



# Writing for the Web

Best Practices for Enhancing the User Experience on Your Website

# Writing for the Web



1. How Users Read on the Web
2. The Five Second Test
3. The Role of Introductory Text
4. Layout Essentials
5. Audiences and Top Tasks
6. Content and Style Overview
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# Writing for the Web



## How Users Read on the Web

### *They Don't*

- ☞ People rarely read web pages word by word; instead, they scan the page, picking out individual words and sentences.
- ☞ Research on how people read websites found that 79% of test users always scanned any new page they came across; only 16% read word-by-word. [www.useit.com](http://www.useit.com)

# Writing for the Web



## *Get To The Point*

- ☞ When a user visits your website you have about 5 seconds to grab their attention before they click off.
- ☞ A good site gives users the information that they need quickly and efficiently.

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## *The Five Second Test*

- ✓ Go to one of the important pages on your site – one that should drive key goals.
- ✓ Now, look at that page for 5 seconds or, better yet, ask someone not familiar with your page to view it.
- ✓ Remember, no more than 5 seconds!
- ✓ Now – have them name what stood out, was it clear what action you wanted them to take?

*<http://blog.stamats.com>*

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## Solution – **Use Scannable Text**

- ☞ Highlighted keywords - [hypertext links](#) serve as one form of highlighting; *typeface variations* and **color** are others
- ☞ Break documents into separate topics
- ☞ Use meaningful sub-headings (not "clever" ones) – questions often make great headings.
- ☞ Use bulleted lists

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## Scannable Text *(cont.)*

- ☞ One idea per paragraph - users will skip over any additional ideas if they are not caught by the first few words in the paragraph
- ☞ Craft the first sentence to capture attention
- ☞ Use the inverted pyramid style, starting with the conclusion
- ☞ Short paragraphs – 50 words or less. *One sentence paragraphs are ok!*

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## **Scannable Text** *(cont.)*

- ❧ Short sentences – 5 to 10 words
- ❧ This does not mean adhering to a defined word or character length for every piece of content.
- ❧ Try to say what you need in the shortest, clearest way possible - Half the word count (or less) than conventional writing



# Writing for the Web



A good rule of thumb is to *write out your content as a first draft without thinking about length, then come back to it a day later and cut it down by half.*

*Then, repeat the process!* You'll find it's not hard after spending a little time away from it to cut down unnecessary text and still convey the relevant information.

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Here is an example of how varying content can affect usability:

5 versions of the same webpage were developed

- ∞ same basic information
- ∞ different wording
- ∞ same site navigation

Users were then asked to perform the same tasks with the different pages.

# Writing for the Web



## Version 1 - Promotional writing (*control condition*)

- Uses “marketese” found on many commercial websites

*Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), Carhenge (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).*

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## Version 2 – Concise Text

- Uses about half the word count as the control condition

*In 1996, six of the best-attended attractions in Nebraska were Fort Robinson State Park, Scotts Bluff National Monument, Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum, Carhenge, Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park.*

**Usability Improvement 58%** *(relative to control condition)*

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## Version 3 – Scannable layout

- Same text as the control condition in a scannable layout

*Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were:*

- ❧ *Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors)*
- ❧ *Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166)*
- ❧ *Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000)*
- ❧ *Carhenge (86,598)*
- ❧ *Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002)*
- ❧ *Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).*

**Usability Improvement 47%** *(relative to control condition)*

# Writing for the Web



## Version 4 - Objective language

- Uses neutral rather than subjective, boastful, or exaggerated language (otherwise the same as the control condition)

*Nebraska has several attractions. In 1996, some of the most-visited places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), Carhenge (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).*

**Usability Improvement 27%** *(relative to control condition)*

# Writing for the Web



## Version 5 – Combined Version

- Uses all three improvements in writing style together: concise, scannable, and objective

*In 1996, six of the most-visited places in Nebraska were:*

- ❧ *Fort Robinson State Park*
- ❧ *Scotts Bluff National Monument*
- ❧ *Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum*
- ❧ *Carhenge*
- ❧ *Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer*
- ❧ *Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park.*

**Usability Improvement 124%** *(relative to control condition)*

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## *The Role of Introductory Text*

### **What's the page about??**

- ❧ There is a tendency to use filler text at the top of a page, however, this is where you need to cut to the chase!
- ❧ People read very little on web pages so you shouldn't waste valuable real estate on generic feel-good type of content.



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- ❧ Intro text has a valid role in that it sets the context for the content.
- ❧ For example, rather than having a list of links or articles, interviews, etc., you should preface the page with one or two lines of intro:
  - What do the links/articles/interviews have in common
  - What will the visitor gain by reading them?

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☞ Focus on answering two questions:

☞ **What?**

What will users find on this page – i.e., what's its function?

☞ **Why?**

Why should they care – i.e., what's in it for them?

