



# HISTORY BYTES

BY TIM GROVE

## Writing for the Web

**S**taff at my institution recently took a course about writing for the Web, and it reinforced what we know but often forget: the Web is a different animal. As I've said many times in this space, it's important to understand the unique qualities of the medium and how people use it. Dr. Jakob Nielsen, called one of the world's foremost experts in Web usability by *Business Week*, writes a biweekly online column where he repeatedly compares the Web to television. The Web is an active medium in which the user has an agenda and wants to get things done. Television is a passive medium, with viewers who want to be entertained and do not necessarily want to make decisions. Nielsen refers to these differences as lean-forward vs. lean-back. The Web format is also clearly different from the printed media. Any good writer knows the value of understanding the strengths and limitations of the medium in which he is writing.<sup>1</sup>

Research studies show that online users are usually task oriented and thus, they read differently when online. It's important to understand that because people online *read* differently, Web content writers need to *write* differently. According to Nielsen, "Reading from computer screens is about *twenty-five percent slower* than reading from paper. Even users who don't know this usually say that they feel unpleasant when reading online text. As a result, people don't want to read a lot of text from computer screens: you should *write fifty percent less text* and not just twenty-five percent less, since it's not only a matter of reading speed but also a matter of feeling good."<sup>2</sup>

Consider two important factors that affect writing for an online audience. First, studies show that people do not *read* websites, they *scan* them. And, according to Nielsen, people read at most less than one-third of the words during an average visit to a website, though he suggests

that twenty percent is more accurate. By scanning key words and fragments, users can quickly move through information. Nielson's main characteristics of scannable text are:

- Highlight keywords (hypertext links, typeface variations, color)
- Meaningful (not clever) sub-headings
- Bulleted lists
- One idea per paragraph
- Inverted pyramid style (important information first)
- Half the word count (or less) than conventional writing.<sup>3</sup>

Eyetracking studies show that the dominant reading pattern of Web users is an F-shaped pattern—two horizontal stripes followed by a vertical scan down the left-hand side of the page. To address this pattern, Nielsen suggests that the first two paragraphs on a page must state the most important information and that all subheadings, bullet points and paragraphs should start with "information-carrying" words. Studies show that a user will read the first two words on a line more often than continuing to the third word. Another easy fix to improve scannability is left-justified text—always a better choice than right-justification. And using all-caps reduces legibility by about 10%—mixing upper and lower-cases always makes text easier to read. A good rule of thumb is when you use good design principles to make online text more legible, you also make it more scan-

One way to think about a layered presentation is by using the terms bite, snack, and meal. A bite is a heading or headline, a snack is a brief summary, and a meal is major content (most similar to the print version). People looking for specific information are only interested in bites until they find the information they want, then they often want the meal.

nable. Clear design and writing are firmly intertwined. If you want people to read your website, you need to pay attention to both.<sup>4</sup>

Second, Web users often want in-depth information about a topic, but only after they've successfully managed to sort through a multitude of information in order to find what they need. In other words, layering information is very important, just as an exhibition script for a broad audience should be layered. Hypertext links are reportedly the most-used feature on the Web. They take the reader to new information—which may or may not supplement or support the information they were reading. Writers who make use of hypertext links need to use great care in selecting the words they will highlight.

One way to think about a layered presentation is by using the terms bite, snack, and meal. A bite is a heading or headline, a snack is a brief summary, and a meal is major content (most similar to the print version). People looking for specific information are only interested in bites until they find the information they want, then they often want the meal. Online headings can be very challenging to write. They do not need to be witty to grab the reader's attention, instead they should clearly convey the topic of the text below. When possible, it's good to include a verb, because verbs trap the meaning and improve understanding.<sup>5</sup>

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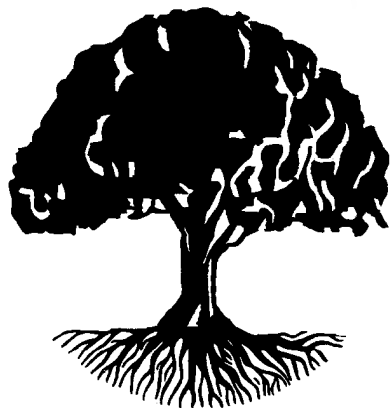
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Sometimes websites offer the meal layer in the form of a PDF document. I've heard various opinions about when to use PDF documents but make sure you have a good reason to use one. PDFs are formatted for printing, not for reading online. Maps are excellent in PDF form, but there's rarely a need to put straight text into a PDF document because a user may not take the time to download a PDF or to print it.

The bottom line with writing for a Web audience: use short, concise text. The more you say, the more users will tune you out. Based on his studies, Nielson advocates removing half of a website's words with a result that users comprehend double the amount of information.<sup>6</sup>

History websites are no different than other sites. Sure historians are not known for their brevity, but they must learn to write for the Web. Just as visitors don't want to read a book on the wall in an exhibition, Web users don't want to read a book online. From online exhibition text to collections database text, the written word on our sites needs to reflect current research in usability to ensure that our website users have a positive experience online and want to return ●

**"History Bytes" is a forum for discussing Web issues facing all types of historical institutions. Tim Grove can be reached at [grovet@si.edu](mailto:grovet@si.edu).**



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<sup>1</sup> Nielsen's column is found at [www.useit.com/alertbox](http://www.useit.com/alertbox).

<sup>2</sup> Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox, [www.useit.com/alertbox/9703b.html](http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9703b.html), 15 March 1997 and 6 May 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox, [www.useit.com/alertbox/percent-text-read.html](http://www.useit.com/alertbox/percent-text-read.html), 6 May 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox, [www.useit.com/alertbox/reading\\_pattern.html](http://www.useit.com/alertbox/reading_pattern.html), 17 April 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Leslie O'Flahavan, Writing for the Web course training materials.

<sup>6</sup> Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox, [www.useit.com/alertbox/20030811.html](http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20030811.html), 11 August 2003.