

# Writing for the Web

Websites require a unique style of writing. Novelists paint a picture with words. Reporters report the news with dramatic flair. Academics explain complex ideas in context with citations. Web content writers share information as succinctly as possible.

People consume websites differently than other forms of media: they don't read; they skim.

## How do you make your website easy for users to digest?

### **Be concise.**

Do not say in 150 words what could be said in 75. Do not say in 75 words what could be said in 30.

### **Write simply.**

Long sentences with complex structures that endeavor to explain in complicated terms a topic that could otherwise be described in a more straightforward manner are best avoided. Use simple sentences.

### **Avoid "marketingese."**

Neutral language is easier to read and understand than subjective and boastful text. Be clear and direct.

### **Use the "Inverted Pyramid" style of writing.**

Put the essential and most interesting information at the beginning. Include additional information in order of diminishing importance.

### **Use keywords.**

Use terms that are commonly used to describe your topic. Avoid using proprietary terms and abbreviations as much as possible.

### **Use headings.**

Break up your text with brief but descriptive headings and subheadings so users can find information faster.

### **Break up different ideas into different paragraphs.**

Long, dense blocks of text are intimidating to readers. Several short paragraphs are preferable to a single long paragraph.

### **Make your text skim-friendly.**

Use bulleted lists in place of long series or text lists.

### **Highlight only as necessary.**

Use bold **very** sparingly to draw attention to an important point.

### **Use the proper case.**

Sentence case is much easier to read than uppercase. To emphasize an important point, use bold.

### **Make links easy to identify.**

Links should be a consistent color and style. Do not change the color of a link to make it stand out. Do not underline any text since it may be confused for a link.

# Measuring the Effect of Improved Web Writing

Source: Jakob Nielson's AlertBox

To measure the effect of some of the content guidelines we had identified, we developed five different versions of the same website (same basic information; different wording; same site navigation). We then had users perform the same tasks with the different sites. As shown in the table, measured usability was dramatically higher for the concise version (58% better) and for the scannable version (47% better). And when we combined three ideas for improved writing style into a single site, the result was truly stellar: **124% better usability**.

Site Version	Sample Paragraph	Usability Improvement
<b>Promotional writing (control condition)</b> using the "marketese" found on many commercial websites	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).	0% (by definition)
<b>Concise text</b> with about half the word count as the control condition	In 1996, six of the best-attended attractions in Nebraska were Fort Robinson State Park, Scotts Bluff National Monument, Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum, Carhenge, Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park.	58%
<b>Scannable layout</b> using the same text as the control condition in a layout that facilitated scanning	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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors)</li> <li>• Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166)</li> <li>• Arbor Lodge State Historical Park &amp; Museum (100,000)</li> <li>• Carhenge (86,598)</li> <li>• Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002)</li> <li>• Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).</li> </ul>	47%
<b>Objective language</b> using neutral rather than subjective, boastful, or exaggerated language (otherwise the same as the control condition)	Nebraska has several attractions. In 1996, some of the most-visited 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).	27%
<b>Combined version</b> using all three improvements in writing style together: concise, scannable, and objective	In 1996, six of the most-visited places in Nebraska were: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fort Robinson State Park</li> <li>• Scotts Bluff National Monument</li> <li>• Arbor Lodge State Historical Park &amp; Museum</li> <li>• Carhenge</li> <li>• Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer</li> <li>• Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park</li> </ul>	124%

It was somewhat surprising to us that usability was improved by a good deal in the objective language version (27% better). We had expected that users would like this version better than the promotional site, but we thought that the performance metrics would have been the same for both kinds of language. As it turned out, our four performance measures were also better for the objective version than for the promotional version. Our conjecture to explain this finding is that **promotional language imposes a cognitive burden** on users who have to spend resources on filtering out the hyperbole to get at the facts. When people read a paragraph that starts "Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions," their first reaction is *no, it's not*, and this thought slows them down and distracts them from using the site.