University of
BRISTOL

IT SERVICES

Writing effective and accessible web content

Practical workbook

Aims and Learning Objectives

The aim of this one-day training workshop is to **develop the writing skills to enable you to write effective and accessible content for the University of Bristol website**.

By the end of the course you will be able to:

- identify 5 characteristics of effective web content;

- explain how people read on the web and how it differs from print;

- define key messages, goal(s) and audience(s) for your web communications;

- write web copy that makes it easier for readers to find the information they want, and to University standards;

- write web copy that is and more credible, trustworthy and engaging;

- identify potential accessibility issues in your web pages and ensure that they are accessible to all readers, including those with disabilities;

- develop a plan for checking and reviewing the quality of your web copy.

Document information

Course files

This document and any associated practice files (if needed) are available on the web. To find these, go to www.bristol.ac.uk/it-services/learning/resources and in the **Keyword** box, type the document code given in brackets at the top of this page.

Related documentation

Other related documents are available from the web at:

http://www.bristol.ac.uk/it-services/learning/resources

In addition you should refer to University of Bristol standards when writing content for the University website:

- University web standards and best practice (https://www.bristol.ac.uk/web/guide/bestpractice/)
- University house Style guide (https://www.bristol.ac.uk/visualidentity/house-style.html)

Writing effective and accessible web content (March 2014)

Introduction

Although the web has become a highly visual, multi-media channel, text is still at the core of most information and transaction websites. In other words, people come to a website for its content, either because they have a specific information need, seek entertainment or want to buy something. In the case of a University website, they are most likely to look for information that answers a question (eg *What is it like to study in Bristol?*) or helps them complete a task (eg *I want to visit the University.*). They expect this information to be easy to find, to access and to understand, as well as being accurate, up-to-date and credible.

As a result poorly written website copy puts visitors off and ultimately loses business. Yet too many website owners concentrate their efforts on visual impact and design, but pay scant attention to the quality of copy (i.e. the words on a page).

In this workshop you will learn how to write content that is search engine friendly, accessible, and present in an easy to read manner.

Prerequisites

None

Contents

Task 1 Introduction

Objectives To reflect on the characteristics of effective online content; to explore differences between reading online content and print; to raise awareness of the need to make online content accessible.

Comments Research has showed that the way people read online text is considerably different from the way they read printed text. Online text presents unique challenges to the reader, due in part to the medium, and to human behaviour.

Good vs. bad web content

Drawing on your own experience of using websites, answer the following questions:

➢ What are the differences between good and bad web content?

Good content is	Bad content is

➢ How does the way content is written affect the reader and the organisation?

Good content does:	Bad content does:

What is 'good' content?

> Good content **effectively** communicates its **intended message** to its **intended audience**.

In other words, **a message must be appropriate** to:

- its **goal(s)** – i.e. what you want it to achieve
- its **audience(s)** – i.e. who it is intended for
- the **medium** – e.g. the web

In order to create effective content of your own, you need to have a clear understanding of each of these parameters and how they relate to one another.

The web as medium

Task

> ➢ What are the distinctive characteristics of on-screen reading compared to print media (e.g. books, newspapers, magazines, etc)?

1.1   How does the web differ from print?

A number of studies have showed that:

1. Digital text is harder to read:

- Computer screens have a lower resolution than printers.
- Reading on screen increases eye strain due to flicker, luminance, contrast and glare.
- Readers of online text usually find it more difficult to understand, less interesting, and the authors less credible than those reading the same text in print[1].
- Reading from a computer screen can feel unnatural because of the landscape format and the reading position.

As a result, reading online is 10% to 30% slower than reading the same text in print[2].

2. Readers not authors control page appearance

- Readers can change the font size, type and colours through their browser settings.

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[1] Murphy, P. K., J. F. Long, T. A. Holleran & E. Esterly (2003) Persuasion online or on paper: a new take on an old issue. *Learning and Instruction,* 13**,** 511-532.
[2] Hastuti Kurniawan, S. & P. Zaphiris. 2001. Reading Online or on Paper: Which is Faster? In *Abridged Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Human Computer Interaction.*

- Readers may use different screen sizes, resolutions and devices to access your website – from traditional desktop monitors to tablet computers (e.g. iPad), smart phones and screen readers.

   3. Readers can enter a website via any page, not necessarily the homepage.

Task

➢ What reading strategies do you use when reading a book? A newspaper? A train timetable?

