

## Writing for the Web

A workshop for  
United Methodist Association of Communicators  
October 18-21, 2011

## Workshop Trajectory

1. How people read on the web
2. How people find web content
3. Know your audience
4. Print vs. Web writing
5. Rules for web writing
6. Adapting print → web
7. Optimizing the web page

### 1. How People Read on the Web

- Reading on computers is slower than on paper
- Skim and scan
- Pick out key words, phrases and fragments
- Pay attention to only some parts of the page
- Guided by headings, links and bullet points
- Are action oriented

### F-Shaped Reading Pattern



Eyetracking visualizations show that users often read Web pages in an F-shaped pattern: two horizontal stripes followed by a vertical stripe.

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### Implications of the F Pattern

- Users won't read your text thoroughly
- The first two paragraphs must state the most important information
- Start subheads, paragraphs, and bullet points with information-carrying words

### 2. How people find web content

- Search engines
- Links on other websites or within a website

**SOOO.....**

- Every page should be written as if the user has never seen the rest of the site
- Some users may not know where they are on a site

### 3. Know your audience

- United Methodist Church members
- Church agencies
- Clergy (Pastors & Bishops)
- Potential church members
- Press
- Casual web surfers

**Who else???**

### Users are looking for...

- Answers to their questions
- Easily accessible information
- Current content
- Inspiration & hope
- Reasons to trust you

### Data You'll Need to Gather

- Demographics
- Geographic location
- What they already know or believe
- Info & tools to act

### 4. Print vs. web writing

- Linear vs. non-linear
- Author-driven vs. reader-driven
- Storytelling vs. actionable content
- Anecdotal examples vs. comprehensive data
- Sentences vs. fragments

### What makes good web writing?

- It is direct.
- Knows its audience scans and skips.
- Written to inform, not perform.
- Helps customers decide their own journey.
- It's like a conversation.
- It answers people's questions.
- Helps people "grab and go."

### 5. Web writing rules

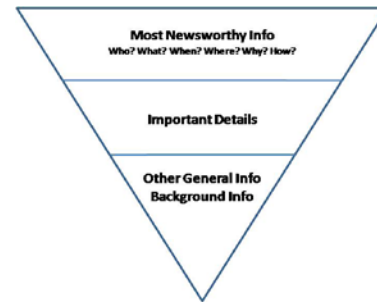
**Takeaways:**

- Keep to your essential message
- KISSS (keep it short, simple, and scannable)
- Use links strategically
- Write for Search Engine Optimization

## Keep to your essential message

- Give people only what **they** need.
- Cut! Cut! Cut!
- Start with the key point. Write in Inverted Pyramid style.
- Break down wall of words. **Less is more!**
- Hyperlink to details.
- Use statement headings to convey your message.
- Use action headings to convey instruction.

## Inverted Pyramid Writing Style



## Tone & voice

- Active
  - *United Methodist Women members rallied for justice.*
- Personal
  - *Sign up for your free e-newsletter here!*
- Friendly
- Informal without being too casual

## Varying your voice

- Corporate websites: efficient, informative, but approachable
- Intranet: less formal, community-focused (us not you), inclusive
- Blogs: informal, conversational, inviting responses (still grammatically correct!)

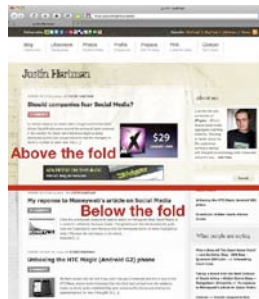
### Keep it short, simple, & scannable

- **Keep it short:**
  - Headlines: 8 words or less
  - Sentences: 15 to 20 words
  - Paragraphs: 40 to 70 words
  - Articles: 300-600 words
  - Break long articles/ documents into several pages
- **Goal:** Above the fold!

