Writing for the Web

This is an excerpt from *The Web Content Style Guide*, by Gerry McGovern, Rob Norton and Catherine O'Dowd. It is published by Financial Times Prentice Hall.

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Writing for the Web is different

Writing for the Web is not the same as writing for print because people read differently on the Web. One of the impediments to online reading is physical: It's harder to read on a screen than it is to read on paper. Even the best computer monitors are hopelessly fuzzy when compared to the crisp images on a glossy magazine page, and the extra effort this requires from human eyes and brains slows readers down. The longer the document, the bigger the problem.

The physical impediment will lessen—perhaps even disappear—in time. Today's monitors are vastly better than the ones in use a decade ago—especially the latest generation with flat screens and liquid crystal displays. Better software is also helping. Microsoft, for instance, has created a superior family of type fonts specifically designed for online reading (Arial and Tahoma are two of the most widely used). Innovation continues.

But the more significant barrier web writers must overcome is behavioral, not physical, and technological advances may never break it down. Everyone who's observed, tested, or studied online reading agrees that people behave differently when online. When viewing a new page, they don't read—they scan. They look at headings and subheadings first; they scan for hyperlinks, numerals, and keywords. They jump around, scrolling and clicking—their fingers never far from the browser's "Back" button. The word that best describes their behavior is: impatient.

The challenge for the web writer is to overcome readers' impatience by keeping things as brief as possible. It's a big challenge. Writing 250 breezy words on a given subject is usually harder than writing 1,000. There's an anecdote editors like to pass along that goes like this: One editor gets a long letter from a friend. After the signature at the end of many pages is a scribbled apology: "Pardon me for going on. I didn't have time to write a shorter letter." Fictional? Probably. Corny? Certainly. But dead-on.

Shorter is better

Given these behavioral facts, the key difference between writing for the Web and writing for offline readers is that web writing needs to be shorter. Documents intended for online reading should rarely be longer than 1,000 words. A good target to aim for is 600 to 700 words. There are many approaches and devices that can help you learn to write more concisely, and an exhaustive review of them is beyond the scope of this guide. But we'll mention a few.

If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

This profound rule for keeping your content short comes from the English novelist George Orwell—who also happened to be one of the masters of twentieth-century English (See ORWELL'S RULES, in the A to Z). It is almost magical in its ability to streamline prose and expose rhetorical weakness.

Let's apply the rule to a newspaper article, picked at random, (from the January 7, 2001, *New York Times)*. The first paragraph of the lead story read:

> Washington, Jan. 6 – One thing is already clear about how President-elect George W. Bush intends to govern the nation: state and local officials will have far more leeway to shape and operate the full range of federal social, regulatory, and public works programs.

Applying Orwell's rule gives this:

> Washington, Jan. 6 – One thing is clear about how George W. Bush intends to govern: state and local officials will have more leeway to shape and operate federal social, regulatory, and public works programs.

That takes the excerpt from 40 to 31 words—a 23 percent decrease without affecting its content.

This rule can be extended to cover phrases, sentences, and thoughts, as well as words. Once you've completed a draft of your content, read it again, asking yourself as you go along: "Is there superfluous information here?" and "Could these details be cut?"

A similar rule is embodied in the phrase "kill your darlings" by William Faulkner. Or as Samuel Johnson put it, "Read over your compositions, and wherever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out." This sounds like suicidal advice but it makes a lot of sense. Often we fall in love with pet phrases or words. Subconsciously, we tend to write sentences that allow us to use them. This is not a good idea because it takes the writer away from the reason they sat down to write in the first place: to communicate something useful. Which brings us to a golden rule …

Write for the reader, not for your ego

It's easy to just write and write, with no particular reader in mind. The problem with this sort of writing is that nobody reads it. Always keep the reader in mind when writing. Think of them as busy, impatient people who are on the Web to find out something.

