

ACADEMIC ■ IMPRESSIONS

Writing Right for the Web | 10.01.07

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Q: Does this same principle apply to press releases on the web?

- Yes, the points about writing style and presentation of text on the web page apply to press releases as well. The "standard" for print distribution press release as first written isn't very web-friendly. With editing for subheads, bullet points, and links to additional information about what's in the story, the press release becomes a much more usable document.
- Remember to use a different page title tag for head press release that includes the main subject of the release. I see many colleges and universities just using "press release" or "news" as the same title tag for every release. That's throwing away opportunity for search engine exposure. The BBC nails it.

Q: Would you provide a link to the complete release?

- No, if you mean the "complete" release as originally written for print distribution. The online "original" should now be the web-friendly version.

Q: What are your views on the use of "Click here" for the call to action? Our IT department discourages us from using "Click here" because they feel it dilutes our Google rating.

- Your IT folk are right. For search engines, better to use substantive words in an obvious link format.
- Some direct marketers would disagree if there's a stronger desire to get people to take an action than to keep search engines happy. In that case, telling them what it is you want them to do might get more people to do it. Haven't seen any test results on that, but in general direct marketing results say that more people will do what you want them to do when you ask them directly to do it.

Q: Do you have any examples of admission pages for international students whose first language is not English?

- Not right now. University of Dayton once had international student information on their admissions website in several languages other than English. I just visited and can't find it now. Might be very well hidden but I suspect it isn't there. It really seems a good idea but I imagine most places are not taking the time because they assume anyone coming to U.S. or Canada (with French-speaking exceptions) is going to use English.
- A suggestion. Wikipedia is branching out into more and more foreign language editions. That might be a place to post information for international students in more than one language. Check the 10 languages including English at <http://www.wikipedia.org/>

Q: Do you have examples of good financial aid pages?

- I've picked a few here from presentations done for financial aid groups over the last 18 months or so:
 - <http://www.financialaid.utoledo.edu/estimator/default.asp> (financial aid estimator at University of Toledo)
 - <http://www.myspace.com/goucherfinaid> (financial aid on a social networking site from Goucher College) College students are moving away from MySpace but you could do something like this on other social networking sites.
 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzFpHDJnZ4k> (financial aid on video from University of Washington... and you can find more.
 - <http://www.financialaid.neu.edu/wordpress/> (financial aid questions answered in a blog format at Northeastern)

Q: Do you have any good examples of human resources pages?

- Alas, I do not. I've never been asked to do a presentation that had me out and about on the web looking for sites like that.

Q: Could you provide some good examples of career centre web pages?

- No, as with the human resource pages, that's not an area I've ever been asked to look at.

Q: Do you identify a difference between a Web Content Editor and a Webmaster?

- The most common difference is that the Web Content Editor has a communications background and the Webmaster has a technical background. Both have critical roles to play in building a strong website. Some of us believe that the future is with the communication person who is also web-savvy. More website responsibility is shifting to the Communications area at colleges and universities. That's placing more weight on communications people to learn more about effective web communications.

Q: What is the best way to present publications other than PDFs?

- Convert the content to HTML and repurpose it to the web environment by making sure that the content presentation points we discussed are employed in the conversion.
- In addition to the Carleton University example I used, see also the alumni magazine for University of Chicago at <http://magazine.uchicago.edu/> As someone pointed out in the Web Engagement conference a week before, this publication started out in print form. What you see online is a good example of how to modify things for the online environment. Note that in this format, they've been able to add a blog as part of the magazine. That's a marvelous example of taking advantage of Web 2.0 interactivity.
- By the way, there's a very nice article at <http://searchengineland.com/070912-095906.php> on how to make PDFs friendly to search engines. This was in my September higher education marketing newsletter.

Q: Should you adapt a feature magazine article originally for print for online presentation? How would you do that?