1.2 How do people read on the web compared to print?

We tend to read print media in a linear way, line-by-line and from beginning to end (although there are exceptions to this, for example when reading a train timetable or a television programme among others).

When reading web content we rarely read in this way, instead we tend to adopt a 'snatch and grab' approach to finding information[3].

A landmark study conducted in 1997[4] made three important findings about the way people read on the web:

- Web readers **scan** pages, looking for keywords or key phrases to find the information they want.
- [They] "do not like long, scrolling pages: they prefer the text to be **short and to the point**."
- [They] "detest anything that seems like marketing fluff or overly hyped language ("marketese") and prefer **factual information**."

The authors concluded that web writers should strive to make their copy **scannable**, **concise** and **objective**.

Note | **Scanning or skimming?**

Scanning involves moving your eyes quickly down the page in search of specific words or phrases. It is what online readers do, the first time they see a web page, to determine whether it will answer their questions.

If they think that it will, they might then **skim** the page to extract the actual information or the main ideas.

This and other studies have also showed that:

- **The longer the text, the less likely people are to read it** – we read *at most* 28% of the words on a web page; 20% is more likely[5].

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[3] Sutherland-Smith, W. (2002) Weaving the Literacy Web: Changes in Reading from Page to Screen. *The Reading Teacher,* 55**,** pp. 662-669.
[4] Morkes, J. & J. Nielsen (1997) Concise, SCANNABLE, and Objective: How to Write for the Web. www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/writing.html [last accessed 15/08/2011].

- Readers **understand more when reading less**.

- Web readers **are relentlessly task-focused**: they want to **solve a problem** (e.g. find specific information, buy a train ticket, etc) and they want to **do it quickly and without fuss**.

- Web readers are **impatient**, **intolerant** and **critical**. They usually make up their mind about the usefulness of a website in a split second[6].

- Web readers **do not like scrolling down a page** – they tend to make up their mind after reading what's visible on the screen.

- Web readers tend to be **task-oriented** (e.g. find an event's venue) and **goal-oriented** (e.g. get an idea of events).

- Solid, well-written and grammatically correct content is **crucial** to gaining the **reader's trust**.

Eye tracking studies also *"show that users often read Web pages in an F-shaped pattern: two horizontal stripes followed by a vertical stripe."*[7]
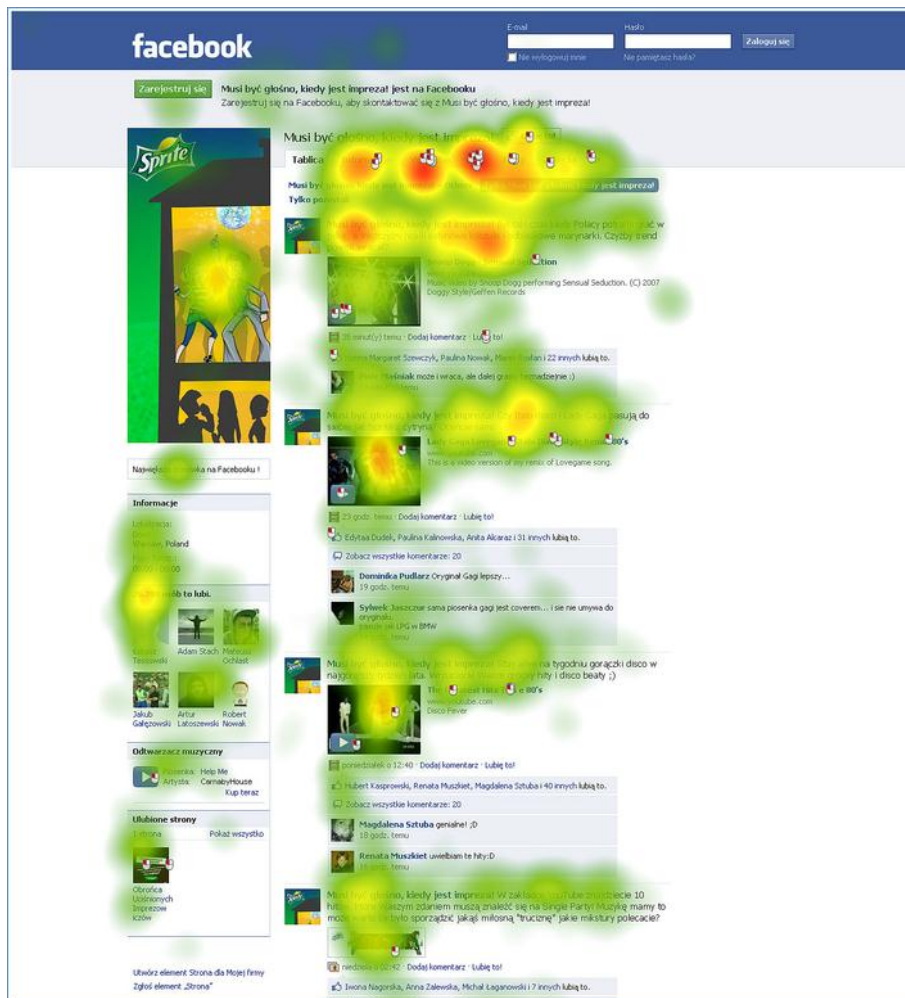
Figure 1 – HeatMap of Lady Gaga fan page
(K2_UX, www.flickr.com/photos/k2_ux/5497507427/in/set-72157626195146020)