Question your modifiers

One of the characteristics of bad writing is its overuse of adjectives and adverbs. They add to the length of an article and also tend to slow its pace. When you look at them a second time, you often find they are disguising weak nouns and verbs. Think about the sentence, "He hit it really hard," then compare it with "He clobbered it."

Be direct

"Begin at the beginning, and go on till you come to the end: then stop." Web readers would be eternally grateful if web writers always followed that piece of advice (delivered by the King of Hearts to the White Rabbit in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*).

But all too often, as any frustrated web reader knows, writers do nothing of the kind. Instead of beginning an article about growing tomatoes with a clear statement telling you what you can expect to read (such as: "The best way to grow tomatoes is ... ")

they will either begin with an anecdote ("It was a hot summer day when I first visited the sun-drenched fields of Sicily ... "), or with a barrage of information tangential to the main topic ("The soil in the Red River Valley of the north is known for its fertility—second, some of the locals say, only to the steppes of Russia ... "), or, perhaps most common on the Web, with personal superfluous information ("My name is John, I've been an amateur gardener for three years, and I created this page using Shovelworks for Imagemaker ... ").

Such indirect beginnings for articles are fine for certain kinds of writing. The anecdotal introduction, for instance, is a storyteller's staple and can be very effective. (Who could forget Hunter S. Thompson's beginning to *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, first serialized in *Rolling Stone*: "We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold.") But in most web writing—especially business writing—the best way to begin is with the shortest and clearest statement you can make about your topic.

People on the Web are usually looking for information, and if you make it easy to find, they will thank you. If you make it hard to find by burying what you actually want to communicate in the second or third paragraph, no one may read your article at all: Research shows that web readers scan pages before they read anything, meaning they may scan right past your article if it doesn't have a straightforward heading or introduction that includes key words about your topic.

Writers often opt for indirect introductions because of their own insecurity. They fear that what they have to say will be so unexciting that potential readers will be turned off, so they try to find an indirect but more interesting way to draw the reader in. But doing this actually makes things worse. If you're writing about tomatoes, and the reader isn't interested in tomatoes, it's better to get it over with fast. Readers who've had to wade through several paragraphs before finding out they're in the wrong place will be all the more annoyed.

So be courageous when you sit down to write, and don't blame yourself if it takes a while to come up with an introduction that works. As anyone who's tried to write knows, beginning is often the most difficult part of the writing process. The blank sheet of paper is so anxiety-inducing that it's become a metaphor for writer's block. Writing for the Web is even worse: Not only is the screen blank, but there in the upper-left-hand corner is the cursor, blinking away as if to mock your inability to get started.

Web headings that work

On the Web, you live or die by your headings (or *headlines* as they are called in newspapers and magazines). A good one makes it easier for readers to find your article, and much more likely that they will read what you have written. A bad heading ensures that few, if any, readers will find your text at all, and that those who do will be unlikely to read further.

People don't begin to read your web article by accident. First they have to find it. Potential readers will usually come to your article either from a crowded webpage—where your article is just one of several clickable elements—or worse still, from a page full of search engine results. In either case, all the reader sees is the heading

and the first sentence or so from the article (if they're lucky). If your heading doesn't grab them, you lose them—probably forever.

Writing headings for web articles is a craft. Sometimes it almost seems to be an art. To learn from examples of heading writing at its best, look at top quality advertising campaigns, front-page headlines in tabloid newspapers, and the cover lines of successful magazines. Madison Avenue's best advertising slogans succeed so well, they enter our common language. Think of Nike's "Just Do It" line

Editors of tabloid newspapers are among the best of all heading writers, since they know that nothing will do a better job of selling their papers than a short, compelling headline in big type. Two famous tabloid headlines: *The New York Daily News*, reporting on former US president Gerald Ford's decision to deny emergency funds to New York City during a fiscal squeeze:

Ford To City:
Drop Dead!