- Yes. Personally, I'd start with the original in a Word document so I could see it quickly while I wrote the revised version just below it. And then it is an edit job. Check the length of paragraphs and sentences. Look for places for subheads that follow for the primary heading on the page that should itself connect to the title tag on the page.
- One new element: check for content outside the feature story for links. If something is important enough to write a feature story about, chance are there's more information on the topic on your website. Make it easy for people to find. Check everywhere, including YouTube. You just might find a really good video already online that expands the impact of the original story.

Q: Is the best resolution setting for most computers 1024X768

- That's what most people are using today and therefore it is the default choice. But as with most things, the answer can get complex. Check Jakob Nielsen's 2006 article at http://www.useit.com/alertbox/screen_resolution.html and what he has to say about "liquid layouts," especially as we enter a "smart phone" web access era.

Q: Do you do the links in a list do you link to new pages or are they jump points?

- I might not be reading this question right, so feel free to follow-up by direct email.
- The links could be either depending on the content after the link. Best, as a general rule, to have people come right back to the original place of the link rather than be free to take off around the website but in some cases, I can where it would be better to let them wander and return when they want.

Q: One of reason that we are using PDFs is that it gives better printable version than Web page. What do you think?

- That's a good point and works for relative small documents that you know people might actually want or need to print.
- But in the case of alumni magazines and such, I've yet to see any evidence that people will print these out to read them. And in particular, unless people are using expensive photo-quality inks and papers, you just are not going to equal the photo and paper impact of what went into the print publication.
- For something like a short White Paper (10 pages or less) where we essentially have black on white pages with maybe a few graphs, a PDF would be fine.

Q: What are the best ways to find out care words?

- The very best way is to do a formal carewords research program that in most cases will cost less than \$20,000. You can read more about that at <http://www.bobjohnsonconsulting.com/customercarewords.html>
- Informally, I'd suggest this: talk with the people who talk to your audiences. On the recruitment side, that means people who answer the phone and hear what words people use to ask questions and the admissions counselors/recruiters who do college fairs and the like. That's pretty qualitative but might help identify language to use.
- Be really persistent in eliminating jargon unless you know you have a reason to include it. One simple jargon test is to use the free Wordtracker service at <http://freekeywords.wordtracker.com/> If you look for a term and find that almost nobody is using it, you've likely found a word that shouldn't be prominent on your website headings. I'm doing a 500-page web writing project for a university right now and yesterday I was using that service as a rapid way to find alternative words to use. Sometimes it was helpful, sometimes not. Test similar terms (elementary education vs. teacher education, for instance) and use the one that has the higher search ratio.

Q: Should flash files be used or avoided?

- When in doubt, don't use it. And certainly don't use it as the entire first page a visitor encounters at a website.
- That said, there's a place for flash. Here's the article I mentioned during the conference on "Flash-al Abuse" for websites that was in my last newsletter. It is the second item after a section on web colors at <http://www.site-reference.com/articles/Website-Development/5-Things-To-Hate-About-Web-Design-and-how-to-fix-them.html>

Q: what are your thoughts on embedded videos on university web pages?

- Video is expanding dramatically as important website content, far faster than most people are able to keep up with it. I don't see anything wrong with embedded video. Most important is the relationship of the video to the content and purpose of the page. After that, the questions are technical. The video has to download quickly, plan smoothly, and in most cases, be professional quality or close to it. That doesn't always mean it has to be done by a professional firm, but, as in photography, if it is done by an amateur it should be a very skilled amateur with decent equipment.
- Another comment about videos. Don't do them just for the sake of doing them. I have several links to videos that feature presidents at http://bobjohnsonconsulting.com/blog/2007/08/college_presidents_and_youtube.html Some of these are quite good. And some, to be charitable, might be a boon to insomniacs and should never have been done for the general population.

Q: 1. Please discuss breadth vs. depth, i.e., how far should a web site visitor drill down?

- Depending on the subject (let's say exploration of a academic major by someone really interested in it) I'd say three layers is fine and five likely works as well if the content is of interest and its easy to get back to the starting place.
- Nielsen refers to the back button as the "lifeline" of web users. The further down you go, the more you want to make sure that people can just click their way back to the starting place with the back button.

