Principles of Effective Web Writing

Point of View

First person point of view is most effective for web writing. It humanizes the content, helping you connect with your readers on an emotional level.

> Example: "**We** don't just treat a disease; **we** care for people who may not know which step to take next… "

Second person point of view is easier to persuade the reader to take action, and appeal to their emotions. This is useful when you pitch a service. However, when writing in the second person narrative you must be cautious that the content does not sound patronizing or like a 'hard-sell' pitch.

> Example: "**You** can ask to be moved to another room if **you** are uncomfortable or unhappy."

Avoid mixing points of view.

Focus on the Audience

Even when using first person point of view, focus on what your organization can do for the reader.

> **Example of Internal Focus:** "We offer free wireless internet access to patients and visitors at all of ABC Health System facilities."

> **Example of User Focus:** "You may use our free wireless internet while a patient or visitor at any of our ABC Health System facilities."

Substantiate Claims

Support your benefits with statistics, patient stories, quality awards, etc.

If you're going to use accreditation and awards, years of experience or other "accomplishment" factors to establish credibility, it should support the page theme, not compete with it.

More complex claim substantiation – such as full-version patient stories, quality data and articles about awards – should be easy to find (calls to action, featured content) but not compete with the content.

Write for Users

Write to meet varying literacy levels. Avoid jargon. Medical specialists use words and phrases that are meaningful to them but fail to communicate to the general public.

Inverted Pyramid
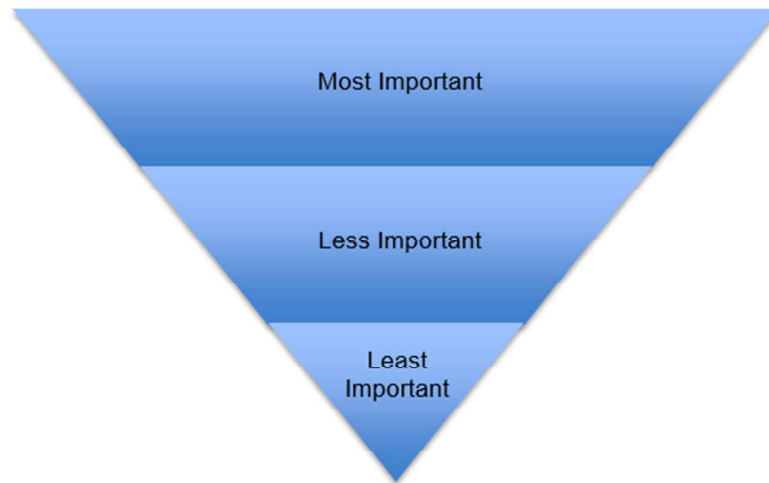
- Place the most important information first.
- Follow with further detail
- Place least important information last

Users won't read your text word-for-word. Therefore, the first two paragraphs must state the most important information. Start subheads, paragraphs, and bullet points with information-carrying words.

Use Active Voice

Active voice is virtually always preferable to passive. It is immediate and engaging; it involves the reader. It helps deliver a more clear and effective message to the user.

To eliminate passive voice, scan your writing for "be" verbs, which often indicate passive voice.

- Am
- Is
- Are
- Was
- Were
- Be
- Been
- "ing" – on the end of words

Other Tips

Don't Turn Verbs into Nouns

This structure is often unnecessary. By eliminating it, you can make your sentence shorter and simpler.

> **Example of a DO:** Once your appointment is scheduled, please **review** our new patient packet.

> **Example of a DON'T:** Once your appointment is scheduled, please **conduct a review of** the new patient packet.

Avoid Duplicating Content

- Reduces credibility
- Frustrates users searching for unique information
- Damages page rank
- Search engines must try to guess which page is the original

Page Length

Users will scroll, but users' limited attention span means that long pages can still be problematic.

- One topic per page
- Structure page content to help users easily scan
- Use headers, subheads and bulleted lists
- Avoid prepositions and articles
- Use accordions or tabs for topical groups if topic headings are strong
- If a page is very long and all content is crucial, break up the page into multiple pages

Conversion Goals

Every page should have a goal that connects users to you.

Types of conversions:

- **Direct transaction:** User can actively accomplish something (make a purchase, call us, email us)
- **Indirect transaction:** User submits contact information to request that something under your control happen in the future (email opt-in)
- **Informative transaction:** Provide user with valuable information (view a training video)

Lead with telling users what to do and how to do it

- **Example of a DO:** Check your blood pressure every 2 years, especially if you are age 40 or older.

- **Example of a DON'T:** Blood pressure is the force of blood against the walls of your arteries. Blood pressure should be checked often.