Or the *New York Post*'s account of a gruesome strip-club murder:

Headless Body
In Topless Bar

Magazine editors face a similar challenge. The would-be magazine buyer is looking at a rack of dozens or even hundreds of magazines, and makes a purchasing decision in minutes or seconds. The cover line is the first—and often the only—thing the potential buyer reads.

In 1998, a group of *Fortune* magazine editors spent 45 minutes debating the "cover line" for the magazine's annual retirement guide. They came up with a two-word headline that drove sales up an incredible 51 percent, making it the most popular issue in the magazine's 70-year history and increasing revenue by hundreds of thousands of dollars:

RETIRE RICH

These examples of winning headline-writing share common attributes that are all applicable to the Web. Let's look at a couple of them here:

Headings should be short and direct

Remember that web readers are usually looking for something, and the more efficiently you tell them [1]what it is you've got, the better your heading will work. To be effective and attract the reader, headings should use "keywords." Studies have shown that people who use search engines predominantly type in one to two keywords for their search, rather than sentences or phrases. So, if you're writing about Microsoft's earnings, whatever else you do, use both words—"Microsoft" and "earnings"— in your heading!

Never try to be indirect and cute. Many writers and editors make this mistake, and write headings such as this, taken from a brokerage house report about technology-stock prices:

Much Ado about Nothing

Erudite? Your call. Amusing? Only if you read the first section of the article, and then only mildly so. But such a heading guarantees that people looking for information about tech stock prices will never see the article. Try typing that heading into a search engine such as AltaVista. You'll get a million results, nearly all of them concerning drama and literature.

Use powerful language

Good headings share another attribute: Nearly all have some kind of power in their language. Try not to undersell your content. If you're writing about the biggest something, say so! If profits have plunged, don't say they've decreased. Use the active rather than the passive voice, and try to use a strong verb—say "Ad Agencies Cut Jobs," not "Layoffs announced by some agencies."

But don't deceive your reader either. If your article is about an incremental improvement in browser software, don't call it "The Browser Wars Erupt Again." Web readers are smart and unforgiving. The merest whiff of a bait-and-switch—promising one thing and then delivering another--sends them instantly to the Back button, and they'll stay away from your site forever.

Use subheads

One proven device for keeping a reader moving forward through an article is to insert subheads (subheadings) every few paragraphs. Just as a well-written heading can draw a reader into a story that he or she might otherwise skip over, subheads provide a visual road-sign for readers, alerting them that something different and potentially interesting is coming up.

The job of the subhead is to pick out a word, phrase, or idea from the following few paragraphs that will make the reader want to keep reading. The cleverest newspaper editors use a similar device when they have an article that is so long it must "jump" from one page to the next. Just before the article jumps, make sure there's an intriguing phrase. One feature-article editor for the Wall Street Journal used to say that the ultimate sentence that could appear before a "jump" is "...and then the shit hit the fan."

This approach is not unlike the classic "cliffhanger" that film and TV directors use to end an episode in a serial movie or TV show—the heroine dangling over a chasm, moments away from sudden death. To find out what happens, you need to tune in again.

But subheads don't necessarily need to be dramatic. If you're writing a story about a stock-market analyst's predictions, for instance, and the analyst is saying that the overall market will decline over the next year but that stocks in a particular sector will rise, you'll need to lead with one idea or the other—probably the overall market. But a

well-placed subheading that says "Companies that will buck the trend" will entice at least some readers to continue on to that section.

For subheads to be truly effective on the Web, they must be used liberally. Some websites use subheads, but place them too far apart to be helpful. A subhead every six or seven paragraphs can be okay in print, but only because a reader is looking at a much larger piece of text than the web reader ever sees at a given moment. The subheads used in this introduction, for instance, would be much too widely spaced for the Web. Online, either on the Web or in email, you should insert subheads often enough so that a reader never scrolls for more than a screen and a half without seeing one.

Web paragraphs are different

To make your documents efficient and attractive for online readers, you need to ensure that the structure of the writing—the way that sentences and paragraphs are arranged on the screen—is suitable for web reading. Among the most important elements of structure for online reading is paragraph length.

