

A Church in Wales guide to writing for the web

Introduction

Many people assume that writing for the web is just the same as writing for any other medium. The web is littered with sites put online by organisations who appear to think that uploading their latest corporate brochure or annual report constitutes a good site. If you stop and think about the way that you read content online, you can probably see that this isn't a great idea.

Web usability expert Jakob Nielsen did some research along with PJ Schemenaur and Jonathan Fox. They uncovered two key statistics about the way in which people read information on the web:

1. 79% of users always scan; only 16% read word-by-word

In other words, people treat content on the web more like advertising posters than an interesting book.

2. Reading from computer screens is 25% slower than from paper

Screen glare is a huge obstacle to reading large amounts of text online. No-one cuddles up with a nice computer screen to read in the evening, and there's a reason for that.

As a result of these two findings, they suggested:

Web content should be 50% the size of its paper equivalent

Ouch. This might be a painful rule to keep, but when tested and applied to some white papers, tests proved that Nielsen and his group's recommendations resulted in a doubling of the ease with which people absorbed information.

The following sections aim to show how you can take Nielsen's recommendations onboard and create text that is as accessible to an online audience as is possible.

- **Ingredients** looks at how the common ingredients of writing – words, sentences, paragraphs, headings, lists – need to be used in an online environment.
- **Online Particularities** looks at a few special factors that only apply to text in an online environment.
- Finally, **Appendix A: Examples of Styles** shows you what your text might look like when placed online on a Church in Wales website.

Ingredients

This section will take a look at each of the constituent ingredients of online text – words, sentences, paragraphs, headings, lists, and images – and offer some advice for using them in an online context.

Words

Don't assume everyone will know what you're talking about. Avoid obscure references, acronyms, or names of people your readers might not recognize. For example: "RB", "GB", "DCMM", "the Bench".

Use bold text to highlight key words or terms that people might spot as they scan the item for information. Remember that hyperlinks to other pages online appear in blue, which creates the same effect of making a phrase stand out from the text. Don't highlight or embolden entire sentences or paragraphs, as this can hinder readability.

The Nielsen study that we referred to earlier recommends using bold text to highlight key terms or words three times more often online than in print.

Sentences

Use simple sentence structure. Remove unnecessary words and never allow a sentence to carry on for more than 30 words. Avoid awkward tenses, run-on sentences and over-use of adverbs.

Wherever possible, use the active voice and not the passive. For example: "Ad Agencies Cut Jobs," makes a better heading than "Layoffs announced by some agencies."

The American classic *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White says:

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

Use metaphor, puns and wordplay sparingly – people in a hurry do not appreciate being made to think more than necessary. Similarly, stay away from hyperbole and remain objective - you have to earn the trust of a reader.

Paragraphs

Text should be split up into digestible sections. You should use shorter and more frequent paragraphs than in printed text. The white space that falls in between paragraphs is probably the single most important factor in aiding online readability.

In order to help you keep to this rule, restrict yourself to one idea per paragraph. Relegate other ideas to separate paragraphs – users tend to skip a second idea in a paragraph when scanning. If a paragraph contains more than three sentences, consider splitting it up.

Bulleted lists

You should use bulleted and numbered lists far more often online than in print. These lists slow down a scanning eye, and draw attention to important points by introducing more white space. If you are writing something, and seem to be listing points or steps, use a list.

Lists can get complex, like the one below. You should not use more than two levels – that is to say, that the sub-list below is readable, but a sub-sub-list is likely to confuse someone reading text online.

1. A list
 - a. A sub-list
 - i. A sub-sub-list

Particularly in numbered lists, a reader may also get confused if there are too many points without sub-headings to break them up. Experts recommend using no more than nine items in a single list.

Headings

Each page should have a main headline that is short, succinct and clearly indicates the content of the section. Headlines should not end in a question mark or exclamation mark.

As in newsprint, sub-headings are of vital importance in allowing people to easily read and location information. Use a sub-heading every few paragraphs. If you have more than four paragraphs without a sub-heading, consider adding one.

Web pages use a series of graded heading sizes, so that you can structure your document accordingly:

- A Heading 1 style is used at the top of each page
- A Heading 2 style is used to denote sub-sections
- A Heading 3 style is used for sub-headings within sub-sections

Your text should be structured in such a way as to make the application of these headings obvious.

Images

Whilst this guide is about text, good images are vitally important to content online. Think about what images you can provide with your text whilst writing it, not afterwards. Your text will have to be significantly more interesting and better written to get attention online without any supporting visuals.

You can caption images, but only do so when necessary. When you do, give clearly descriptive captions and avoid “figure 1”, “figure 2” and so on.

Online particularities

Having looked at the ingredients that constitute accessible online text, there are a few factors that only apply online. In this section, we will look at providing context, relegating non-crucial information, and adding links.