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[5] Nielsen, J. (2008) How Little Do Users Read? http://www.useit.com/alertbox/percent-text-read.html (last accessed 12/08/2011).
[6] Lindgaard, G., G. Fernandes, C. Dudek & J. Browñ (2006) Attention web designers: You have 50 milliseconds to make a good first impression! *Behaviour and Information Technology,* 25**,** 115-126.
[7] Nielsen, J. (2006) F-Shaped Pattern For Reading Web Content.
http://www.useit.com/alertbox/reading_pattern.html (last accessed 15/08/2011).

Task 2   Plan your work

Objectives   To identify the purpose and goal(s) of a message, it's target audience(s); to recognise the different types of pages on a website and understand their characteristics.

Comments   In order to communicate your message effectively, you must know what you want to say and who you want to say it to.

Focus on the message(s) you want to communicate

> **A message must be appropriate to its goal(s).**

2.1   What is the message you want to communicate?

An organisation usually has a few high level key messages that it wants to communicate; these are what it wants to be known for. For example:

- *Our students are taught by world-class researchers and clinicians.*
- *Our research is geared towards turning science into medicine.*

However, every constituent part of your website (e.g. sub-sites within your site, individual pages, sections within pages, down to paragraphs) should have a clear purpose and a clear message to communicate.

A good message is:

- **Clear and concise**: to the point, avoiding jargon and acronyms
- **Short**: one brief, memorable sentence
- **Active**: make every sentence active
- **Positive**: talk about what can be done, not what can't be done
- **Specific**: address a particular challenge or issue, and audience

Finally, in order to be **credible**, a message should be backed up with **facts** and **examples** (i.e. evidence) when relevant.

Task

➢ Open the **Innocent Drinks** website (www.innocentdrinks.co.uk/) in a browser.

What key messages do you think the homepage tries to communicate?

➢ Now open the **us** > **being sustainable** page (www.innocentdrinks.co.uk/us/being-sustainable).

What do you think is the main message of this page?

2.2 What are the goal(s) of this message?

It helps to think of goals in terms of action verbs. For example:

"The goal of this message is to...

- **encourage** people to do daily exercise.

- **showcase** our achievements."

Task

➢ What other goals can you think of for a message?

It may help to think about the goals different types of organisations might have for their messages. For example:

- oil company (e.g BP, Shell)

- news and media (e.g. BBC, Virgin Media)

- charities and pressure groups (e.g. Oxfam, Amnesty International)

- government (e.g. city council, Environment Agency)

- bank (e.g. Barclays, Co-operative Bank)

- travel agent (e.g. First Choice Holidays)

- mobile phone (e.g. Orange, T-Mobile)

- insurance company (e.g. AXA Insurance)

- online retailer (e.g. Amazon)

- university (e.g. Bristol, UWE)

- international organisation (e.g. World Health Organisation, UNICEF)

Here are some of the goals you may have come up with:

▪ inform	▪ give advice	▪ educate
▪ reassure	▪ sell (a product, a service, an idea?)	▪ help
▪ promote	▪ entertain	▪ warn
▪ remind	▪ inspire	▪ scare
▪ attract	▪ persuade	▪ instruct
▪ shock		

You probably found that a message can often have **multiple goals**. When this is the case you will need to **prioritise** them and decide which is the most important.