Although you can consult a dozen writing guides and find many "rules" about how to write paragraphs, there really aren't any rules. The ideal paragraph length depends not only on the kind of writing you're doing and the style and tone you adopt, but also on the format and medium in which you're writing. It's as much a visual as a verbal issue.

Different kinds of writing demand different average paragraph lengths. The classic tabloid newspaper style is to make each sentence a paragraph, and to keep each sentence short. Paragraphs average fewer than a dozen words. This creates a telegraphic, immediate style appropriate for news stories, and is well suited to the narrow text columns of tabloids. "Quality" broadsheet newspapers favor a more discursive style. Paragraphs in *The New York Times*, for instance, tend to be more in the range of 50 to 60 words.

The structure for formal essays—followed by many magazine and book writers—runs toward longer paragraphs, sometimes considerably longer. This is the style of writing usually taught in schools. Each paragraph, ideally, deals with a single thought. The first sentence is the "topic sentence," setting forth the main idea. The thought is developed in succeeding sentences. Distinctions and connections are made, qualifications are introduced, and examples given. Further points are sometimes included; contrasting material is sometimes provided as well.

This kind of formal paragraph can easily run on to 100 or more words, with no real upward limit. Some notable writers—Marcel Proust, for example—wrote paragraphs that go on for pages. At some point, however, the thought is concluded—typically with a short sentence.

The preceding four paragraphs of this article, in fact, would make up such a "classic" paragraph, and many book editors would have run them together into one paragraph. Altogether, they are 271 words. But even in a book like this, such a fat, dense, paragraph could be off-putting. On a webpage, it would be deadly. It would be like

walking into a McDonald's and being ushered to a table with linen and silverware and a six-page menu. Not what you had in mind.

The rules for structuring writing for print have evolved over centuries; the rules for structuring online text are still emerging. In this, as in many other questions of online style, it's instructive to look at what the most successful websites do. Check out the way that sites like Yahoo, Excite, Microsoft, and CNET handle paragraph length.

As you'll see, on the Web—generally speaking—shorter is better. One of the handiest tools for the online writer is the word-processor's word-count function. Try it. Live by it. If you're consistently writing paragraphs with more than 50 words, you should probably lighten up.

(The paragraph you've just read, at 45 words, is about the right length for the Web.)

Keep your sentences simple

One of the best ways to make your writing web friendly is to keep your sentences short and simple. Long, convoluted sentences, which may read very nicely in print (such as this one), will often seem forbidding onscreen. They can distract your readers from their primary goal of finding information.

There are essentially three kinds of sentences, the first of which is the simple sentence. The simple sentence contains a verb, and usually a subject. It may or may not have an object. The famous first line of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, for instance, is: "Call me Ishmael." Another notable simple-sentence first line introduces Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*. It reads: "Nobody could sleep."

Second is the compound sentence, which is basically two simple sentences that are related. An example would be: "The Nasdaq crashed, and investors were devastated."

Finally comes the complex sentence, which includes a dependent clause. To embellish the last example, an example of a complex sentence would be: "The Nasdaq crashed, and investors were devastated because they didn't see it coming." ("Because they didn't see it coming" is the dependant clause.)

From there, you can weave compound and complex sentences together until you have a very tangled web indeed. Some novelists—Dostoyevsky, Faulkner, and Proust, for instance—are famous for writing sentences that go on for pages.

But the intent of most online writing is neither to dazzle the reader with literary technique nor to see how much you can cram into a single sentence; the intent is to communicate as quickly and efficiently as possible. This holds especially true for news and business writing.

Consider the following sentence, from a New York Times News Service dispatch posted on the International Herald Tribune site:

> The situation here, already tense, turned explosive earlier this month when the international administration, put in place after the 1995 peace accord that

> ended the war in Bosnia, ordered a raid on Herzegovacka Bank and nine of its branches.

