

# Writing for the Web

From our first days of school, we learn to write with reinforced expectations that our work will be read from beginning to end. However, there are many types of writing like newspaper articles that people skim instead. On a website, research studies have shown no more than 20% of text is typically read!

A visitor to a website will first glance at the page in an **F-Shaped** reading pattern – [www.nngroup.com/articles/f-shaped-pattern-reading-web-content/](http://www.nngroup.com/articles/f-shaped-pattern-reading-web-content/).



They will explore further only if they believe their task can be accomplished. The statistics documenting how much will be read is surprising.

Visitors judge the quality and appeal of a web page in only 50 milliseconds.  
Lindgaard G., Fernandes G. J., Dudek C. & Brown J. *Behav. Inf. Technol.*, 25. 115 - 126 (2006)

Bounce Rate: 50% of people glance at the page and don't engage further  
[www.gorocketfuel.com/the-rocket-blog/whats-the-average-bounce-rate-in-google-analytics/](http://www.gorocketfuel.com/the-rocket-blog/whats-the-average-bounce-rate-in-google-analytics/)

Only 1/3 of engagement time occurs when a user is scrolled below the fold  
[www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2013/06/how\\_people\\_read\\_online\\_why\\_you\\_won\\_t\\_finish\\_this\\_article.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2013/06/how_people_read_online_why_you_won_t_finish_this_article.html)

The average visitor can be expected to read only 20% of the words on a page.  
[www.nngroup.com/articles/how-little-do-users-read/](http://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-little-do-users-read/)

All visitors have a specific goal in mind then they visit a site. Clearly, reading all the content on the page is not their primary task.

For most screen based interactive content like news, opinions, blogs, portfolios, instructional, and portal sites, users are most likely trying to accomplish one of the following:

- Find a specific piece of information to answer a question
- Judge the quality of a product or service
- Complete a task like registration, purchasing, or messaging

Visitors will attempt to complete their task as quickly as possible, and writers must adapt to help them.

The visual design of the content - including typography, graphics, layout, and whitespace - can help with readability. The text should be optimized to meet the readers' needs even without design.

Here are some strategies that apply to writing for the web.

## WRITE FOR YOUR AUDIENCE

### 1. Identify what your audience knows and what they need to know

Avoid using space for information your readers can be expected to know. Include more details for younger audiences and writing that must be accessible to a broad range of people.

**Example:** the following passage defines McCarthyism, but those details are not necessary for understanding the thesis. The paragraph discusses the political leanings of each film, but assumes the reader knows which one was liberal and which one was conservative, which is not common knowledge.

In *Dream West: Politics and Religion in Cowboy Movies*, Douglas Brodie wrote the politics in Western movies are complex and not easily defined. McCarthyism, or the red scare, was a time where Americans were persecuted with unfair allegations to stifle political dissent. In *High Noon*, a reaction against McCarthyism, the community was criticized for not standing together against a threat. In the end, however, a rugged individual took personal responsibility and saved the day with his guns. In *Rio Bravo*, John Wayne's character attempted to handle the conflict on his own, but ultimately accepted assistance in a tribute to shared community contributions.

**Fix:** Remove text you can assume the readers know. Explicitly state facts that are key to the argument.

In *Dream West: Politics and Religion in Cowboy Movies*, Douglas Brodie wrote the politics in Western movies are complex and not easily defined. ~~McCarthyism, or the red scare, was a time where Americans were persecuted with unfair allegations to stifle political dissent.~~ In **the liberal film** *High Noon*, a reaction against McCarthyism, the community was criticized for not standing together against a threat. In the end, however, a rugged individual took personal responsibility and saved the day with his guns. In **the conservative** *Rio Bravo* **response**, John Wayne's character attempted to handle the conflict on his own, but ultimately accepted assistance in a tribute to shared community contributions.

## 2. Decide whether formal or colloquial language is more appropriate

Formal language would be appropriate when presenting yourself as a business professional.

A colloquial, or informal writing style would make more sense in a pop culture article targeting a young audience.

## 3. Incorporate jargon and slang only when familiar to your audience

Using terms that are unfamiliar to readers can confuse them. However, when appropriately targeted, they can help form a bond with the audience.