Research your target audience(s)

A message must be appropriate to its audience(s).

You cannot write an effective message if you don't have a clear idea of who you are communicating with.

For this reason it is essential to research your audience in order to gain a better understanding of their **characteristics**, **attitudes** and **behaviours**, as well as what they want and need from your website.

A good starting point is to think of your target audiences in terms of their defining characteristics. Some of the most obvious demographic characteristics in which people differ from one another include **gender** and **age**, however there are many more.

Task

➢ Can you think of other ways in which people differ from one another?

Here are some of the factors that can be used to differentiate people:

▪ income	▪ internet experience	▪ language
▪ location	▪ newspaper they read	▪ culture
▪ occupation	▪ level of education	▪ ethnicity
▪ marital status	▪ social background	▪ religion
▪ lifestyle	▪ life experience	▪ disability

Needless to say, websites usually have **multiple audiences**; again you need to **prioritise** them.

Ideally, you would want to find out about your target audiences[8]' needs directly from them, through surveys, interviews and focus groups.

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[8] Your faculty web and marketing officers in the Public Relations Office can help you with this. You can find their contact details at www.bris.ac.uk/web/contact/.

Task 3   Make text scannable

Objectives   To write good heading and sub-headings, and to use lists, tables and emphasis effectively to facilitate scanning.

Comments   Web readers tend to scan pages for key words and phrases. Therefore we should strive to make our content easy to scan.

Task

➢ Open the **Liverpool FC** website (www.lfconline.com) and go to **Club History > History of LFC**

How easy is this page to read? Why?

Headings and sub-headings

Writing good headings and sub-headings is one of the most effective ways to make your content easier to read. Think of them as **signposts** to the information that readers are looking for. In addition they are crucial to gaining greater visibility in search engines.

3.1   Tips for writing headings and sub-headings:

- Use headings for their **intended purpose** (i.e. as headings and not to emphasise a block of text).

- Use them in their **logical order** (i.e. start with **<h1>** followed by **<h2>** followed by **<h3>**, etc).

- Use **sentence case** (i.e. only the first word begins with a capital letter – unless other words in the heading are proper nouns).

- Make them as **descriptive** as possible of the section they introduce, **using keywords**: e.g. *Activity tips for parents*.

- **Leave out** as many **prepositions** and **adjectives** as you can.

- **Start with a verb** when writing actionable content: e.g. *Stay healthy* or *Staying healthy*.

- When appropriate **use questions**: e.g. *What kind of activity is good for my heart?*

- They should **make sense** when **taken out of context**.

- Use **three or four heading levels** at most.

The **main page heading** should:

- Be an **<h1>** and used only once on each page.

- Quickly and accurately describe the content of the page.

Sub-headings should:

- Appear at the **beginning of each new section**, whenever the **subject-matter changes**.

- Start with **<h2>**s, to introduce each new main section, and if necessary **<h3>**s to introduce each sub-section, etc.

Accessibility note

Headings are helpful to all users, but particularly to **screen reader users** for two reasons:

1. Screen readers have an option to list all headings on the page and to follow any heading listed, enabling the user to jump directly to the section it introduces.
2. If used in their logical order they give a clear idea of the structure of the page.

Practice exercise

Start Microsoft Word and open the 'Practice Exercises' document (webwriting-1tx.docx).

Note   In the training rooms this document is located in **UoB Training Materials \ WWW \ Web writing**. Otherwise it can be downloaded from www.bristol.ac.uk/it-services/learning/documentation/webaccess-1/webaccess-1tx.docx

➢ In the 'Practice Exercises' document, complete **Task 1 Writing headings**.

Lists and tables

Lists and tables **save the reader time** because they **draw attention to important information** and make this information **easy to grab**. Therefore they should be used whenever possible.

Task

When would you use a list or a table to present information?

Lists	Tables

3.2   Tips for using lists:

- Use lists for individual items belonging to the same category of information.

- Use **bullet lists** (**<ul>** HTML tag) when list items have no particular order.

- Use **numbered lists** (**<ol>** HTML tag) when order matters (e.g. steps in a process, instructions, etc).

- Try to keep unfamiliar lists to **5 to 10 items maximum**.

