Quicklist for Authoring Comprehensible Web Pages

[Excerpted from "Guidelines for Authoring Comprehensible Web Pages and Evaluating Their Success"]

Jan H. Spyridakis

KEY CONCEPTS

Reading process  All parts of the reading process use a reader's attentional resources, a limited commodity. If readers can devote less attention to lower level tasks such as decoding letters, words, and syntactic structures, they will have more attention available for higher level tasks, such as combining text-based information with other text-based information and also with information stored in long term memory.

Tradeoffs  Writers' decisions can amount to tradeoffs between the use of effective and less effective text strategies. Effective text strategies ease the reader's load and make more attention available for more difficult reading tasks. The following guidelines describe numerous effective text strategies, not all of which an author will choose to use. Authors and evaluators, though, should recognize that some strategies are more effective than others, and understand that the degree of effectiveness relates to context and audience.

Context: Audience and purpose  All writing decisions or evaluations of effectiveness must be made in the context of the abilities and knowledge set of the intended audience, and the purpose of the Web site.

Internationalization  Writers must decide whether they want a Web site to serve audiences beyond a specific English speaking audience. If so, they may want to internationalize the Web pages (remove content and concepts specific to only one culture) and then localize the pages (translate the pages to meet the needs of different cultures). Alternatively, they may want to globalize the pages, making them readable by readers in any culture who speak English.
1 SELECTING AND PRESENTING CONTENT

1.1 Present content in such a way that readers can orient themselves and access relevant prior knowledge so they can comprehend new information when they arrive on a new page.

Effective text features

- An informative title at the top of each page
- An introduction or introductory sentence that announces the topic and specifies the intended audience
- Repetition of company or agency names, redefinition of specific terminology, and spelling out acronyms on each page

1.2 Select content that will be interesting and relevant to the audience. Readers will attend to and retain such content better than content they find less interesting and relevant.

Many authors reuse content from existing printed texts or Web sites just because they have the information. Readers are often not interested in an organization's mission statement or management chart, topics common to many Web sites.

1.3 Minimize the amount of information per page.

Effective text features

- Short pages instead of long pages (in general)
- Only a few examples of a concept versus exhaustive coverage
- Summaries or abstracts with links to longer articles or discussions

2 ORGANIZING CONTENT ON THE PAGE

2.1 Group information to help readers create hierarchical frameworks for storing incoming information in long-term memory.

Effective text features

- Five or fewer items per group at one level of the organizational hierarchy While this ideal number may be difficult to achieve with the overall site design, information on pages can often fit within the ideal. Readers retain more information and discriminate among ideas best when the number of items at any one hierarchical level is five or fewer.
• Grouped ideas on one page at the same conceptual level

2.2 Create order within and across grouped content.

Effective text features

• Information the reader is likely to know placed before new information (within sentences, paragraphs, and pages)
• Deductive organization, reinforced with a topic sentence
• Important information near the top of paragraphs and pages

2.3 Use organizational cues to make text visually accessible and scannable (easily skimmed or quickly read through at a top level); and to facilitate search tasks, comprehension, and recall. Do not distract readers with unnecessary cues.

Effective text features

• Headings and subordinate headings
• Introductions
• Overview (preview) and topic sentences
• Lists or tables
• Link labels
• Tables of contents, overviews, or site maps

3 MANIPULATING STYLE

3.1 Use words that readers can easily and accurately understand.

Effective text features

• Concrete words
• Words that appear frequently in the language
• Short words (fewer syllables)
• Pronounceable words
• Link labels that create clear context for the linked page
• Words that readers are familiar with (the audience's vocabulary set)

3.2 Use syntax (grammatical order) that readers can easily understand.

Effective text features

• Active voice verbs
• Few embedded relative clauses (a relative clause inside another
clause—for example, "The boy, who is tall, fell down."

- Few embedded links
- Important information placed in independent clauses

3.3 State ideas concisely.

**Effective text features**

- Omission of unnecessary detail
- Concise wording
- Short sentences

3.4 Choose a tone that fits the message and the audience.

**Effective text features**

- Objective tone instead of promotional tone (for informational Web sites)
- Personal tone using the pronoun you (when appropriate)
- Plain instead of inflated, pseudointellectual language

4 ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY

Make pages trustworthy. Readers are more likely to continue reading and return to a page if they feel the information is credible.

**Effective text features**

- Author's name, credentials, and e-mail address
- Date that site was posted or last updated
- Citation of sources when appropriate
- Statement regarding Web site's use of reader's personal information
- Up-to-date information
- Links to relevant outside sites
- Accurate information
- Lack of typos, grammatical errors, and spelling mistakes
- Lack of "hyped-up" language

5 COMMUNICATING WITH INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCES

5.1 Select content that is relevant to the audience and purpose of the site.

**Effective text features**
• For globalized sites, culturally generic content (that is, lack of culturally specific content)
• For localized sites, content that serves a specific culture's interests

5.2 If localizing a site, consider using an organizational structure suited to the preferences of readers in the target culture.

5.3 Use a style that is culturally generic and is easily translatable.

Effective text features

• Measurement terminology in either international units (for example, the metric system, 24-hour military-time clock) or units specific to different cultures
• Internationalized words and phrases
• Lack of jargon, abbreviations, and idioms
• Lack of cute wording, titles, and phrases
• Simple sentence structures TC

JAN H. SPYRIDAKIS is a professor in the Technical Communication Department at the University of Washington. She teaches courses and offers industry seminars on style in technical writing, advanced technical writing, the conduct and interpretation of research in technical communication, and international technical communication. She conducts research on usability, comprehension, and document and screen design issues. She has received teaching and publication awards, and is a fellow of STC. Contact information: jansp@u.washington.edu