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The Six Rules of Web Writing

Draft something for the Web site about our event," says your boss. "Um, okay," you reply. But how does Web writing differ from the usual business writing you have done? Web-writing coach Merry Bruns helps you tap-tap your way to compelling Web content.

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1. Create content for readers.
2. Show them the benefits.
3. Write to reach them.
4. Write more concisely.
5. Format for scanning.
6. Become interactive.

Your Web site is your business card – your front door – and the first view visitors have of your organization. A well-written, well-designed site tells visitors what you are doing for them and how you are addressing their needs and priorities.

People often make snap decisions based on what they see, and Web site content is no exception. Sometimes our decisions are erroneous. Associations that are truly member-driven may have sites that don't reflect it due to weak editing and editorial decisions regarding Web content and focus. Other sites look promising, with pricey designs, great visuals, and clever animation, but on second glance they have unreadable pages of dense text, a lack of reader focus, and myriad usability challenges.

Fortunately, associations can do a lot to dramatically improve that crucial first impression and position themselves for repeat visits by customers, members, and other site visitors. Web editing and writing are skills that anyone can learn, and the payoffs – well-informed members, loyal customers, impressed donors, satisfied media, and more – certainly are worth the effort. Here are six guidelines to get your started.

Create Content for Your Reader

Before talking to designers and programmers, you should recognize that developing a visitor-oriented focus is the most important item in any Web content strategy. Too often, overworked managers bury this critical element deep beneath the complex physical business of creating or relaunching a Web site, learning a content management system, or deciding who does what for the site. As a result, the reader – the very reason for the site – is missing from the process.

Perhaps the hardest part about Web content strategies is determining what's important to your readers as opposed to what's important to the organization. Your association's goals and those of your audience are sometimes aligned, but occasionally they may conflict.

It's tempting to think that what drives the internal workings of the organization – the processes by which things happen – are important and need to be prominently displayed on your Web site. But sometimes these internal issues are the ones least likely to demonstrate that you are thinking about visitors' needs, problems, and goals. They don't work at your organization; why should they care?

Look through the expansive pages of your site and ask yourself at each screen, "How well does this content address our visitors' questions and problems? Does this page show readers that we understand what's most important for them, or does it reflect primarily the meetings, processes, and tasks of the organization?"

Note that the question is not "Are we giving our readers enough information about the workings of our organization?" but "Do we understand enough about our readers to know what they need our help with, and are we giving it to them on our Web site?"

Show Them the Benefits

When placing informational content online – current events, association news, calendars, or e-learning opportunities, for instance – association writers must edit the information for maximum impact, so members can see immediately why and how the information benefits them.

Simply uploading information about an industry trade show and allowing members to register online are not enough. Tell them that attending the trade show will give them a unique chance to meet 500 potential buyers in their industry. Identify the specific ways the organization's event will meet their needs and desires. Share stories of real value gained from happy past participants. Analyze your content as you edit it to go online:

- Can your products streamline members' workloads?
- Will attendance at your next conference give people a huge discount on your products or a chance to interact with key speakers?
- Will your online classes give customers a jump on their competition in clearly defined ways?

As we increasingly rely on the Web for practical information, we're always looking for things that will help us work more efficiently, improve the quality of our jobs and home life, and keep us competitive. Showing your readers exactly how your information can help them achieve these goals is a good way to guarantee loyalty for your site.

Write to Reach Them

Text on Web sites should speak directly to the people you're trying to reach, so use appropriate language for the reader. Generally, Web writing styles are more conversational than in print, since we are, in effect, extending a friendly handshake to anyone who comes by and may be interested in what we're offering.

Jargon is a disaster on Web sites, since the audience is global. Your Web site is not your intranet, and outside readers can't possibly understand in-house terms. A pontifical tone and a pedantic writing style make pages seem canned and artificial. We all are annoyed by Web sites that appear to talk down to us, are filled with excessive marketing hype, or are clearly written from an insider-only perspective.

Writing for the reader in a more conversational tone also can ensure a clearer writing style, one that is more like the way we normally talk when explaining something. Clearer writing makes information more accessible, and readers are less likely to misunderstand what we're saying.

