University of Edinburgh

Guide to writing for the web and producing effective content

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1. About this document

Writing for the web is a specialist skill, but many of us publish online every day as just a small part of our roles. This document aims to highlight why online information should be structured differently to printed materials, and provide a few hints on how we can make the University’s website easier to read.

How to use these guidelines

Read the document through and keep a copy to hand for reference when you’re creating website content. Distribute copies to any colleagues who are responsible for providing material for the website – copy editing other people’s content is easier if they understand how best to structure their contributions in the first place.

These guidelines will:

- Help you structure information so that it’s easy to read online – and therefore help ensure your content doesn’t get overlooked by your target audiences
- Help you avoid the most common mistakes made when publishing website content
- Help the University produce a website which has a degree of consistency and appears to speak with one voice

These guidelines won’t:

- Tell you what you need to say to your audiences
- Help you to write great marketing or promotional material

Other guidelines you should know about

To help create consistency in the language we use, an editorial style guide has been produced. Should we write website or web-site or web site? This guide is maintained and updated regularly by Communications and Marketing and is the essential reference document for anyone writing material (whether online or in print) for external audiences.

See Section 6: Useful online resources for how to get a copy.
2. What’s so different about the web?

The web is a publishing medium, sharing characteristics with both print and TV. However, there are important differences that make the web distinct:

- **Interactivity** – the web is much more interactive than TV or radio. You don’t just sit back and wait for the next website to come along; you have to find it yourself. This also means you are not bound by someone else’s schedule, so there is much greater freedom for the user.

- **Familiarity** – there’s no standard format, like for books and magazines. It doesn’t always have a linear journey, with a contents table, preface, beginning, middle and end. The user has to search.

- **Readability** – reading from a computer screen is tiring on your eyes, and much slower than reading from print.

- **Technology** – users have varying technology, with varying capabilities. They may have a slow dial-up connection to the internet, or older versions of software, or use assistive technology like a screen reader. You can’t always determine the user experience.

What this means for users

As a result of these factors, users tend to:

- Scan pages for information – they don’t read pages from beginning to end
- Have a specific objective in mind – they’re task-driven
- Expect results quickly

New users are unlikely to learn ‘your way’ – if they cannot easily find what they are looking for, they will go somewhere else.
3. Navigation and structure of websites

There is a temptation to use the structure of your organisation (and what is important within it) to determine the layout and priorities of a website. The purpose of any site is to serve the users but it’s worth being aware that this can be clouded by other objectives.

Navigation

It helps users greatly if navigation:

- Uses a standard layout of global, local and supplementary navigation locations.
- Goes some way to answering three basic questions: Where am I? Where can I go? Where have I been?
- Gives some idea of the amount of information contained within the site.
- Avoids overloading the user with choices (Human computer interaction studies have shown that more than seven or eight choices begins to confuse the user).

Routes into information

It is advisable to distinguish between top-level pages and lower-level content pages – they serve different purposes so will benefit from different layouts:

- Keep top-level pages short – they are signposts to information.
- Longer pages at a lower-level - as the user reaches their intended destination, it is more appropriate to offer more information on one page, for example, a lengthy academic document.

Users will find a site far easier to navigate if there is consistency in navigation and structure. If they can predict what will happen when they click on a link, they are reassured and don’t feel the need to ‘learn’ how to use the site.
4. Writing for the web

Scannable content
We read web pages in a different manner to the way we read printed material. Reading from the web is a slow and quite tiring process, so we generally don't read pages word-for-word. Instead we scan.

When we scan web pages certain items stand out:

- Headings and subheadings
- Bold text
- Bulleted lists
- Link text

It's important that we use these elements appropriately to enable the reader to get an accurate indication of the information available on the page.

Breaking up text with descriptive headings and sub-headings allows site visitors to easily see what each section of the page is about. The main heading on the page provides an indication of what page is about, and within the page, the various sub-themes can be quickly put across with sub-headings.

There's no hard and fast rule for how frequently to use sub-headings, but you should probably be roughly aiming for one sub-heading every two to four paragraphs. Most importantly, the sub-headings should split on-page content into logical groups, to allow site visitors to easily access the information that they're after.