- Longer lists may be ok for familiar topics (e.g. list of countries); however it may be a good idea to group them by topic (e.g. by continent) or A to Z (e.g. www.roughguides.com/travel).

- Use lists as **table of contents** for long pages and link each list item to its corresponding heading
(e.g. www.bris.ac.uk/prospectus/postgraduate/2012/intro/10).

Note   Refer to www.bristol.ac.uk/visualidentity/house-style.html#bullets for University style guide on appropriate punctuation for lists.

Practice exercise

➢ In the 'Practice Exercises' document, complete **Task 2 Using lists**

3.3   Tips for using tables:

- Table should be **used to present data**, not for layout purposes (e.g. aligning images with text).

- Use tables when there is **more than one category of information** and at least two items (i.e. at least two columns and rows).

- Use tables to **compare numbers**.

- Use tables to **answer questions when there are several options** (e.g. list of costs for different room hire options).

- A two-column table can also be used to display a series of **"if..., then..." statements** (e.g. "If you are..., Do...").

- Table columns (and if relevant rows) should have **clear headings**.

- **Keep tables simple**: not too many columns (most readers are likely to miss information if they have to scroll sideways to find it) and rows (if readers have to scroll down, the column headers are no longer visible) – if necessary break up complex tables into smaller ones.

Practice exercise

➢ In the 'Practice Exercises' document, complete **Task 3 Using tables**

Accessibility note

Lists are particularly helpful to **screen reader users** as screen readers announce the number of items in a list before reading them out.

Well designed tables are helpful to most readers as they avoid repetition and present information in a visual way. However they can be problematic for screen reader users if not coded properly (see the section on **Data tables** at www.bris.ac.uk/web/guide/bestpractice/basics.html for further information)

Emphasis

Emphasis is about highlighting key words and important phrases on a page in order to draw the reader's attention. In print this is done in different ways: **bold**, **underline**, **italics** and **capitalisation**.

3.4   Tips for using emphasis:

- **Bold** is best... but use it sparingly: i.e. no more than 5 words or phrases per paragraph.

- The highlighted terms or phrases on a page should give the reader **a good overview** of its content.

- Use *italics* even more sparingly: e.g. foreign words and phrases, titles of works (films, books, etc), scientific taxonomy and for clarity (e.g. the word *sepoy* means...), but never a whole sentence or paragraph as these are more difficult and slower to read.

- Do not use <u>underline</u>... people will try to click on it!

- Do no use BLOCK CAPITALS other than for abbreviations and acronyms (e.g. UNESCO) – used for whole sentences, THEY REDUCE LEGIBILITY AND LOOK RATHER INELEGANT!

- *... and **COMBINING DISPLAY STYLES IS TOTALLY UNNECESSARY!***

Practice exercise

➢ In the 'Practice Exercises' document, complete **Task 4 Using emphasis**

Task 4 Make text easy to understand

Objectives   To write simple, clear and concise content, appropriate for a web audience, and meaningful links.

Comments   Making text easy to understand means writing in plain (simple) English, clearly and concisely, in a style that is appropriate for your target audience.

Simplicity

Simplicity is a double-edged sword. The challenge is to harness the benefits while avoiding the potential pitfalls.

Task – Benefits (and potential pitfalls) of simplicity

➢ What are the benefits of expressing yourself in the **simplest appropriate** manner? What are the potential pitfalls of expressing yourself simply?

Benefits	Potential pitfalls

4.1   Tips for writing simply

- Use **simple everyday words** (i.e. Plain English) whenever possible:
  e.g. write *end* instead of *terminate*; *try* not *endeavour*.

- Avoid **wordy expressions** such as in view of the fact that... (use *as* or *because* instead) and **impersonal constructions** such as *It is generally believed that...* often found in academic writing.