Page Elements

Headlines and Subheads

Headers are the most-scanned written content on the page. The best headlines and subheads are:

- Short
- Introductory
- Front-loaded with keywords
- Scannable

Paragraphs

- Lead with most important information
- Convey one concept or idea
- Use small, easily digestible blocks of text

Sentences

- Begin with the most important terms
- Minimize clauses: each sentence should communicate a single idea
- If you must use compound sentences, mix them with simple sentences
- Avoid *that, who a*nd *which* clauses
- Avoid prepositions and transitional words

Bullets

- Use most important words for each bullet first.
- Structure bullets consistently (e.g., started every bullet with a verb).
- Break longer lists into two columns.

Links

Links within on-page content tell search engines there is additional, relevant content available for a given keyword.

Make sure users can predict what will happen if they follow a link. Use action terms for link text and explain what users will find. Avoid words like "Click here," "read more," or the word "link." However, be careful to avoid overly lengthy link descriptions.
- **Example of a DO:** Get driving directions.
- **Example of a DON'T:** For driving directions, click here.
- **Example of a DON'T:** Click this link to get driving directions to Henry Ford Hospital

Use meaningful terms in your links as opposed to "click here"

Avoid URLs as links. e.g. http://www.henryford.com/body.cfm?id=57389

Why use in-page links?
- They stand out when users are scanning the page, helping them figure out what the page is about
- They are useful for mobile users – they don't need to rely on menus to access key parts of the site

In general, links should be ordered from most important to least important on the page (again, think about the inverted pyramid). And make sure to sprinkle them through the page – too many pages within a single sentence or paragraph can make text unreadable.

SEO Fundamentals

Links

Use meaningful link text. Your link helps improve SEO for the link destination

Headers

Nesting header tags properly is necessary to help search engine robots make sense of a page of content.

Some tips on headers:

- H1 tags should be unique and relevant
- Start the content of the H1 tag with the core keyword
- The H2 tag content can be an expanded version of H1
- If your H1 tag is "Diabetes Nutrition Services," your H2 tag could be "Nutrition Counseling and Support for Diabetics"
- Don't feel obligated to use H3 to H6 tags for SEO purposes

Proper nesting of headers:

Yes	No	No
H1	H1	H2
H2	H3	H3
H3	H2	H2
H2	H3	H3
H3	H2	H2
H2	H2	H2
H2		

Best Practices for Meta Data

Browser Titles:

- A compelling title increases visits from search results and helps visitors invest in your site
- Aim for 50-60 characters at most (including spaces)

URLs:

  o Keep it as short as possible so people can see the entire URL in search results
  o Avoid duplication of words

Meta Descriptions:

- Use the same main keyword as used in the browser title
- Create unique descriptions for each and every page
- Aim for 155 characters at most (including spaces)

Where to Use Keywords in Your Content

- **In Browser Titles:** At least once, preferably close to the beginning
- **In Meta Descriptions:** At least once, but don't compromise readability of description by packing it with keywords
- **On Page:** Once prominently near the top of the page (H1 typically a good choice) and at least 2-3 times, including variations, in the body copy and links

Accessibility Tips

Section 508

Part of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 which requires that electronic and information technology developed, procured, maintained, or used by the Federal government be accessible to people with disabilities.

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0

WCAG, pronounced Wuh-Cag, is a stable technical standard. It includes 12 guidelines organized under 4 principles:

- Perceivable
- Operable
- Understandable
- Robust

For each guideline, there are testable *success criteria*, which are at three levels: A, AA, and AAA. Meeting WCAG 2.0 AA = Section 508 Compliance.

Accessibility Tips

Many of the principles shared in this document also support accessible content. A few more tips and practices to consider:

- Use clear and simple language
- Use contextual link text (avoid "click here/learn more"
- Avoid use of All CAPs
- Screen readers sometimes spell out individual letters if a word in all CAPS, mistaking it for an abbreviation - generally harder to read for everyone
- Type Size - scalable with a minimum of 14px
- Use tables only for data. Avoid tables for layout purposes.
- Use lists for groups of links or related items.
- Use H1-H6 tags to identify headings, in proper order. Do not order based on visual size or look/feel.
- Alt Text. Use actual text, avoid putting text in images
  - Alt test is read by search engines and helps search engine optimization efforts
  - Provide text alternatives for any non-text content so that it can be changed into other forms people need, such as large print, braille, speech, symbols or simpler language.
  - A short text alternative can be provided within the "alt" attribute of the "img" element or in content adjacent to the image.
  - Alt Text Must - Accurately represent *content* and *function* of the image. Be succinct, usually no more than a few words.
  - Do not provide the same information as text near the image or use phrases like "image of …" or "graphic of …" to describe the image.

Video and Audio

- Provide alternatives for time-based media.
- Provide captions for video
- Synchronized – display captions at the same time as audio
- Equivalent – convey the same meaning
- Accessible – available to anyone who needs it
- Provide transcripts for video and audio formats in addition to captions
- Provide audio descriptions if video provides important content not available through the audio
- Can avoid as long as visual elements described verbally during video production