Writing for the Web

AGCJ 407
Web Authoring in Agricultural Communications

Note: Special thanks to University of Maine Cooperative Extension Service for the primer in this lesson (available at http://www.umext.maine.edu/webauthor2/intro.htm)

The Effect of Information Overload

• Computers (especially e-mail and the Internet) have enabled us to produce a degree of information that is overwhelming. We often feel controlled by it rather than empowered by it.
  • Because of the proliferation of information,
    • information has become devalued,
    • people have developed coping mechanisms to filter out non-vital information.
  • People are increasingly discriminating about what they’ll take the time to read.

How the Web differs from print media

• The user is in control on the Web. They control where they enter your site, how much they read, where and when they leave.
• The Web has inherent credibility problems. Anyone can publish a web page. You have to prove your trustworthiness. To increase your credibility
  • stick to the facts (leave out the hyperbole);
  • provide outgoing hyperlinks to unquestionably respectable sites with supporting information;
  • use bylines if possible;
  • provide links that reference you or your organization.

How the Web differs from print media

• Print is linear. The Web is a non-linear linking medium.
• Print is easier to read: Upwards of a thousand dpi of printed text is infinitely more readable than the 72 dpi of most computer monitors.
• Web users can view online publications only one screen at a time -- a crucial difference between Web and printed publications.

How Users Read on the Web

• 79% scan text, and only 16% always read every word.
• Users “zagzag” for desired content by following hyperlinks and skimming headlines, bulleted lists and bolded text.
• Users read 25% slower from computer screens than from print.
• Over 50% use search engines to navigate the Web.
• Web users are both HASTY and PICKY.
  • They haven’t bought access to your site like they buy a newspaper or a book
  • They have less vested interest in slogging through information they don’t need.
• Most users prefer concise, fact-filled text.
  • Users will exit pages which contain long-winded language.
How Page Structure Improves Usability

- Because users can arrive at your pages from a number of unpredictable locations -- search engines, hyperlinks on other sites, hyperlinks on your own pages (remember that the Web is inherently non-linear) -- each Web page should be structured to stand on its own.
- Provide immediate orientation on every page. Include information about the purpose of your site and the identity of your organization.
- Place the most important information at the top of your page. Remember, some users don't like to scroll. Information located at the bottom of the page (off the screen) may be missed.

How Page Structure Improves Usability

- Keep content to one concept or purpose per page.
- Place graphics at the bottom of your page. This allows users to begin reading while the lower portion of the page downloads.
- Use microcontent (brief bits of text) to inform and direct.
- Examples of microcontent include:
  - Page titles
  - Headlines
  - Subheads
  - Links
  - Bold or colored text
  - ALT text
  - Captions
  - Pull-quotes
  - Navigation bar links
  - "In-page" indexes (tables of contents)

Microcontent Should Be:

- able to stand alone. Headlines and links should be completely comprehensible out of context.
- explanatory and informative, not clever or persuasive.
- concise.
- used with purpose to direct and clarify, like road signs. Don't aimlessly crowd the page.

Guidelines for Effective Microcontent

- Headlines should appear at the top of your page, summarizing the content of the page.
- Omit opening articles such as "a" or "the" or vague phrases such as "Welcome to."
- The first word should carry vital information.
- Language should be plain and simple.
- Keep headlines to 60 characters or less.
- Make sure your headlines stand on their own.

All Subheads Equal Significance

- In-page indexes (or tables of contents) are useful if your page has more than two content sections or ideas.
- An overview (a summary or introduction) is useful when you are presenting a large document with many sections.
- Linked text should be explanatory and descriptive so that users know exactly what to expect if they click it.
All Subheads Equal Significance

- Effective linking strategies help users find what they are looking for.
- When creating links, keep in mind:
  - Content links -- links that lead to information.
  - Longer, descriptive links are better than short links.
  - Users prefer shallow sites to sites that are too deep.
  - Provide more than one path to each page.
  - Organize content links into easily scannable categories that make sense to your user.
  - Provide a linked author e-mail address on each page to help establish credibility and professionalism.

All Subheads Equal Significance

- Bold text helps users scan content quickly for points of interest.
- ALT tags should explain the significance of the graphics rather than describe its appearance. Keep ALT tags concise (nine words or less is optimum).
- Use captions for photos to eliminate any confusion about what the images are and why you are showing them.

