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Writing for the Web

Australian Customs Service

Bobby Graham

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Ten tips for top web content

With thanks to Dey Alexander

1. Know your goals and stick to them

Your business goal is either to sell a product – books, airline tickets, houses, etc. – or to promote a service, for example: banking, jobs, medical advice, government agencies. Your audience needs to understand those goals quickly and easily; you need to enable them to do so.

2. Know your audience and write to meet their needs

At the Library we use a user-centred approach – and I'll talk about that later. This means that we try and put ourselves into the users' shoes to understand their needs.

We shouldn't assume that we know the answers: our users know what they want. What we need to do is to find out what that is.

3. Use plain language

Avoid jargon, acronyms, and clever turns of phrase. A large percentage of web users struggle to use a computer. Many users may not have English as their mother tongue – think of migrants and international users. Think too of users who may use screen readers to listen to the texts. You don't want to handicap them even more.

4. Be very concise

Studies show that people are very task-oriented when they use the web. They have a particular goal in mind and they are often in a hurry. So they scan rather than read text closely. Think of the way your teenage children use websites: they click and move on, taking in just enough to know what they don't want. But that's not to say that you can't or shouldn't include longer texts online. Users still want to read policy documents; you just need to know how to present them appropriately.

5. Make content easy to scan

Write and design content to suit the way people read online. Use headings followed by short texts – think of the way Google displays their results. Think of media sites: paragraphs contain only one topic and sentences are short.

Use bulleted or numbered lists where you can. For example:

You can order books by:

- Email
- Fax
- Phone
- In person.

6. Avoid exaggeration and unnecessary words

Don't put unnecessary words between your real content and the people who want it. It takes more time and effort for people to find what they've come for if you make boastful claims about your products, services or achievements.

7. Make sure page titles are accurate

Page titles are used in search engine indexing; they appear as the links in search results; they are stored in browser bookmarks, favourites and histories. Good page titles will help people find or return to your content. For example, make sure that your page about 'The unbearable lightness of being' is really about a movie and not about existentialism. Your user has to remember what the page is about when next they look at their list of favourites.

8. Write meaningful link text

Links embedded in the content on a web page stand out: they are a call to action – or at least they can be. Links like 'click here' don't provide enough motivation to act. Link text needs to clearly tell users what the link will lead to. For example, 'our [product list](#) includes details of members' subscriptions' – where 'product list' is the link. Another reason for not using 'click here' all the time is that a screen reader will read them out – in that mechanical voice – as: 'click here', 'click here', 'click here' – and drive the reader mad.

9. Draft and review

This is your opportunity to use your knowledge and skills of grammar, spelling and syntax. You can review, edit and proofread until you feel comfortable that you have the right words in place. After that, ask a colleague to read your text. If they understand what you're trying to say, the chances are good that others will too. Sometimes a content review checklist – ensuring you have all the elements in place – can be helpful.

10. Don't publish and forget

Websites are not filing cabinets or archives. Once published, web content is live and available, and the assumption is that what is available is current. To avoid out-of-date content you could consider doing some of the following:

- Automate changes so that updates happen when required.
- Don't cite numbers, for example, 'we have x-number of items in our list'. As the product list changes regularly, you will need to constantly revise the figures – and if you forget, you can be sure that someone will notice.
- Similarly with staff names and contact details – remember to update these regularly or don't use them at all. Stay away from emails online: they just attract spam.

So now that we know how to write content, let's criticise an existing web page:

An example of typical web content at the Library

- Who is this written for?
- What information do I get here?
- Is it useful?

'The National Library of Australia is the country's largest reference library. Our role is to ensure that documentary resources of national significance relating to Australia and the Australian people, as well as significant non-Australian library materials, are collected, preserved and made accessible either through the Library itself or through collaborative arrangements with other libraries and information providers.

'By offering a strong national focus in all that we do and cooperating with others who share our goals, the Library contributes to the continuing vitality of Australia's culture and heritage.'

'We collect books and other important cultural objects. We preserve these so that you can find them, both now and in the future. We focus on items that are of interest and important to Australia. We work together with other libraries to give you the best opportunity to get information about our collections.'

Writing for web users

A case study from the National Library of Australia: when planning a new website, we consider the following:

- Who are our users?
- What do they want?
- How can we help them to find what they want?

Who are our users?

Understand who our users are by conducting research. A Library survey identified the following types of users:

- An academic researcher
- A postgraduate student
- A reference librarian
- A secondary school student
- A genealogist
- An artist
- A potential benefactor
- A government legal researcher
- A professional library colleague

We personify these users by writing *personas*. For example:

An academic researcher

Persona: Richard has recently retired from his post as Dean, Faculty of Science, Western Australian University of Technology. He plans to research and write about his lifelong passion: wattles. Richard is not very skilled when it comes to using computers – in fact he’s relied all these years on his personal assistant to download and print out his email correspondence. However, his grandson has given Richard a computer for Christmas so Richard’s game to give it a go.