Provide context

You cannot make assumptions about where a user has come from online. A user could have been diverted to any one page from a search engine. Always try to place information in context and never assume that the user has read information elsewhere.

This might involve no more than adding a line at the top of the article. For example, a sentence at the top could note that the page is part of a bigger section and offer a link to the main index page for that section.

Users don't usually like to have to scroll through the whole page to find what they want. Make sure that the content of the page is made obvious in the first paragraph.

Relegate non-crucial information

Any information that is not crucial to the page should be removed, and added to a separate page. This can then be linked from the original page so that readers can quickly access the information if they need it.

Good examples of non-crucial information are background information, definitions of terms, reference information and background reading lists. It is usually best practice to add a "further information" link to the left hand column of the page, rather than referencing the extra information continually within the main text.

Links

You can link to other pages containing supporting information, other sites online, or to people's email addresses. When doing so, try and provide obvious text that the link can be added to. For example [Click here](#) doesn't give much explanation to a user about what will happen if they click on the link, whilst [Accounts for 2005-6](#) is perfectly clear.

Too many links can be a distraction. If this happens, then make a list of the less relevant links at the end of the document. These can then be added to the left-hand column.

Edit

Finally, we should say that none of what we've talked about here is easy. No-one is going to get it right all the time. What will make it easier is if you allow yourself enough time to come back and reflect on the document after writing it. Try printing it out or even reading it out aloud to experience the text in a different context, and ask others for comments if possible.

Appendix A: examples of styles

As it may help you to know what specific styles will look like when your document is placed online, this appendix aims to show a few of the key styles: Headings, Introductory Paragraph, Important Word, Quotations, Bullets and Boxouts.

Headings

We talked earlier about using the Heading 1, 2 and 3 styles to structure text:

THIS IS HEADING ONE STYLE

Dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Morbi cc gravida, orci magna rhoncus neque. Lorem ipsum d adipiscing elit. Morbi commodo, ipsum sed pharetra rhoncus neque, id pulvinar odio lorem non turpis. Nl Suspendisse id velit vitae ligula volutpat condimentu

This is heading two style

Sed quis velit. Nulla facilisi. Nulla libero. Vivamus pt consectetur. Sed aliquam, nunc eget euismod ullamcorper orci, fermentum bibendum enim nibh e ligula eu dolor. Maecenas vitae nulla consequat liber magna enim, accumsan eu, blandit sed, blandit a, e

This is heading three style

Quisque facilisis erat a dui. Nam malesuada ornare amet rhoncus ornare, erat elit consectetur erat, id odio. Proin tincidunt, velit vel porta elementum, mai non aliquet massa pede eu diam.

Introductory paragraph

The new site also has a style intended for introductory paragraphs at the beginning of documents:

THIS IS HEADING ONE STYLE

This is a larger more noticeable style intended for use in opening paragraphs. Nullam sit amet enim. Suspendisse id velit vitae ligula volutpat condimentum. Aliquam erat volutpat.

This is normal text . Nulla facilisi. Nulla libero. Vivamus pharetra posuere sapie Nam consectetur. Sed aliquam, nunc eget euismod ullamcorper, lectus nunc ullamcorper orci, fermentum bibendum enim nibh eget ipsum. Donec porttitor ligula eu dolor. Maecenas vitae nulla consequat libero cursus venenatis. Nam

Important word

In addition to the ability to use bold text, there is also a style intended to allow highlighting of very important words. It is anticipated that this will be used only in special situations, with bold used for all normal highlighting.

THIS IS HEADING ONE STYLE

This is normal text . **This is bold text** . Nulla libero. Vivamus pharetra posuere sapien. Nam consectetur. This is an **important word**, but this style should not be over-used. Donec porttitor ligula eu dolor. Maecenas vitae nulla consequat libero cursus venenatis. Nam magna enim, accumsan eu, blandit sed, blandit a, eros.

Quotations

There are a number of styles for pullquotes, which can also be used to break up text and aid the ease with which a document can be read. Whilst these examples generally include a citation, this is not required.

This version shows the standard pullquote, which takes up the width of the page:

Nam consectetur

Sed aliquam, nu eget euismod ullamcorper, lectus nunc ullamcorper orci, fermentum bibendum enim nibh eget ipsum. Donec porttitor ligula eu dolor. Maecenas vitae nulla consequat libero cursus venenatis. Nam magna enim, accumsan eu, blandit sed, blandit a, eros. Quisque facilisis erat a dui. Nam malesuada ornare dolor.