By the end of the sentence the clauses are so entwined that it takes an effort to remember the main point. The sentence should probably have been rewritten entirely, but a quick fix would have been to excise the clause about the origin of the international administration and use it as a new, second sentence in parentheses. The passage would then read:

> The situation here, already tense, turned explosive earlier this month when the international administration ordered a raid on Herzegovacka Bank and nine of its branches. (The administration was put in place after the 1995 peace accord that ended the war in Bosnia.)

In addition to the three classic sentence types, there is also the sentence fragment. Despite what some members of the literati teach, there's nothing wrong with using sentence fragments. Think of the ways they can be effective: For variety. For emphasis. Really!

A pedantic magazine editor once objected to a writer's use of sentence fragments in general, and of single-word sentences in particular. In the heat of the moment, the editor asked the writer: "Do you really think you can use single-word sentences whenever you feel like it?" To which the writer could think of only one reply: "Yes."

Getting ready to write

One of the simple tricks that professional writers learn can greatly ease the process of getting ready to write: Look for a model of the kind of article you need to do, then dissect it, analyze it—and copy it. Beginners sometimes worry that this is cheating, if not plagiarism, but it's nothing of the kind. It is, indeed, the way beginning writers were traditionally trained at newspapers and wire services. (Plagiarism, though, is a subject of increasing importance on the Web, and is dealt with in the A to Z index.)

For aspiring web writers, this means becoming familiar with the best websites that feature the kinds of articles that you're seeking to write. In addition to content formats, you will also see the best-practice approach to writing headings and summaries.

If you're writing a corporate news bulletin, for instance, you could do a lot worse than visit one of the top news sites, such as "TECH NEWS" at ZDNet (www.zdnet.com) and see how their stories are constructed. Here's the heading and first three paragraphs of an article that appeared on April 2, 2001:

> **Netcentives to cut 120 jobs**
> U.S. Web-based marketing firm Netcentives said on Monday it would cut about 120 jobs in a cost-cutting effort that would help bring its earnings per share above Wall Street's forecasts.
> In a statement, Netcentives also said President Eric Larsen would become chief executive, replacing West Shell III. Shell will remain chairman.

Netcentives said a cost-cutting effort would save about $40 million in the 2001 fiscal year. "The company's cost reduction plan includes several initiatives such as: a reduction in contract labor; cuts in administrative, travel and capital expenditures; and a reduction in work force of approximately 120 people," the statement said.

The heading is short, to the point, and factual. The first paragraph gives just a bit of background about the company, states the news, and tells you "why" the company says it's doing what it's doing. The second paragraph gives the next-most-important news. The third fills out the news a bit, and provides a direct quote from the company's press release.

That's a pretty good recipe for a breaking-news story, and a novice writer trying to put together a news piece could save a lot of potential flailing around by adopting the format.

Say you're asked to write a fact sheet for a corporation. A good place to start would be at one of the slicker Fortune 500-company websites, such as General Electric's, and see what they do. At www.ge.com/factsheet.html you'll find a two-page fact sheet that's an excellent model.

GE's fact sheet begins with a tight two-paragraph "About GE" section, then has a complete "financial highlights" section, and a listing of awards and honors the company has received. The second page features 20 one-paragraph descriptions of GE's business segments (linked to the appropriate parts of the website) and, finally, a social responsibility statement.

Although the company you're describing won't warrant the exact same treatment (few companies have so many business segments as GE!), this fact sheet is an excellent model of web-friendly writing and design.

Beginning writers often make two mistakes: They think they need to be entirely original, and they think they need to wait for "inspiration." Take it from the pros: for most kinds of writing, originality and inspiration are overrated. There are only a few ways to begin an article, and most often, the right one won't seem very original. As for inspiration, writers should always bear in mind that old maxim of Thomas Alva Edison: "Genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration."

When getting ready to write, always try to read the type of writing your reader reads. Say your target reader is a financial analyst, chances are they'll read *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Financial Times*. Read a number of issues. If nothing else, you'll get a feel for the basic tone and style of financial writing. For the writer who wants to get published, read the content your target editor publishes. It will give you a sense of what kind of writing to emulate.