Q: 2. Should I take anything into consideration, when designing my web page, to improve usability for the visually impaired?

- Check the same article included elsewhere where by Nielsen on "liquid layouts" at http://www.useit.com/alertbox/screen_resolution.html
- Lower screen resolution makes everything on a web page larger. Visually impaired people might not prefer the standard format.

Q: Where can we learn more about the process or techniques for transforming print content into web content?

- Lots of books and articles on web writing but I'm not right now thinking of a book that specifically focuses on the transformation topic.
- A good, basic place to start for 10 tips is <http://webdesign.about.com/od/writing/a/aa031405.htm> where you'll note some things that we covered in our conference.
- Nielsen has an old but still useful article at <http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/writing.html>
- Gerry McGovern's new book Killer Web Content at <http://www.gerrymcgovern.com/killer-web-content.htm> although this might be broader than what you have in mind.
- An Amazon search will bring up the latest books.
- And of course, you can always have me on campus for an extended workshop for content creators and content writers.

Q: How can you plan for all the different types of browsers, screens, and manage what a student is actually viewing on the screen?

- I'm not a technical expert. But my answer from conversations with friends is that this is a very difficult thing to do given the resources that most colleges have to do it. In most cases, you have to make decisions on where to focus based on what most of your audience is using. Microsoft Explorer, for instance, remains the dominant browser and it is critical to optimize for that first. And with Explorer, pay attention to stats on how many people are using what version. At some point, you just have to leave behind early versions as people update their systems. Ultimately, this is a judgment call.

Q: do you need to use an H1 tag on your main headline so that search engines know what to match your title tag with?

- Cascading Style Sheets to the rescue here. Good discussion at http://www.yournew.com/h1_tags_seo.cfm
- You can't always use font size equivalent to a heading like this, but CSS gives you the flexibility to use the tag and keep the size of the heading under control. And that's good, because while no one element guarantees anything, an H1 tag tells a search engine that something important (we presume) live here.

Q: How can the news-page gain prominence in the university's main webpage?

- Without knowing the politics of the web at your institution, that's impossible to say. Rather than try to be one more place listed on the front page, I'd make sure that people searching for news from your place could find you from search engines and can use your own search feature at your website.
- Most people are looking for a particular type of news. And so it is important that when they find your news section, they can easily sort things out and find what's of interest. To that end, I'd really encourage considering the Texas A&M System approach and put news releases in a blog format.

Q: What is your recommendation for the line spacing of text on line?

- Back in the old days, we called that "leading" for the print world. And as with so many things, there isn't a perfect answer. You'll usually know when something is too dense just by looking at it. For me, the Regis MBA pages and the BBC press release page that we looked at are close to perfect. I might almost put the Smith College page in the same group.
- Good review of this at <http://www.wpdesigner.com/2007/06/21/web-typography-line-spacing/>

Q: Are there any tools to translate pages into foreign languages?

- None that I know of that works so well that I'd trust my web pages to them.
- See what you think of Google at http://www.google.com/language_tools and Babel Fish at <http://babelfish.altavista.com/>
- You'll find those and more listed at the bottom of <http://translation.langenberg.com/>

Q: Slightly off, but you've mentioned YouTube today and last week as well: What is your take on copyright release agreement of materials uploaded to YouTube?

- Just don't know enough about the legality of this to make a comment you'd like to quote. What is happening more now is that universities are posting videos to YouTube that I assume are undergoing the same copyright scrutiny that would be done for video used in any other fashion.

Q: Can/will multimedia (audio/video) replace storytelling through writing on the web or supplement it?

- Certainly supplement it, but in some cases it is replacing it now. I have links to three replacement examples (Boston University, Capella University, Kenan-Flagler Business School) at http://bobjohnsonconsulting.com/blog/2007/09/video_replacing_text_two_examp.html In each case, the video is indeed stronger than trying to do the same content in a text version.

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