“ *This is a standard blockquote. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Morbi commodo, ipsum sed pharetra gravida, orci magna rhoncus neque, id pulvinar odio lorem non turpis.* ”

– Citation goes here

This version “floats” the quotation to the right of the text:

Cras gravida

Diam sit amet rhoncus ornare, erat elit consectetur erat, id egestas pede nibh eget odio. Proin tincidunt, velit vel porta elementum, magna diam molestie sapien, non aliquet massa pede eu diam. Aliquam iaculis. Fusce et ipsum et nulla tristique facilisis.

Level-three heading

Sit amet ligula viverra gravida. Etiam vehicula urna vel turpis. Suspendisse sagittis ante a urna. Morbi a est quis orci consequat rutrum. Nullam egestas feugiat felis. Integer adipiscing semper ligula. Nunc molestie, retium enim ectus.

Level-four heading

Etiam vel nibh. Nulla facilisi. Mauris pharetra. Donec augue. Fusce ultrices, neque id dignissim ultrices, tellus mauris

“ *This is a right-floated blockquote. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Morbi commodo, ipsum sed pharetra gravida, orci magna rhoncus neque, id pulvinar odio lorem non turpis.* ”

– Citation goes here

Finally, this version allows for longer quotations with an indented italic style that can be used over several paragraphs:

enim. Suspendisse id velit vitae ligula volutpat condimentum. Aliquam erat volutpat. Sed quis velit.

This is an extended quote. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Morbi commodo, ipsum sed pharetra gravida, orci magna rhoncus neque, id pulvinar odio lorem non turpis. Nullam sit amet enim. Suspendisse id velit vitae ligula volutpat condimentum.

Aliquam erat volutpat. Sed quis velit. Nulla facilisi. Nulla libero. Vivamus pharetra posuere sapien. Nam consectetur. Sed aliquam

Bullets and numbered lists

There are two styles of bullets or lists available – the traditional plain style, and a more formatted version. In the screenshot, the traditional style can be seen in the first list at the top of the page, and the newer version in the list of directions that follows.

Directions to the Provincial Offices at 39, Cathedral Road

This page includes three sets of directions to the Provincial Offices of the Church in Wales at 39, Cathedral Road, Cardiff:

- From Cardiff Central Station
- From the West or A470 via Junction 33 of the M4
- From the East via the M4 (after crossing the Severn Bridge)

FROM CARDIFF CENTRAL STATION (on foot)

>> With the station entrance behind you and facing the bus station, take the left hand exit from the forecourt. At the traffic lights, turn left, past the Millennium Stadium, and cross the River Taff (you are now about 300 yards from the station).

>> Turn right immediately after the river into Fitzhamon Embankment.

>> After about another 400 yards, the road turns sharp left becoming Despenser Street.

>> After 150 yards, turn right by a roundabout into Lower Cathedral Road.

>> After another 150 yards at a busy junction controlled by traffic lights, Lower Cathedral Road crosses Cowbridge Road, and becomes Cathedral Road.

Boxouts

In addition to simply “floating” images to the right or left of text, a boxout can be added to house the image and a caption. For small pictures, this can be added to the right of the text:

Sed quis velit. Nulla facilisi. Nulla libero. Vivamus pharetra posuere sapien. Nam consectetur. Sed aliquam, nunc eget euismod ullamcorper, lectus nunc ullamcorper orci, fermentum bibendum enim nibh eget ipsum. Donec porttitor ligula eu dolor. Maecenas vitae nulla consequat libero cursus venenatis. Nam magna enim, accumsan eu, blandit sed, blandit a, eros.

Quisque facilisis erat a dui. Nam malesuada ornare dolor. Cras gravida, diam sit amet rhoncus ornare, erat elit consectetur erat, id egestas pede nibh eget odio. Proin tincidunt, velit vel porta elementum, magna diam molestie sapien, non aliquet massa pede eu diam.

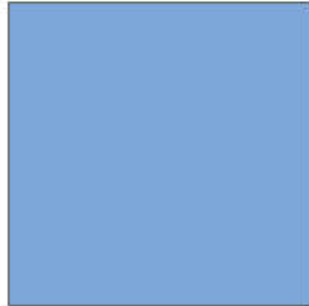
Aliquam iaculis. Fusce et ipsum et nulla tristique facilisis. Donec eget sem sit amet ligula viverra gravida. Etiam vehicula urna vel turpis. Suspendisse sagittis ante a urna. Morbi a est quis orci consequat rutrum. Nullam egestas feugiat



This is a caption [paragraph] in a boxout.

But for larger pictures, the boxout must span the entire page:

Aliquam iaculis. Fusce et ipsum et nulla tristique facilisis. Donec eget sem sit amet ligula viverra gravida. Etiam vehicula urna vel turpis. Suspendisse sagittis ante a urna. Morbi a est quis orci consequat rutrum. Nullam egestas feugiat felis. Integer adipiscing semper ligula.



This is a caption [paragraph] in a centred boxout. This image is bordered.