Keep to one idea per paragraph. Readers will often consider the opening sentence before deciding to move on, so this helps prevent content being overlooked. Used sparingly, bold text gives an indication of the paragraph’s content.

Avoid in-line links; instead provide them at the end of a paragraph. A paragraph containing links is difficult to scan as they don't always reflect the paragraph’s theme.

Descriptive link text is helpful, particularly if there are many links on a page. Scanning a page full of 'click here' links will take considerably longer and make it that much more difficult for the user to make an informed choice. Use wording that tells the user where they are being taken, like “Read more about student halls of residence”, rather than a web address link (http://www.accom.ed.ac.uk).

See Appendix A for more examples of how best to structure links.

Lists are preferable to long paragraphs because they:

- Allow users to read the information vertically rather than horizontally
- Are easier to scan
- Are less intimidating
- Are usually more succinct

Notice that images were not included here. Unlike the way in which we read printed matter, we see text before we see images on web pages. Don't place important information in images as it could go unnoticed.
Style for top-level pages

Make your top-level pages (your routes into information) short and easy to scan, enabling the user to pick out information and choices at a glance.

It’s best practice to use summary pages that lead into your more detailed information. This allows the user to decide whether the information will meet their objectives.

Try to use language that avoids technical jargon or colloquialisms that may not be easily understood by a wider audience. Keeping paragraphs and sentences short and concise will help the user to scan information.

To help the user find information quickly, we recommend that for top-level pages you:

- Use plain English.
- Write short paragraphs – one idea per paragraph.
- Write short sentences.
- Be concise.
- Summarise first.

Style in general

Below top-level pages, your content is likely to be more in-depth and specialised. Pages will be longer. Your readers will still scan for information, however. These general guidelines are useful across all pages.

All pages – particularly long ones – should begin with a summary. By beginning with a summary of what the page contains, the user can decide early on whether the information that will follow is relevant to them. Think about articles you read in a newspaper. The title gives you an indication of the news item and the opening paragraph provides an overview of the rest of the piece.

For more detailed advice, see Nathan Wallace’s article, ‘Writing for many interest levels’ – referenced in Section 6.

Avoid in-line links – these are links that appear in the middle of a sentence. On a site such as ours, which tends to be quite text-heavy, in-line links are distracting and make text difficult to read. As the user reads, in-line links offer the opportunity to stop mid-sentence and go to another piece of information. In addition, links which wrap on to the next line, or appear at the same point as a link on the line above are more difficult to take in. Minimize the disruptive quality of links by managing their placement on the page. See Appendix A for examples.

Be direct – try to use direct language to create a personal and engaging user experience. Try to use the 1st and 2nd person (“we” instead of “the University”, and “you” instead of “the student”). This also helps to shorten sentences.

It’s best to avoid:

- Italic — difficult to read on-screen, so never use for full sentences.
- Underlining — users expect underlined text to be links.
- Upper case — slower to read and signifies ‘shouting’.
- Coloured text — issues for colour blind readers and causes confusion with links.
Editorial style guide

The publications team has produced an editorial style guide to assist in creating consistent language across the University. If you’re creating or editing information for external audiences, refer to the editorial style guide.

Context

A website’s lack of physical form means that establishing the context of information on a page takes on extra importance.

Search engine results are a common route into websites and could lead users directly to almost any page, so it is important that your pages make sense out of context. Making sure the page has a meaningful title and a date stamp will help users to work out where they are, identify what they are looking at, and will reassure them that the content is up-to-date.
5. Reviewing content

Research and testing
It is important to review and develop your content in order to continuously provide your users with relevant and up-to-date information, in a format that makes sense to them. Try to engage in research and review activities, both before and after your content is published. You can do this with:

- **User testing** – check how well your area of the website works for target user groups
- **Feedback** – find out about problems your users are experiencing and what information they want. If you’re fielding the same generic queries again and again by phone or email, the information should probably be online.
- **Competitor analysis** – keep an eye on what other leading universities are doing. (Bear in mind though – another institution doing something doesn’t necessarily make it a good idea).