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## Layout Essentials

☞ Landing Pages

☞ Images and Headlines

☞ Length of Page

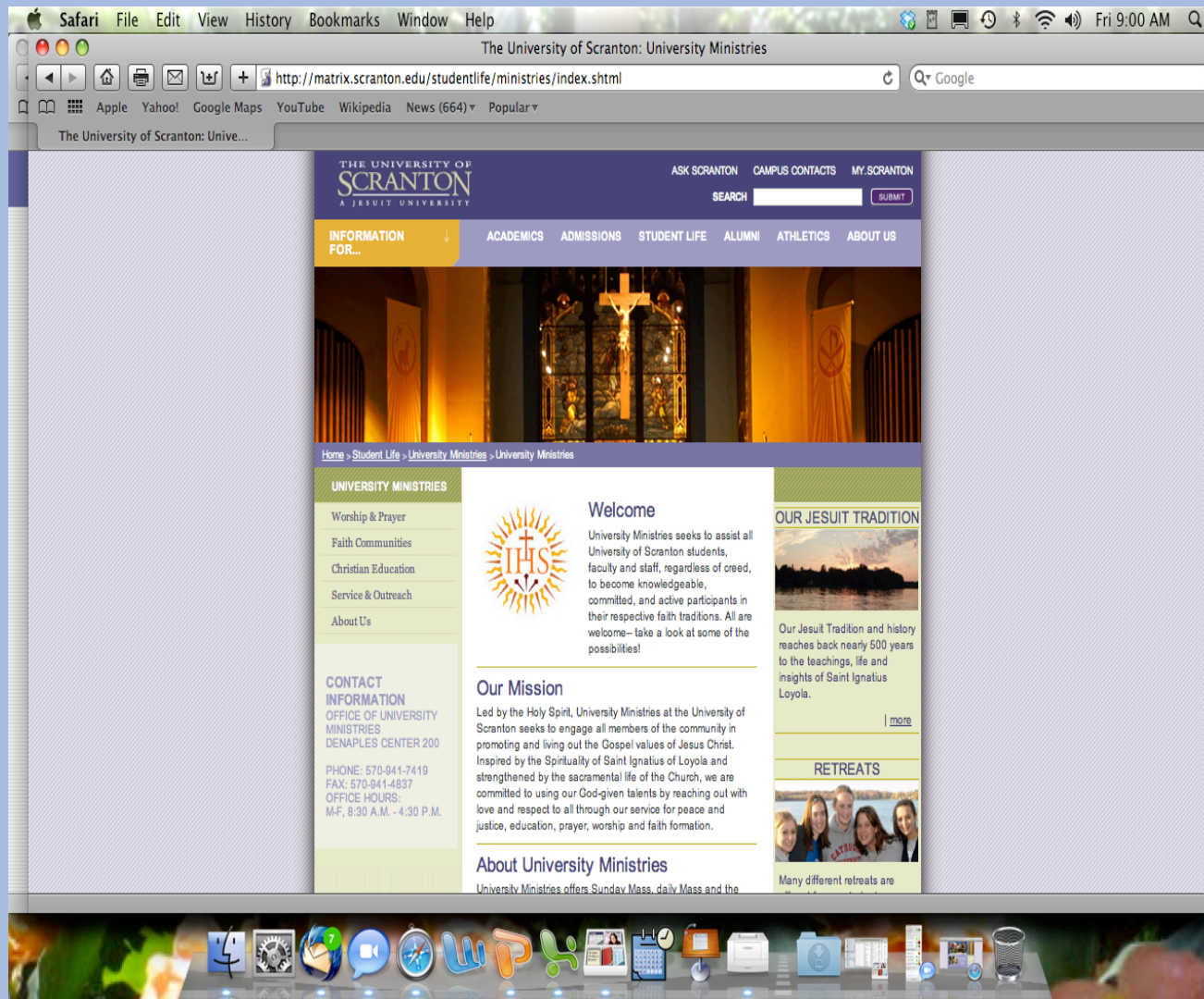
# Writing for the Web



## *Use Landing Pages Strategically*

- Landing pages should give an overview of each web section.
- Integrate any relevant and current “take action” items such as “sign the petition to stop Big Oil from drilling in the Arctic Refuge.”
- Provide links to resources, fact sheets, and important articles so users can easily click to read more.

# Writing for the Web



# Writing for the Web



## *Use Compelling Images And Headlines*

- Images can help draw your readers in and help connect them to your organizations mission and initiatives.
- Try to attach at least one compelling image to each page.

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## To Scroll or Not to Scroll?

*Web users spend 80% of their time looking at information above the page fold*

- ∞ Long pages continue to be problematic because of users' limited attention span. People prefer sites that get to the point and let them get things done quickly.
- ∞ Besides the basic reluctance to read more words, scrolling is extra work.
- ∞ However, you can put information below the fold rather than limit yourself to bite-sized pages.