A secondary school student

Persona: Jack is a Year 8 student at Otago High School, Devonport. For his SOSE course, he has to do an assignment on bushrangers. He’s decided he wants to make his presentation look like an old ‘wanted’ poster, with an image of Ned Kelly.

What do they want?

Write a *use case* for each persona.

How can we help them to find what they want?

Write a user *scenario* for each of the personas:

Use case: Richard is keen to find out what the National Library holds in terms of images on wattles to support his articles, which he hopes to publish in an academic journal.

User scenario: Richard has managed to get online from home and to find the Library's website and once there, he wants to find wattles. He's not very confident clicking through too many links as he's scared he won't be able to return to where he started (he hasn't yet discovered the 'back' button). What is the best route for him to follow to get a quick and comprehensive result on his first search? And if and when he does find wattles, will he be able to get the images? Can he order them? Will he be able to receive them in a way and format that he understands? Must he pay for them? Should he get copyright clearance first? These questions cross his mind as he pores over the Library's home page, looking for the best entry point.

Use case: One of Jack's schoolmates has told him that the National Library has a really cool service called 'AskNow' where the librarian does all the work for you. Jack thinks this is a fast way of getting the material he needs.

User scenario: Jack is a seasoned internet user and doesn't hesitate to type in AskNow, where he finds the section entitled School Assignments. This points him in the direction of the Library catalogue. Searching the catalogue is a little frustrating as he'd really just like pictures. What can he do next? Tiring of the site, he decides to give Google a go. There he finds a very satisfying reference with an image of Ned Kelly's face, which he copies immediately onto this desktop. Jack quickly forgets about AskNow and the Library and reverts to Google for his next school assignment.

Navigation and Information architecture

Website structure and the way information is presented are important. There are some similarities between books and websites: both have pages, both have a hierarchical structure such as sections and chapters. But books are accessed and used in a linear fashion: you generally start at the beginning and work your way through from front to back. A website can be accessed

from any page or section and each page has to deliver a stand-alone message.

So what do you need to think about?

- The goals for your site
- Your target user groups
- The key tasks your content must support
- Navigation and structure

If you already have a website, you could run an activity with your users. Make sets of cards that represent content from your site and ask users to sort them into categories. This helps you understand how users think the information should be structured.

If you're planning a new website, you will need to develop a draft structure. For example, think of the main sections – 'about us', 'our products', 'corporate information', etc. – and then think of what you'll have within each of these sections.

Once you have created the structure, you can evaluate it with simple user testing: let users find information using a paper version of the new site structure. Listen to what they have to say: this helps you decide whether any changes are required.

Now you can write appropriate content – using Dey Alexander's Ten Top Tips – for each of the pages, sections and headings.

Some sites to look at

<http://www.alistapart.com/>

For people who make websites

<http://www.flickr.com/>

The best way to store, search, sort and share your photos.

<http://www.plos.org/>

Public Library of Science is a non-profit organization of scientists and physicians committed to making the world's scientific and medical literature a freely available public resource. All our activities are guided by our [core principles](#).

<http://www.bloglines.com/>

Create a personal Bloglines page loaded with the freshest news about the things you love.

Subscribe. Search. Publish. Share. Sign up now. It's free.

<http://creativecommons.org/>

Enabling the legal sharing and reuse of cultural, educational, and scientific works

Find. Publish.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/>

<http://www.abc.net.au/>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page

The free encyclopaedia that anyone can edit

In conclusion

After all of that, don't lose heart: content is still king and writing is at the heart of all communication.

In closing, I'd like to read a couple of introductory paragraphs from a book called:

The Web Content Style Guide

An Essential Reference for Online Writers, Editors, and Managers

Gerry McGovern, Rob Norton, Catherine O'Dowd

'Good writing is the exception rather than the rule on the Web. One reason is simply that it's hard to write well. Another is that many of the people who've been involved with the Web from the beginning have been slow to realize that writing is a very big part of what the online experience is about. While the Web has important non-textual uses, such as listening to audio files, watching video files, and downloading software and music, most people who use it spend an overwhelming amount of their online time reading words on a page. It's not an accident that we call them webpages.

'Writing, in fact, is arguably the most important link in the chain of devices, technologies, software, and interfaces that propels ideas across the Web—more important than the kinds of computer, operating system, browser software, or Internet connection method used. Writing is also the least understood link in that chain, and the one least likely to improve with technology.'

So the onus is on us to make sure that writing for web users reaches an appropriate audience in a focused, targeted and clear manner.