## 4. Target a readability score appropriate for your audience's level of education

Online tools like <https://readability-score.com/text/> can help measure the accessibility of writing. In general, long sentences and words with many syllabus results in passages that are more difficult to read.

Tax instructions should target a low grade level, so they can be understood by as many citizens as possible. An academic abstract could target a higher grade level.

## WRITE FOR SCANNABILITY

### 5. Front-load important information at the top

Sales pitches often begin with a soft sell, where stories are told and relationships are built before the salesperson comes to the point. That works in real life where a hard sell turns people off.

On the web, however, visitors come to the sellers. They want immediate access to the key information they need to make their decision. If those details are hidden behind a soft sell, they may never be seen.

The inverted pyramid structure used in journalism is appropriate for web writing. The first paragraph should summarize the entire article.

### 6. Chunk content into individually distinct sections

First drafts often resemble a word dump and can feel disorganized. Sorting your ideas into a logical flow is important, and helps users find and focus on the information they need the most.

### 7. Limit one idea per paragraph

Long paragraphs are tiring to read on a computer screen.

## 8. Use headings, subheadings, lists, indented quotes, bold, italic emphasized text

These techniques allow the reader to understand what the document is about without having to read all the text.

## WRITE CLEARLY AND CONCISELY

### 9. Include headlines and link text that are short and informative

Readers are usually focused on finding specific information to complete a task. Cute phrases and vague headlines are often skipped if their relevance is not immediately apparent.

Example: “A Can of Worms”

Fixed: “Deregulation Law Destabilized Housing Market”

### 10. Avoid empty platitudes that would apply universally

Language should be descriptive, conveying specific emotions and personality. Anyone can say something is great – phrases like that are ignored by readers. Also, avoid details that would be universally true. Writing should set your subject apart from the competition.

Example: “Skyler, an outstanding accountant, is great with numbers, and always focuses on her clients.”

Fixed: “At her current position, the accuracy of her five-year accounting forecast estimates earned her the nickname Psychic Skyler.”

May feel that too specific language could eliminate potential leads, and write broadly to appeal to as many visitors as possible. Counterintuitively, the results don’t appeal to anyone. With countless website options available, visitors will always choose one specifically targeting their needs. Consider this – If you needed a makeup artist for a horror film, would you choose one who said they did all kinds of makeup, or the one with a portfolio specializing in horror films?

### 11. Removing redundant words, sentences, and paragraphs

If two paragraphs or sentences make the same point, eliminate one. Avoid wordy expressions that do not convey any information.

Example: “It is fair to say that the yummy apples were more or less delicious.”

Fixed: “The apples were delicious.”

## 12. Use active voice and pronounce, direct instead of indirect speech

Active voice put the subject first. Write “John finished the job” instead of “The job was finished by John.”

Indirect speech is reported, often about the past, and is wordier. Try writing “She said, ‘I saw him’” instead of ‘She said that she had seen him.’”

### Conclusion

A classic study by Jakob Nielsen (<https://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-users-read-on-the-web/>) measured how much applying these techniques improved usability.

In this example, changing the language to be more concise, scannable, and objective resulted in a 124% usability improvement – more than double.

#### Example:

Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), Carhenge (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446)

#### Fixed:

In 1996, six of the most-visited places in Nebraska were:

- Fort Robinson State Park
- Scotts Bluff National Monument
- Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum
- Carhenge
- Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer
- Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park

### Creative Expression

These guidelines do not completely limit creative expression. Stylistic choices available to web writers include vocabulary and word choice; the aural rhythm created by the arrangement of mono and polysyllabic words and varying sentence lengths; and other techniques like alliteration and figures of speech. The voice of the a can be authoritative or reflective, objective or passionate, serious or funny. Language choices can be symbolic or visual.

(source: <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/few/684>)

## Good writing Examples:

### Instructional:

<http://www.gov.uk>

### Portfolio/Bios

[https://alansnider.com/?page\\_id=9](https://alansnider.com/?page_id=9)

<http://www.larakesler.com/Me>

### Tips for writing reviews:

<http://lifehacker.com/5885607/how-to-write-interesting-and-effective-reviews-online-that-people-will-actually-read>