Considerations for the Home Page

- Think of your home page as a 30-second radio spot. In that 30 seconds, you must tell your audience:
  - who you are;
  - what you provide;
  - why they need you; and
  - how they can contact you.
- Many Web designers treat home pages like magazine covers, designed to attract users to the information inside.
  - A magazine cover is designed to persuade a consumer to buy a publication.
  - By the time a user hits your home page, they've already been persuaded to visit your site.
- The most effective home pages are functional:
  - They tell users how to find what they need on your site;
  - Describe your four or five basic primary services, and
  - Organize those choices into scannable, easily understandable lists.

Effective Writing Techniques

- Keep text concise: Pare word count to 50% of comparable printed information.
- Write for "scannability." Because most users scan text on the Web, help them find information quickly by:
  - using bold text to highlight words that convey information.
  - using highlighted words that indicate what makes this page different from other pages and summarize content.
  - using in-page indexes or tables of contents.
  - using bulleted lists.
  - keeping paragraphs short, and keeping them to a single idea each.

Effective Writing Techniques

- Keep language objective:
  - Avoid buzzwords, adjectives, exaggeration, and unsubstantiated claims.
  - Establish your credibility by avoiding promotional writing styles.
  - Stick to the facts, and use the language and vocabulary of your intended audience.
Effective Writing Techniques

- Write in an inverted pyramid style:
  - Start with your conclusion.
  - Then provide the most vital supporting information.
  - End with background material.
- This journalistic technique is even more important on the Web.

Journalists and good Web writers reverse this style.
- Start with your conclusion.
- Then provide the most vital supporting information.
- End with background material.
- This allows the user to stop at any point and still get the essence of the story.

This journalistic technique is even more important on the Web.
- Although writing for the Web is similar to writing for newspapers, keep in mind that journalists must provide background information in each article, whereas Web writers can link to background information, including archived articles.

Writing Effective Titles

- To help users in search engines, include appropriate titles, keywords, and summaries in the HTML <HEAD> of your pages.
- Write concise, descriptive page titles.
- A page title is not the same as the page's file name.
- Page titles are located in the <HEAD> of a document. The HTML code looks like this:

```html
<HEAD>
<TITLE>AGCJ 407: Web Authoring - Writing for the Web</TITLE>
</HEAD>
```
- Page titles show up in search engine query hit lists, in browser "bookmarks" or "favorites" menus, and sometimes in hyperlinks to your pages.

Guidelines Effective Titles

- Keep titles between 40 and 60 characters.
- Create titles that make sense when viewed out of context.
- Make the first word descriptive.
- Give each page its own unique title.
- Write titles in upper and lower case.
- Avoid teasers that entice people to click to find out what your page is about.

Provide Accurate Keywords

- "Keywords" are the terms users type into search engines when initiating a search.
- Locate your keywords in the <HEAD> of your document, before the <TITLE>.
- A keyword META-tag might look like this:

```html
<META name="keywords" content="Texas A&M University, Agricultural Communications, education, research, agriculture, media, video, streaming, Windows, college students">```

Guidelines Keyword Tags

- Create a list of terms appropriate to your subject matter.
- Add keywords to the META-tag of all related pages.
- Use only keywords that describe the main topic of a page.
- Do not add a keyword if the page is only peripherally related to the term.
Informative Search Engines Summaries

- Many search engines display summaries below the page title in their query hit list.
- Locate your one-sentence summary in the <HEAD> of your document, before the "keywords" and <TITLE> META-tags. A "description" META-tag looks like this:
  `<META name="description" content="Windows streaming media provides college students opportunities to create digital videos for agricultural communications research projects."/>
- It is good practice to repeat your "description" META-tag as the first sentence on your page.
- A one-paragraph summary is an expanded version of the one-sentence summary and is sometimes used by quality search engines.

Guidelines Effective Summaries

- Keep one-sentence summaries to 150 characters or less.
- Write summaries that make sense when read out of context.
- Use descriptive terms that tell users what the page is about and allow them to judge its relevance.
- Concentrate on the facts.
- Do not use promotional or exaggerated language.

That's All Folks!