### Above the fold



### Below the fold



### Keep it short, simple & scannable

- **Keep it simple:**
  - Never use a long word when a short one will do
  - Beware of acronyms (GBHEM? UMAC? SPSARV? GCCUIC? WNCCUMW?)
  - Don't use metaphors and wordplay
- "Write as if you are explaining to someone who has never heard it before."
  - Joan Novak, Professor Emeritus of Christian Ethics, Denison University
- **Goal:** Clear over clever!

## Keep it short, simple & scannable

- **Keep it scannable:**
  - Format content in small chunks
  - Headlines should tell the story
  - Use subheadings to summarize
  - Use bullet points whenever possible
  - Use bold intelligently and sparingly
  - Avoid italics
  - Write numbers as numerals (5 instead of *five*)
- **Goal:** Users receive information quickly

## Promotional text

Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), Carhenge (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).

(Nielsen, 1997)

## Scannable text

Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were:

- Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors)
- Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166)
- Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000)
- Carhenge (86,598)
- Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002)
- Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).

## Even better!

- In 1996, six of the most-visited places in Nebraska were:
  - Fort Robinson State Park
  - Scotts Bluff National Monument
  - Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum
  - Carhenge
  - Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer
  - Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park

## Use links strategically

- “Do what you do best, and link to the rest.”  
—Jeff Jarvis, *What Would Google Do?*
- Use links in your text to:
  - Send the user to important background info or related material
  - Explain unusual or technical terms
  - Emphasize important info (repeat in text to follow user’s train of thought)

## How to write a link

- First 11 **characters** are the most important
- Use plain, specific language
- Use conventions for naming/phrasing common features
- Put verbs first! ([Subscribe now](#) vs. [You can click here to subscribe](#))

## Other tips for writing links

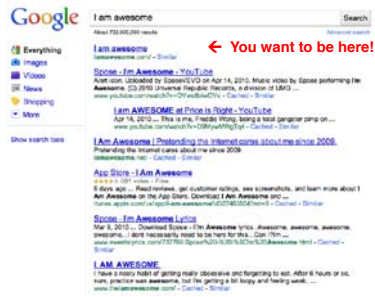
- Links should be self-explanatory & meaningful.
- Don’t waste words writing “click here” or “follow this link.”
- **Hypertext** links, don’t just copy/paste URL.
- Be clear if the link takes users to a different **file type**. (PDF, JPEG, GIF, etc.)

## Write for Search Engine Optimization

**Why?** To be found.

- Use old words. They come to mind in search queries.
- Supplement made-up words with known words.
- Play down internal vocab. (No more church-speak!)
- Boring is better.
- Avoid politically correct terminology.

## Write for Search Engine Optimization



## 6. Adapting print → web

**Transmedia:** A technique of telling stories across multiple platforms and formats using current digital technologies.

- An online environment has different demands than a print publication.
- Never copy the text from your print materials online.
- Deliver unique pieces of content over multiple channels. (Don't abandon print!)

## Print → web tips

- Think "topic," not "book."
- Organize content differently:
  - By audience
  - By task/action
  - By topic
  - By product
- Make it current.
- Make it helpful.
- Add links.
- Break it up.
- Rename headlines.
- Informalize: "The Org" → "We"; "You"

## 7. Optimizing the web page

- Stay "above the fold"!
- Every part matters: Heading, subhead, paragraph, etc.
- One idea per paragraph.
- ALL CAPS
- Use lists.
- Don't go more than 2 headings below page title.

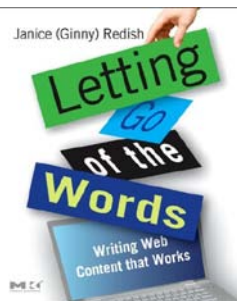
### Bad web page



### Good web page



### Resources



### Resources

- Free chapters of *Letting Go of the Words*:
  - [www.redish.net/writingfortheweb](http://www.redish.net/writingfortheweb)
- Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox Archives
  - <http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/>
  - (Web usability god)