- Avoid using **foreign words**: e.g. use *dead end* instead of *cul-de-sac*

- Avoid **nominalisations** (i.e. turning verbs into nouns):
  e.g. use *to engage staff* instead of *to ensure the engagement of staff*

- Write **simple sentences**: i.e. one main idea, avoid subordinate clauses – but do **vary the length** of your sentences for 'pace'

- **Engage readers** by using "you":
  e.g. use *You must send us...* rather than *Applicants must send us...*

- Use the **active voice** most of the time: e.g. *A technician has investigated the incident.* (Active) rather than *The incident has been investigated by a technician.* (Passive)

- ...but use the **passive voice**:
  - ✓ to be tactful:
    e.g. *Lessons will be learnt from this debacle.*
  - ✓ to emphasise the person or thing acted on:
    e.g. *Penicillin was first discovered in 1928 by Alexander Fleming.*

    ✓ when the doer of the action is unknown or irrelevant:
       e.g. *Five masterpieces have been stolen from the National Gallery.*

Practice exercise

➢ In the 'Practice Exercises' document, complete **Task 5 Simplifying text**

Clarity

Writing clearly means writing without ambiguity, in a way that removes all potential causes of confusion and misunderstanding in the reader.

4.2   Tips for writing clearly:

- Avoid **clichés, buzzwords and metaphors** as they **can be misunderstood**: e.g. *bone of contention*; *blue sky research*; *bring to the table*; *proven track record*.

- Avoid **jargon** as it **can confound** people unfamiliar with it. Examples of jargon include *stakeholder*, *firewall*, *ballpark*, *marginal-cost pricing*, etc.

- Provide the **full name of acronyms and abbreviations** with the acronym or abbreviation in brackets the first time you use them.

- Write **instructions in the imperative form** and keep them **as short as possible**: e.g. *Fill in this form to apply.* rather than *If you wish to apply for the position, you are requested to complete this form*.

Practice exercise

➢ In the 'Practice Exercises' document, complete **Task 6 Jargon, acronyms and abbreviations**

Conciseness

Writing concisely is about choosing the most effective words and omitting unnecessary ones.

4.3   Tips for writing concisely:

- Cut **unnecessary adjectives and adverbs**:
e.g. *actively consider* (*think*); *very high* (*huge*).

- Use **adjectives and adverbs to be more precise** rather than to increase emphasis (how much of something)
e.g. use *dear* (price), *tall* (elevation)*, piercing* (sound), etc rather than *very high*.

- Use the most **concise prepositions**:
e.g. *for* instead of *in relation to*.

- Replace phrases with **single words of the same meaning** whenever possible:
e.g. *now*, *currently* instead of *at this moment in time*.

Practice exercise

➢ In the 'Practice Exercises' document, complete **Task 7 Be concise**

> ### Accessibility note
>
> All your readers will be grateful to you for writing in plain, clear and concise English. However, screen reader users and those with reading difficulties will be particularly thankful.

Links

Task

➢ The following links were found on the University of Bristol website. Can you guess the information they link to?

Link	What information do you expect to get?
strong in teaching	
Where can I study?	
networking	
Further details	
Set up your email for life now	

Links are **what people use to navigate around the web**. As such they have to **stand out** and **give useful clues** to readers as to where they take them.

In a similar way to headings, they **act as signposts**.

4.4 Tips for writing link text:

- The most importan rule is to make link text **meaningful** and as **descriptive** as possible of their target – for this reason **NEVER USE** click here, read more, etc.

- Make sure **link text matches the target page title** – e.g.
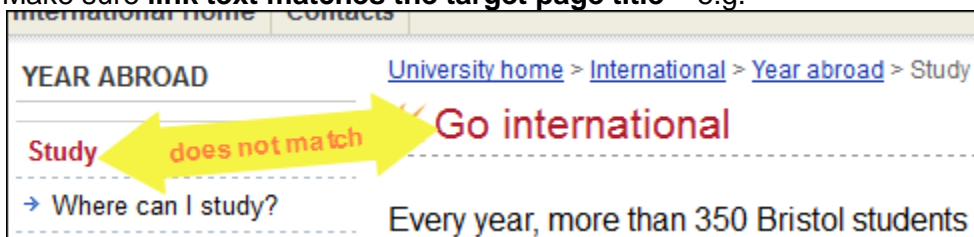
- Use **action phrases for action links** – e.g. Get our newsletter rather than Newsletter; Pay online rather than Online payments.

- **Questions** can also be an effective way of linking – e.g. compare writing a business plan and What makes a good business plan?

- **Add a short description if needed** – particularly relevant on pathway pages (see section **Error! Reference source not found.**).

- Don't embed too many links in each paragraph, they disrupt continuity and understanding.

- **Indicate when linking to other file types** (e.g. Word documents, PDFs) by specifying the type and size in bracket after the link.

