

**Prioritizing Web Usability**  
Nielsen & Loranger : Chapter 8  
**Writing for the Web**

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**SWE 432**  
**Design and Implementation of**  
**Software for the Web**

**Reading for a Purpose**

Users do not read web sites for pleasure

They scan text to satisfy specific needs

## Overview / Chapter 8 Outline

1. How Poor Writing Makes Web Sites Fail
2. Understanding How Web Users Read
3. Writing for Your Reader
4. Formatting Text for Readability

Good Writing Makes Usable Web Pages

## How Poor Writing Makes Web Sites Fail

- Disorganized, poorly written content means users cannot complete basic web tasks
- Users trust sites they understand
  - So they come back !
- Eye studies show users notice headlines and text before images
- Example : Heart association stress test description
  - Good description for intended audience
  - But try clicking on “stress test” !
  - Politics can interfere with good writing : Stem cell research
    - Is intent educational or political ?
    - What about words like “pluripotent” ?

Write for users, not yourself, experts, or your peers

## Understanding How Web Users Read

- Users save time by seeking information wisely
  - Users look for clues that answer is near
  - Users ignore most everything else (excise information)
  - Users punish web sites that frustrate their strategies
- Why users scan
  - Efficient way to identify valuable content
  - Users parse many sources of potential information
- Tip : Hire a web writer
  - Anyone can write, but only a few can write well
  - Grammar, active voice, fewer words, widely known words, ...
  - Would you do your own plumbing or wiring?

There are no great writers, just great editors

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## Write For Your Reader

- To succeed, you must know your audience
  - Interests, culture, needs, limitations, ...
- Understanding how to define your audience
  - IT professionals ?
  - Teenagers ?
  - Parents ?
  - Niche group ?
- Three guidelines for better web writing
  - Skip the jargon : San-Diego-Vision (2002)
    - What is “practice information” ?
  - Avoid acronyms
  - Do not allow sarcasm and cliches

Experts write differently for different audiences

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## Write For Your Reader (2)

- Use simple language
  - Example : “causes cancer” vs. “carcinogenic”
  - Simpler words, fewer syllables, shorter sentences
- Meeting low literacy needs
  - Many people have low (below 8th grade) literacy
  - Even in rich countries!
    - Sweden (2003) : 28% at low literacy
    - US (2003) : 46% at low literacy
  - Most users prefer clear simple language
    - Low literacy users need clear simple language
  - Guidelines for general sites
    - 6th grade level for home pages
    - 8th grade level for interior pages

This sounds easy, but is hard to implement

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## Write For Your Reader (3)

- Reduce marketing hype
  - Example : Accenture
- When should you list your accomplishments ?
  - Reference third parties (eg. JD power or Nobel committee)
  - Collect accolades in “About Us” sections
- Summarize key points and go to details
  - Start with conclusion, then provide support
  - “Inverted pyramid” structure
  - Do not add “continue reading” links
    - Instead, identify content on linked page
- Interesting example : NIH stroke rehabilitation
  - What is the reading level ?

Give readers what they need

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## Write For Your Reader (4)

- Writing samples: before and after

Consume a variety of nutrient-dense foods and beverages within and among the basic food groups while choosing foods that limit the intake of saturated and trans fats, cholesterol, added sugars, salt, and alcohol.

Eat foods from each basic food group. Don't eat much saturated and trans fats, added sugars, salt, and alcohol.

- Keep it short and simple
  - Pretty good example : US Customs and Border Patrol
    - Consider complex regulations
    - What about rotating menu?
    - Fonts and PDFs

Outline, edit, edit, then edit again

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## Formatting Text For Readability

- Making usability skyrocket
  - 1988 study by Nielsen
  - Two versions of B2B white paper : Original vs. web-ready
    - Users were 80% more likely to complete tasks
    - Users made 80% fewer errors
    - Users recalled twice as many facts
    - Users reported 37% higher subjective satisfaction
  - Think about this the next time you want to post a PDF
    - ACS SWE in PDF
    - ACS SWE in HTML
- Highlight keywords
  - As opposed to entire sentences or long phrases

This takes knowledge and time—but is worth it

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## Formatting Text For Readability (2)

- Use concise and descriptive titles and headings
  - Do not make users scan through noise
- Three guidelines for heading hierarchy
  1. Main headings should appear larger and bolder
  2. Sub headings should be smaller, but still stand out
  3. Headings should be left-justified
- Use bulleted and numbered lists
  - Much easier to scan than inline lists
  - 47% faster to read and understand
- Keep paragraphs short

Great literature can be written to slow users down

Web users want to read fast !

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## Formatting Text For Readability (3)

### Top seven guidelines for presenting lists

1. Use vertical lists (especially with 4 or more items)
2. Introduce list with clear descriptive phrase
3. Indent vertical lists and begin run in under text, not under bullet
4. Do not leave too much space between bullet and text
5. When possible, omit articles and repetitive words from the beginning of list items
6. Use parallel phrasing for each item
7. Do not overuse lists

This style is not natural for most people

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## Formatting Text For Readability (4)

- Parallel phrasing is important
  - Use the same phrase structure for each bullet item
- Not parallel
  - Find out what's new
  - How other people in their age group are doing
  - Contests
- Parallel
  - Find out what's new
  - See what other people in their age group are doing
  - Enter contests

This is professional writing  
Not what they teach in high school and Comp 101

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## Summary

Every can write  
But few can write well

But good writing is not magic  
The recipe is simple

**EDIT – EDIT – EDIT !!!**

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