Editing yourself

Learning to write polished, concise prose is a difficult, sometimes maddening process. Learning how to do it routinely, under deadline pressure, is exceedingly difficult. The authors of this book have been at it, professionally, for a collective 40 years, and are still learning.

There are, however, some simple techniques—tricks, you could say—that can help any aspiring writer become more effective. One of these tricks is more about mindset than mechanics: Force yourself to switch roles, think like an editor, and critique your own writing. This can bring new discipline to the writing process.

For many writers, getting the first rough draft of a memo, report, or article onto the screen is the most laborious and painful part of the writing process: organizing your ideas, wresting them from your mind into words and phrases, sentences and paragraphs, confronting the fact that what you have to say rarely seems as good on the screen as it did in your thoughts—none of it is easy. This is probably what Samuel Johnson was thinking when he noted that: "No man but a blockhead ever wrote ... except for money."

No wonder then that most writers—and nearly all beginners—are only too willing to wash their hands of their first draft as soon as they've finally got it all down. But what the best professional writers learn is that they can improve their writing significantly if they can switch roles at this point, take a break, and then return to their writing, but this time looking at it from the point of view of an editor. Again, your word processor's "word count" function is an invaluable tool: Count the number of words you've written, and set an objective for cutting them back. Many experienced writers routinely cut their own first drafts by anywhere form 25 percent to 50 percent.

The editor's motivations are very different from a writer's. The editor must be an advocate for the reader, not for the writer. Uppermost in the editor's mind is the question of how easily the reader will be able to grasp what the writer is trying to say. The editor isn't concerned—at least not primarily—with how difficult it was for the writer to write the article, how proud the writer is of a particular word or phrase, how hard the writer worked to shoehorn a particular fact or anecdote or detail into the article.

The editor must question every word and every sentence, asking

      Is this clear?

      Is there a simpler way to say this?

      Is there a shorter way to say this?

      Is this necessary?

The editor must be willing to rephrase anything that's ambiguous, to simplify anything that's unnecessarily complex, and to cut whatever isn't essential—to cut entire sentences or paragraphs, if needs be.

The first trick in editing yourself is to leave enough time. If you're writing a 500-word article and it's due Friday morning, make sure you finish it Thursday morning, so that you can set it aside for a few hours, go have lunch, and then return to it, prepared to devote another couple of hours to it.

The second and harder trick is to put yourself into the mindset of an editor. One way to do this is to make a game of it. Pretend that someone else has written the piece, and that it's your job to expose its weaknesses. Talk to yourself about the writer: say,

"Okay, what is he trying to do here?" Better yet, say things like, "What was she thinking here?" and "Do we really need this last paragraph?" The object is to detach yourself from the ego that the writer—you—has invested in the article.

Some writers find that a good way to critique their own work is to print it out at this point, and make corrections, changes, and queries on the written draft in pen or pencil. Switching media somehow seems to aid the process of viewing a piece of writing objectively. Then take the marked-up copy and go back and rewrite what you have on the screen.

Try it, and as an experiment, keep a copy of both your first draft and your final self-edited draft. After a week or two, go back and compare the two. Chances are, this exercise will make a believer of you.

A final thought

People have been writing, editing and publishing for millennia. The best minds of human civilization have thought long and hard about the optimal techniques for communicating in print. Much of that accumulated wisdom has held true as the technology of publishing has changed, from clay tablets to papyrus scrolls to bound books, newspapers and magazines, and to the World Wide Web today. It's silly to throw it all away, and many of the rules and suggestions in this book build directly on that knowledge. But at the same time, you must be ever-mindful of what is truly unique about the Web. This book attempts to identify those differences, and present them in a format that can serve as a handy everyday reference for anyone who writes or edits content online.

More information can be found at:
http://www.gerrymcgovern.com