Writing For The Web - How It's Different

The first and most important fact to understand about Web use is this:

People *don't read* Web pages people *scan* Web pages.

Many studies support this premise. Web usability gurus John Morkes and Jakob Nielsen found that 79 percent of test users always scanned any new page they came across, while only 16 percent read word-by-word.

Eye tracking research. Source: Useit.com

Web users seek specific information, or they browse in the hope of finding items of interest. They scan the page, searching for headings and words that pique their interest. Huge blocks of brochure-like text that visitors have to wade through just to determine if your site is valuable overwhelm people. So you need to keep your writing as concise as possible.

Write for the reader and the task they need to complete, not for yourself or department
Always keep the reader in mind. Think of them as busy, impatient people who are on the Web to find out something quickly [*The Web Content Style Guide*].

To write efficiently for your Web audience

- First ask yourself, what's my point? Start with the conclusion (the inverted pyramid method of writing). Avoid long introductory paragraphs or laying out the welcome mat and get to the point.
- Use meaningful subheadings effectively to aid scanning of content and SEO

- Keep sentences brief
- Use clear, concise prose (avoid using clichés and modifiers)
- Write with an active voice and in the first or second person. Use strong verbs and avoid a passive voice. Be consistent throughout your pages
- Chunk ideas into short paragraphs
- Use bulleted and/or numbered lists

Most importantly, halve the amount of content.

Use fewer, more precise words to make your message stick. Your content must be optimized for the way people navigate the Web—it should have half the word count (or less) of the same piece written for print. Try writing the text the way you would normally write it, then cutting out everything you can. Then put the writing away for a while, come back to it, and cut it yet again.

General Rule of Thumb for Web Writing

- Headings and subheads—up to 3-5 words on a single line
- Sentences—up to 20 words
- Paragraphs—up to 70 words
- Pages—up to 600 words

These numbers aren't absolute. It's fine to go over these limits on occasion, but most pages should stick to these lengths. A paragraph doesn't need more than one sentence. One-sentence paragraphs are fine—even ideal—on the Web. Sentence fragments are fine, too, as long as they're clear. Don't duplicate any information that exists on other pages, instead just link to the page. Remember, Web writing needs much more ruthless editing than writing for print. When you're editing Web copy, be aware that what might sound abrupt in print may be perfectly appropriate for the Web. Users don't expect a lot of modifiers and introductions.

Choose Content Wisely

Visitors are in control on the Web. They're short on time and can access billions of pages at the click of a mouse, so they're very selective in what they choose to read. They will only read content if it meets all their needs.

So, when you choose what to publish on the Web, you need to pick your killer content. Ask yourself, what do your readers really want to know? What do they need to know badly enough that they will take the time to actively seek out your site?

Before you post content, put it aside for a while. Then read it again with a fresh perspective and ask yourself:

- Is this as clear as possible?
- Is there a simpler way to say this?
- Is there a shorter way to say this?
- Is this absolutely necessary?

Don't fall into the trap of thinking it won't hurt to publish any content you have. Content isn't neutral. It either delivers value or destroys it. If you bore users or waste their time, they leave the site with a negative reaction.

Be Task-Oriented

Write with a Visitor-Centered Focus

When choosing content, keep in mind what tasks visitors want to accomplish on your site. Choose the content they need to accomplish their tasks, and organize it to help them finish their tasks quickly and easily.

It's difficult to break away from an organization-centered focus and move to a visitor-centered focus—to be driven by what the reader wants to know, rather than by what your department or office wants to say. But it's vital to creating successful content.

One technique that may help as your write content for the Web is for you to develop a list of questions that the particular audience for that page would ask, if they were there in person. Then let those questions guide what content goes on the page.

Above all, focus on what your visitors need to do, not on what you think you need to tell them.

If you need assistance editing your content for the Web, please contact a member of the digital communications staff at digitalstaff@davidson.edu.

Heading and Subheadings (H tags)

When you build a webpage, it can look a little like an outline used on a school paper with a main heading and subheadings.

Example Usage	Davidson Example
<H1>This is a heading – Page Title</H1> 　　*<H2>This is subheading A</H2>* 　　*<H2>This is subheading B</H2>* 　　　*<H3>This is a lower subheading</H3>* 　　*<H2>This is subheading C</H2>* 　　　*<H3>This is a lower subheading</H3>* 　　　　*<H4>This is a lower subheading</H4>*	*Heading 1 – <H1> (Page Title) – Human Resources* *Heading 2 – <H2> Employment at Davidson* *Heading 3 – <h3> How to Apply* *Heading 4 – <H4> Application Questions*

Subheadings are Useful for Several Purposes

1. Declare the most important text on the page
2. Break up the text on a webpage and make the page easier to scan by Web visitors

3. Aid search engines and search engine optimization (SEO). Headings and subheadings include important keywords that are indexed by search engines.

Incorrect Use of Subheadings

- Using subheadings for simply formatting text. Subheadings are used for categorization and for showing hierarchy on a webpage, Heading tags SHOULD NEVER be used to highlight words on a webpage for cosmetic reasons.
- You should never use subheadings out of sequence. If you want to add an H3 tag, it must follow an H2 in the code. Similarly, if you had an H4 tag, it must only follow an H3 tag and not an H2.

Davidson Heading Styles

By selecting Heading 2, Heading 3, or Heading 4 in the Ingeniux editor the subheading format will be displayed consistently across the Davidson website as shown below.

PAGE TITLE HEADLINE
Lato Regular / 34pt / Color: hex#363636 / Style: CAPS

HEADING STYLE 2
Lato Black / 25pt / Color: hex#ac1a2f / Style: CAPS

HEADING STYLE 3
Lato Bold / 21pt / Color: hex#363636 / Style: CAPS

HEADING STYLE 4
Lato Regular / 19pt / Color: hex#363636 / Style: CAPS