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## Word power how to write for web

by Debra Blundell.

**“I have made this letter longer than usual, because I lack the time to make it short.”**

French philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote that in the 17th century, but it could equally apply to the content that’s thrown onto many websites today. Incidentally, Pascal developed the theory of probability. If he were alive today, he would tell you that the probability of anyone reading a badly written, content heavy website is extremely low.

Creating content for a website isn’t about reproducing a printed brochure online, bunging up a few pdf files and hoping for the best. Good Web content is written especially for this purpose and has a style and rules that suit the medium as much as text language suits a tiny screen and wordy prose suits a novel.

It’s all down to the way people use the Internet. The world expert on these matters is Jakob Nielsen who, through exhaustive usability testing, has come up with telling observations on the way people read text online. People don’t generally read the Web for pleasure, because reading on screen isn’t relaxing. They use it as a giant information resource - as a way to get more information, more quickly.

Because of this, Nielsen believes, they exhibit three distinct habits:

- They don’t read from start to finish. They scan, skipping forward to pertinent words and phrases.
- They don’t like long, scrolling pages. Short, concise chunks of information are what they’re looking for.
- They hate marketing guff, boastful claims and anything that gets in the way of them and the straight facts.

Based on these findings, a bank of accepted wisdom has amassed on the best way to write for the Web, the most important bits of which we’ve gathered below. We’re not saying that these are hard and fast rules - sometimes the best writing comes from breaking the rules (if you can do it well). But they’re a pretty good guide for getting your copy noticed and read.

- 1 Keep it short. Keep it snappy. Keep it simple. Try and confine only one thought to each paragraph. Where it makes sense, use bullet points (like this list). Try and at least halve the word count of any paper-based copy.
- 2 Make your text easy to scan. Highlight keywords. Writing self-explanatory headings and sub-heads, not clever ones.

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- 3 Get the structure right. Put the important points near the top (in case people only read a few lines) and expand on them lower down. Make sure each page makes sense when read in isolation, as readers jump around websites in no particular order. And make sure the words work in harmony with the design.
- 4 Adjust your style and your choice of words to suit your audience. Lawyers expect to see professional, formal language. A young audience wants something funky, possibly with slang or buzzwords (but make sure you're bang up to date or you'll lose all credibility). If you're selling nappies to mums, you need to sound friendly, comforting and reassuring.
- 5 Make sure your website is accessible to disabled users by following the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines and test it with tools such as Bobby. When indigo created a site for St Dunstan's, the charity for blind ex-Service men and women, we had to write the copy to accommodate screen-reader software.
- 6 Even if your Web content has been collected from lots of sources or written by multiple people, make sure it sounds like a single voice. Make sure the style, tense and person (is your business 'the company', 'it' or 'we'?) are all consistent and that none of the messages conflict.
- 7 Keep it real. Don't say you're the leading supplier unless you are. Avoid boastful or unsubstantiated claims. Keep jargon and marketing lingo to a minimum - they cloud the real information and send readers packing. Just give them the facts and let them make up their own minds.
- 8 Keep it up to date. A section with news, press releases or new products makes you look busy and productive. A section with news that hasn't been updated for months make you look sloppy, unprofessional and not very active. It will do more harm than good.

- 9 Brush up your grammar. In any kind of writing, first impressions count. Spelling mistakes, grammatical errors and badly constructed sentences definitely don't say 'professional'! Proof read all your copy at least twice and don't rely on computer spell checkers.
- 10 Get some feedback. The only way to tell if copy really works is to have a few people read it and get their thoughts. Did it all make sense? Was it easy to read and navigate? Was the content interesting, informative or entertaining? What was their lasting impression?

Try to follow these rules and your website can be an enormously effective marketing tool that will raise your credibility and visibility no end. As I'm sure Pascal would agree, take the time to make that letter short and people will take the time to read it.

If you would like to discuss your corporate identity in greater detail, contact Gilles Guilbert at [gg@indigocreative.co.uk](mailto:gg@indigocreative.co.uk)