Direct, clear, and friendly writing also draws an instinctive, positive reaction from the reader. Informational text, presented in question form and answered the way we'd answer someone verbally, makes readers feel included, not excluded. We appear to be simply talking to them, happy to provide them with information.

Write More Concisely

Reading online is harder than reading print. Most documents we put online come from print versions. They're written to be read line by line, page by page. Unfortunately, people generally do not read Web pages that way. Sun Microsystems, which conducts usability testing on the way people read text on their monitors, determined that approximately 79 percent of readers skimmed through a Web page, and only 11 percent read online text line by line, as they would for a print piece.

Many physical reasons make online reading an uncomfortable experience. Staring at a screen makes your eyes weary, since you are focusing on fuzzy light. Indistinct text (much less legible than print) causes eye strain, especially when Web designers choose ridiculously small font sizes.

Because few people enjoy reading lengthy documents online, it pays to make your writing as concise as possible, whether you're starting from scratch or editing a print piece to go online. Include everything you need to say but try saying it with fewer words.

Writing more concisely allows the reader to get at the information with less effort, since less time is needed to read it. You may have read that everything you put online needs to be shortened by half. Not true. Sometimes just tightening the text a bit can make a huge difference. Writing with brevity online gets the meaning across faster and with greater impact and better reader retention. Usability tests show dramatic improvements in reader retention and comprehension with shorter text.

Format for Scanning

Those pages and pages of text on Web sites – each filled with long, unbroken paragraphs – are almost impossible to plow through in monitor-sized chunks. Too often, they are pulled straight from printed documents and "repurposed" as either a PDF document or a "Save As HTML" Web page.

Your reader is scanning those pages, seeing only a small piece of the document at a time, looking for something, anything, to let them know what the information is about. Your readers are busy, impatient, and focused entirely on getting at the nuggets of information in your document. Thus, they will profoundly appreciate a skim-friendly format.

Outline the ideas, concepts, points, or directions in your documents so readers can skim and retain the main points, understand any steps to follow, and grasp your most important concepts. Start the formatting process by thinking about questions your reader might have about the material:

- Where is the keyword I'm looking for? Any phrases here look like possible candidates?
- What's this page about? Do I have to read every word to find out what it means?
- How long is this thing anyway?

Use bullets, bold formatting, and spacing to create visual pathways through the material. Insert subheads over related paragraph blocks and make them shorter. It's a new way of thinking about processes you probably already know how to do. You also will need to thoroughly understand the document's content, because you may want to organize the information differently to create a clearer layout.

Become Interactive

The Web gives us tools that let us interact with our visitors in new ways. We can question, converse, and give instant feedback to members, customers, and others who want to do something on our site, whether ordering a book, registering for a conference, or finding directions for a meeting.

Visuals, even something as simple as a diagram, often communicate ideas more clearly than text alone. Web tools, including anything from forms to Flash, can show processes, substitute for lengthy descriptions, describe concepts visually, set moods, and sometimes improve usability.

Think of things that readers will want to do with your information. Can they do it online? From filling in forms or sending an e-mail query to selecting, buying, and evaluating products – all can be done online, saving time, phone calls, and steps.

Ask questions of your own material. Can they be answered online? Is everything adequately explained by the text, or would a diagram be easier and quicker to understand?

The degree of interactivity you choose varies according to your budget, goals, and information. Wise decisions at this stage will save you a great deal of money in the long run, and you won't be taken in by "cool tools" in the Web industry that are not all that useful.

Writing in a style more appropriate for reading online, editing your print material to go up on your site, and developing a strong audience focus are imperative to the development of good, relevant Web content. The process can take as little or as much time as you can afford, and frankly, any effort is worth it. But a careful analysis of your content, followed by a discussion of what's working and what isn't and fixing it, are not optional steps in the process of creating Web sites that truly communicate with readers, convince them that your organization is there for them, and enable them to move easily through your online material.

In the end, it all comes down to communicating, and the Web can be your biggest asset or a liability, depending on how you write, edit, and develop your site's content. The payoffs are true relationships with your readers and fewer headaches for your staff.