Task

➢ Compare and contrast the links on the following pages:

- info.cancerresearchuk.org/cancerandresearch/
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_bristol
- www.bhf.org.uk/research/research-milestones.aspx

Accessibility note

Non-specific links of the click here and read more type are **one of the most important accessibility barriers** for screen reader users.

Just like with headings, screen readers have an option to list all the links on the page and to follow any link listed. It is therefore essential that links to different pages be **unique** and **as descriptive as possible** within the context of the page.

Task 5   Structure content for a web audience

Objectives   To present and organise content in a way that facilitates reading.

Comments   Web content should be organised in a way that makes it easy for readers to find what they want.

Inverted pyramid[9]

Task

➢ Compare the two versions of an article on children living in out-of-work benefit households published by the Department of Works and Pensions (tinyurl.com/6aezolb).

Version 1

An update of Official statistics on children living in out-of-work benefit claimant households, produced by the Department for Work and Pensions, were released on 18 May 2011.

These figures show the numbers of children living in households where at least one parent or guardian claimed one or more of the following out-of-work benefits: Job Seeker's Allowance, Income Support, Employment and Support Allowance, Incapacity Benefit/Severe Disablement Allowance, or Pension Credit at 31 May each year from 2008 to 2010.

The key points from the latest release are:

There were 2.63 million children living in an out-of-work benefit household at May 2009 and May 2010.

They represented 1.39 million households.

Figures represent an increase of 229 thousand children or 9.6% across Great Britain since May 2008.

By benefit type:

- 1.77 million children lived in households claiming Income Support at May 2010.
- 429 thousand children lived in households claiming Jobseeker's Allowance at May 2010.
- 201 thousand children lived in households claiming Employment and Support Allowance at May 2010.
- 550 thousand children lived in households claiming Incapacity Benefit or Severe Disablement Allowance at May 2010.
- 41 thousand children lived in households claiming Pension Credit at May 2010.

Note: Some children were living in households claiming a combination of these benefits.

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[9] Scanlan, C. (2003) Writing from the Top Down: Pros and Cons of the Inverted Pyramid. www.poynter.org/how-tos/newsgathering-storytelling/chip-on-your-shoulder/12754/writing-from-the-top-down-pros-and-cons-of-the-inverted-pyramid/ (short: tinyurl.com/5rd458u) [last accessed 08/01/2013].

Version 2

Over 2.6 million children lived in 1.39 million out-of-work households receiving benefits at May 2009 and May 2010. This represented a 9.6% increase (229 thousand children) across Great Britain since May 2008.

At least one parent or guardian claimed one or more of the following out-of-work benefits in these households:

- Job Seeker's Allowance (429 thousand children)
- Income Support (1.77 million children)
- Employment and Support Allowance (201 thousand children)
- Incapacity Benefit or Severe Disablement Allowance (550 thousand children)
- Pension Credit (41 thousand children).

Note: Some children were living in households claiming a combination of these benefits.

These figures were released on 18 May 2011 in an update of Official statistics on children living in out-of-work benefit claimant households, produced by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Which one does a better job of drawing you in? Why?

Inverting the pyramid consists in **beginning each page with the page conclusion**, each section with the section conclusion and each paragraph with the paragraph conclusion. This is also known as **front-loading**.

Most of us have been taught to write starting with laying the foundations (e.g. general background, problem statement, develop arguments etc) and gradually building up to the point we are trying to put across (e.g. research findings, conclusion).