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*Users will scroll, if the information above the fold makes them believe the rest of the page will be valuable.*

- ∞ In fact, if you have a long article, it's better to present it as one scrolling canvas than to split it across multiple page views. *(but be sure to incorporate scannable text!)*
- ∞ Scrolling beats paging because it's easier for users to simply keep going down the page than it is to decide whether or not to click through for the next page of a fragmented article.



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*People will look very far down a page if...*

- ∞ the layout encourages scanning, and
- ∞ the initially viewable information makes them believe that it will be worth their time to scroll.

*Finally, don't forget to put a nice morsel at the very bottom!*

- ∞ the last thing a person sees remains particularly salient in the mind.

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*Understand your target audiences and how they use your website*

## ❧ **Internal Audiences** (*customer service audiences*)

- ❧ Current students and their families
- ❧ Faculty and staff
- ❧ Engaged alumni
- ❧ Donors and partners

# Writing for the Web



## ❧ **External Audiences** (*prospects and leads*)

- ❧ Undergrad prospects
- ❧ Grad/professional prospects
- ❧ Non-degree students
- ❧ Potential faculty and staff
- ❧ Disconnected alumni
- ❧ Potential donors and partners
- ❧ Visitors and general public

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*What are the top tasks visitors want to complete on your website?*

- ❧ Consider your audience(s) – prospective student, alumni, donors, community...
- ❧ Identify the mission – the purpose – of your website. Then determine your visitors' #1 top task.
- ❧ People come to your website with a specific task in mind. If it isn't easy to complete that task, they'll leave.

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## *How do you identify your visitors' top tasks?*

- ∞ What question do people ask most when they send you an email or call your office?
  - Where can I find information about...?
  - Do I qualify for...?
  - How do I .....?
- ∞ Talk to different audience groups to determine what is important to them.

# Writing for the Web



## *How can you help visitors complete their top tasks?*

- ❧ Structure your pages to make information easy to find on your website.
- ❧ Look at how each piece information fits into other tasks people might be looking to complete.
- ❧ Is it easy to get from point A to point B? After reading your page can the reader figure out what to do next?

# Writing for the Web



## *Conduct informal usability testing*

- Ask someone to find something on your website.
- It may be obvious to you, but can other people find it?
- If not, why not?
- How easy or difficult was it to complete the task?  
(scale of 1 to 5)



# Writing for the Web

Content & Style Overview – plus a few interesting examples



especially readers online

# People ^ are in a hurry, so remember



- ❧ “Less is More”
- ❧ “Catch” readers with the 1<sup>st</sup> sentence; use short paragraphs
- ❧ Vary your sentence length and style
- ❧ Short lists, bulleted lists are quick and easy to digest
- ❧ Don’t be afraid to utilize white space
- ❧ Be creative and imaginative

# Content and Style



- ❧ Make your content personal
- ❧ Write conversationally. Your tone and writing style should be more casual, more conversational. (We are ... , Our University ... , Together ...)
- ❧ Remember to use Active Voice. Strong verbs engage readers
- ❧ Always start with a headline – everyone reads them. (Use Subheads, too.) Limit length to two lines. Anything over 7-8 words is too much.
- ❧ Use bold and italics, but *sparingly*
- ❧ Utilize eye-catching quotes ... example forthcoming

# A Great Quote About Us — Used Effectively

☞ “Don’t go to Harvard, but to the Business School at the University of Scranton, where they are changing lives.”

- Peter Drucker,  
Father of Modern  
Management

Welcome to the

## KANIA SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

“Don’t go to Harvard, but to the Business School at the University of Scranton, where they are changing lives.”

- Peter Drucker, Father of Modern Management

### About the Kania School of Management

The Kania School at the University of Scranton offers highly innovative business programs enriched with the latest technological applications and sharply focused on educating the whole person for a lifetime of success. This dual focus on being on the cutting-edge of scholarly

THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SCRANTON**  
A JESUIT UNIVERSITY

ing the Jesuit principle of 'Cura  
and directs everything we do on behalf  
You can expect to be the center of

# When in doubt, ‘borrow’ ideas



## **Small. Smart. Historic. It's the W&M difference.**

Welcome to William & Mary, one of America's oldest and best universities.

We bet you have a lot of questions. For instance, [who is W&M?](#) What makes our students so extraordinary? For that matter, what exactly is a [Public Ivy](#)? And what does it mean to go to a university that claims both Thomas Jefferson and Jon Stewart as [alumni](#)?