The Website Development Project conducts user testing, but it’s a useful exercise for all schools and departments. If you want to refine and develop content, see how your current online information works for your target audiences. It’s a fairly cheap, quick and easy process.

For help and advice on **how to conduct user testing**, see the Website Development Project website and get in touch. [www.ed.ac.uk/websiteproject](http://www.ed.ac.uk/websiteproject)

Maintenance
The web is constantly changing and growing, and your content will benefit from being monitored. Help ensure your area of the website is up-to-date by:

- **Establishing a review cycle** – timetable a regular process to check what you have published online.
- **Checking links to external sites** – links can break, pages can be moved and web addresses can change.
- Making a note of **time-sensitive content** – if a user is presented with an out-of-date page, it will affect the confidence they have in the rest of your area of the site. Avoid unnecessary time sensitive information.
- **Avoiding duplication** – try not to offer the same information in a variety of places. It will make more work for you. It is better to have one page of information, which is linked to from a number of pages.
- **Checking facts** – for the same reason as time-sensitive content.
6. Useful online resources

- **University of Edinburgh**
  Our editorial style guide – keep an up-to-date copy of this to hand. It will help you create and edit content which is consistent with the rest of the site.

- **Campaign for Plain English**
  [http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/free_guides.html](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/free_guides.html)
  A useful guide to writing plain English – “something that the intended audience can read, understand and act upon the first time they read it.”

- **Yale style guide**
  [www.webstyleguide.com](http://www.webstyleguide.com)
  A broad overview of stylistic issues in web publishing.

- **US Dept of Health and Human Services**
  [www.usability.gov](http://www.usability.gov)
  A resource for producing usable and accessible websites.

- **Nathan Wallace**
  Web writing for many interest levels
Appendix A: Structuring links

What do we mean by ‘in-line link’?
An in-line link appears within the main flow of a web page’s content, as a word or series of words in a sentence. For example:

“If you have any questions about this information or believe that any of the information contained in the offer of admission is incorrect, please contact the relevant College Postgraduate Office.”

However, the following is not an in-line link:

“If you have any questions about this information or believe that any of the information contained in the offer of admission is incorrect, please contact the relevant College Postgraduate Office. See contact details for all College Postgraduate Offices”

Why avoid in-line links?

• Pages are easier to scan.
• Text is easier to read – no distractions mid sentence.
• Meaningful link text is easier to construct – no need to redraft a sentence to accommodate an appropriately worded link.

Example 1

In this paragraph, the links distract the user, both when scanning the page and when reading the paragraph.

“Amongst some of its more famous former students Edinburgh can count philosopher David Hume, chemist Joseph Black, John Witherspoon, a signatory of the American Declaration of Independence, Charles Darwin who briefly studied medicine, novelists including Robert Louis Stevenson, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Walter Scott and JM Barrie, Peter Mark Roget of Thesaurus fame, Joseph Lister who introduced antisepsics into surgery, James Simpson who pioneered the use of chloroform in midwifery and surgery and James Hutton, the father of modern geology.”

Here, it's the paragraph’s purpose is clear to someone scanning the page. The paragraph is also easier to read:

“Amongst some of its more famous former students Edinburgh can count philosopher David Hume, chemist Joseph Black, John Witherspoon, a signatory of the American Declaration of Independence, Charles Darwin who briefly studied medicine, novelists including Robert Louis Stevenson, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Walter Scott and JM Barrie, Peter Mark Roget of Thesaurus fame, Joseph Lister who introduced antisepsics into surgery, James Simpson who pioneered the use of chloroform in midwifery and surgery and James Hutton, the father of modern geology.

Read short biographies of the University's most famous former students”

Example 2

The purpose of this paragraph is to highlight that vacation accommodation is available, but the link doesn’t emphasise this:

“Accommodation is available in spring and summer vacation periods for parents and students. More information can be obtained from Edinburgh First.”

In this version, the destination of the link is much clearer:

“During spring and summer vacations periods, Edinburgh First provides rental accommodation for parents and students.

Visit the Edinburgh First website for information on vacation accommodation”