Writing for the Web

1.0   General Principles:

Writing for the Web is different from ways of writing standard texts (most essays and reports, stories, and letters.) You need to consider:

- the wide range of potential audiences

- the short attention span of most audiences

- the restrictive size of the web space

The following questions are therefore critical:

- How do online readers read?

- How do good Web writers write?

The three key concepts you will need to incorporate and plan for are:

1) text scannability

2) plain, concise use of language and,

3) proof-reading of the final text.

2.0   Scannability

Scannability is the designing and formatting of text in such a way that readers can **quickly pick up (=scan for) the message**. They do this

by picking out key words, sentences, paragraphs, and skipping what is not relevant or not of interest.

Why?

- Reading online is tiring/uncomfortable.

- Web users prefer to hunt actively for information, not passively.

- There are thousands of other competing webpages for users to read.

- Web users are impatient: life is too busy to read word-by-word.

2.1 Solutions:

- Design and format text with 2-3 levels of headings (front page or main headings, sub-headings and sub sub-headings). Be consistent with heading use of bold, size and capitalisation of letters. Consider the use of nested headings for visually impaired readers.

- Make your headings meaningful (not cute, not idiomatic, not slangy).

Which is the more informative of the three below?

> **1.Twosome tells wired world what's news**
>
> **2.Bringing news to the wired world**
>
> **3.Editing news for Web portal homepages (Better)**

- Use bullets, numbering and other design elements to break up the flow of uniform text. Consider too, the effects of white space around the text.

- Use highlighting, emphasis and colour but don't confuse the reader with regard to the colour of hyperlinks.

- Use the 'journalistic pyramid': Important facts first, including conclusions.

- Chunk information and support it with hyperlinks when further detail is required ie. use short 'bursts' of text.

- Be absolutely consistent with any formatting and structuring of your text.

3.0   Using Plain Language

Keep your language clear, concise, complete and accurate:

- Use topic sentences to overview the main message of each paragraph (usually placed in first position).

- Take a 'one main idea per paragraph' approach.

- Keep sentence structures simple and short.

- Avoid metaphoric language particularly in headings ie. idioms, jargon, slang.

- Be careful of humour. It doesn't always translate across international borders.

Refer to Exercises 4.2 and 4.3 for further practice.

4.0   Proof-reading

Proof – reading is an essential component of the web-writing process. Mistakes can strongly influence the perceptions of readers and users,

and potential clients are likely to be put off by mistakes they regard as either illiterate or careless. Therefore ALWAYS check for the following:

- **Spelling:** Use a spellchecker but be careful of US versions. Australian English is based on UK spelling patterns

- **Contractions:** *its* v. *it's* confusion represents the most common error of this kind. Refer to *Common Grammar Errors Guide* for an explanation.

- **Punctuation:** Refer to Sentence Structure problems in the *Guide*.

- **Grammar:** Vital! Check and re-check. Refer to the *Guide* for common errors.

- **Typographical errors (typos)** - this includes spacing.

5.0   Specific Assignment Advice

- Conceptualise material as a set of screens
- Keep scrolling to a minimum
- Structure information for scannability
- Keep language plain and precise.

Refer to the exercises below for further practice of the above lecture notes. Answers are supplied separately on the LLS Other Resources site. Two additional documents, *Common Grammar Errors* and *Editing your Document,* provide further help and examples*.*

4.1 Exercise: Organising information

4.2 Exercise: Writing Concisely

4.3 Exercise: Using Plain Language

4.4 Exercise: Editing a Text