Start by checking out our 36 [undergraduate programs](#), taught by the most committed professors in America (that's an actual statistic) who are also internationally and nationally recognized scholars. And don't forget our 12 [graduate programs in Arts & Sciences](#), and our top-ranked professional schools in law, education, business and marine science. You'll see why *U.S. News and World Report* ranked us sixth among all public universities.

When you're ready to apply, our [undergraduate admission](#) and [graduate admission](#) staff are here to make your life easier. William & Mary is consistently ranked among the top "best buy" colleges in the nation, due in no small part to our [financial aid](#) packages, including the [Gateway](#) program for undergraduates.

Don't hesitate to contact us if you have any questions or if you want to plan your [campus visit](#).

Look at their word choices & sentence structure.

- ❧ “bet,” “extraordinary,” “don't forget”
- ❧ The content is humorous – “that's an actual statistic”
- ❧ Thomas Jefferson/Jon Stewart referenced in the same sentence

# Another Example

## Communication

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How do human beings understand and use the abundance of information that comes to them daily in social, political, and business contexts, or even in their families? How can they become more effective as producers and consumers of communication in today's information-based society?

The Department of Communication invites you to explore these and other related questions. We offer a stimulating undergraduate program that offers a [major](#) and [minor](#) in communication, and a [graduate program](#) that offers an Master of Arts degree in communication. Our graduate program has a broad focus in communication theory, organizational communication, and strategic communication practice. In our undergraduate program, you can choose from 3 tracks of specialization:

- [Media studies](#)
- [Organizational communication](#)
- [Communication and the human condition](#)

The Department of Communication is home to a diverse and productive group of [scholars/teachers](#) with a broad set of research interests that reflects the most current scholarship in the field of Communication. The department sponsors an undergraduate student communication club, *Comm.Unity*, as well as a chapter of the national Communication Honors Society [Lambda Pi Eta](#). Our faculty participate in a wide-variety of interdisciplinary campus programs and initiatives including [Latin American and Caribbean Studies](#), [Women's Studies](#), the [Ignatian Residential College](#), the [Honors Program](#), [Asian Studies](#), [American Studies](#), and [Service Learning](#).



Fairfield University's Communication page

**Overall, it's a good website but ...**

- ❧ Questions are effective openers, in moderation.
- ❧ 17 bullets on this page – a little bit of overkill

## Positives

- ❧ Good, active verbs (invites, explore)
- ❧ Lots of hyperlinks ... but maybe too many?

# Side-by-side Comparison

Option 1



History - the recording of the daily lives, conflicts, thoughts, relationships, work, and beliefs of men and women - has long been central to the world's understanding of human culture, and to every society's transmission of its culture. From ancient tribes to modern nation-states, virtually all groups have appointed bards, historians, or chroniclers to be the keepers of collective

memory. Among the first subjects taught in universities, history has retained a central place in the modern canon, changing and evolving to reflect the zeitgeist of its time and place, but always central to how we understand our world and find our place in it.

Historians here, as around the world, seek to understand the totality of human endeavor in its time-based context. A dedicated historian seeks to know with

## Unnamed University in the Northeast

Commentator, a literary analyst, a translator of documents, a paleographer, an expert on poetry, a geographer, and a statistician. Hence, history is a discipline both intrinsically broad, and unavoidably deep. The scholarly projects of historians consequently require long-term intellectual commitment.

... seeks to introduce to each student the ~~importance of history, and the skills of reading, writing, and analysis of historical materials from every perspective - social, political, economic, religious, cultural, and intellectual. Our courses range from introductory to advanced seminars, covering all areas of the world and all periods of history, from ancient to contemporary. Through small classes, especially at the upper-division level, students are encouraged to analyze primary historical documents, do original research, and learn to write analytically.~~

Those who [major](#) or [minor](#) in history receive a broad preparation for entrance into graduate school and the professions of:

Option 2



## Welcome to Biology at [Redacted] University!

**Biology Students learn about the scientific basis of life through rigorous courses and extensive laboratory work... view [Stories from Biology majors and alumni](#).**

Participation in the [faculty's](#) active research programs further enhances this experience.



Students in the educational e... field and in the

modern biology and the recognition of key issues that arise in the curriculum.

The biology major prepares students for challenging [careers](#) in the areas of biotechnology, education, health, and research.

Excellent academic advising, dedicated mentoring, and outstanding instruction demonstrate the biology department's commitment to the students' intellectual and personal development. The University has implemented a **new Core Curriculum** beginning in 2009.

Interested in [Study Abroad](#)? Great programs exist for science students!



### NEWS AND EVENTS

#### Current Events

The West Coast Biological Sciences Undergraduate Research Conference was a



SCU and thanks to all who attended for your very impressive work. See conference photos by clicking in the red box above and then click slideshow!

# Review of Sample Sites



Let's take a look now at a few examples from our web site to see if we can apply what we've learned!



That's It – Thanks!