Inverting the pyramid essentially **reverses** this process by **front-loading** the page with the **most important information**.
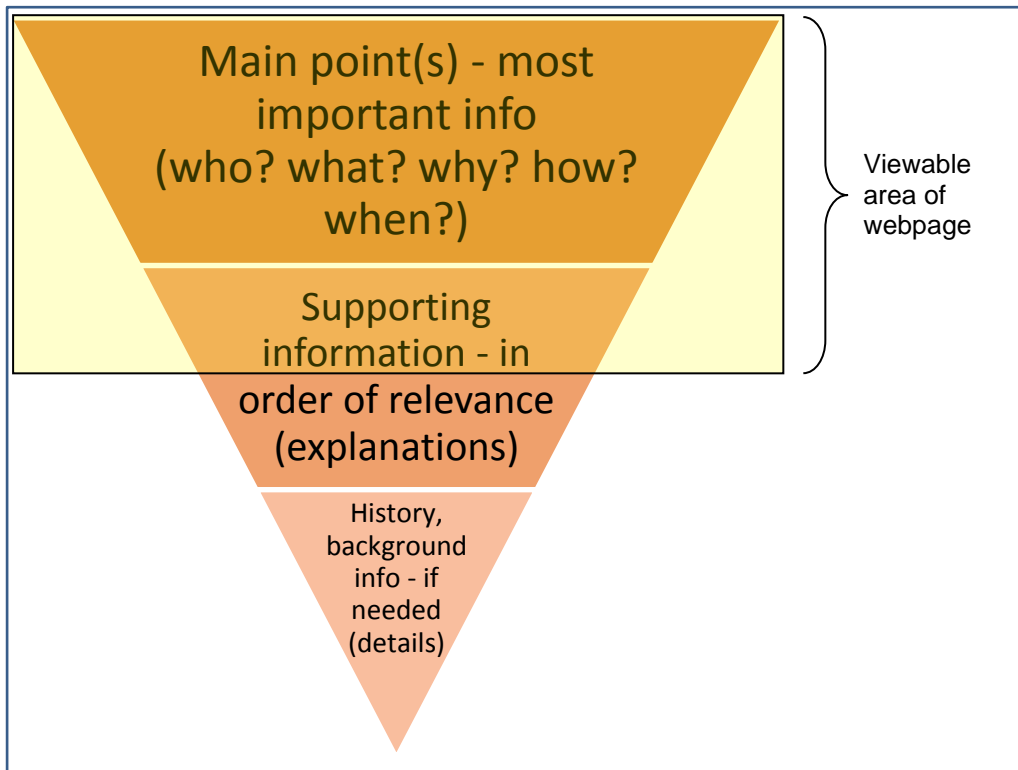

Main point(s) - most important info
(who? what? why? how? when?)

Supporting information - in order of relevance (explanations)

History, background info - if needed (details)

Viewable area of webpage

Figure 2 – Inverted Pyramid writing model

- First, write the **key points** of your message that **readers must read** for your communication to be **successful**.

- Second, write any **supporting information** that is **helpful but not crucial**.

- Third, write any **background information** that it **would be nice** if they had it, but definitely **not essential**.

This technique originates in news reporting and is commonly used by journalists who know all too well that readers are fickle and may stop reading at any time!

Another benefit is that it forces you to focus on the main point and to sum it up in a single, short paragraph.

Breaking down content in manageable chunks

Task

➤ Compare the two versions of the same text below. Which is easier to read? Why?

Adapted from 'Have a heart healthy breakfast', British Heart Foundation website (http://www.bhf.org.uk/heart-health/prevention/healthy-eating/breakfast.aspx)

Version 1

Eating breakfast helps us to concentrate and gets the day off to a good start. Change4Life is a public health programme organised by the Department of Health. Their research shows that lots of families choose breakfast options that are high in **sugar** or **fat** and many don't eat breakfast at all. By encouraging people to eat a healthier breakfast you can help them to move towards all sorts of **beneficial changes**. A regular pattern of meals which starts with breakfast is important to make sure you get all the **nutrients** you need during the day. It can also help to stop you from getting overly hungry, which is when you are more likely to make less healthy choices - like reaching for the biscuit tin mid-morning. You don't have to have a big cooked breakfast – a drink and a piece of **fruit** or a pot of **yoghurt** is a good start to help get you into the habit. Or try taking a box of cereal to work to keep on your desk so you can eat something when you've had time to wake up a bit.

Version 2

Eating breakfast helps us to concentrate and gets the day off to a good start.

Change4Life is a public health programme organised by the Department of Health.

Their research shows that lots of families choose breakfast options that are high in **sugar** or **fat** and many don't eat breakfast at all.

By encouraging people to eat a healthier breakfast you can help them to be move towards all sorts of **beneficial changes**.

A regular pattern of meals which starts with breakfast is important to make sure you get all the **nutrients** you need during the day. It can also help to stop you from getting overly hungry, which is when you are more likely to make less healthy choices - like reaching for the biscuit tin mid-morning.

You don't have to have a big cooked breakfast – a drink and a piece of **fruit** or a pot of **yoghurt** is a good start to help get you into the habit. Or try taking a box of cereal to work to keep on your desk so you can eat something when you've had time to wake up a bit.

Large blocks of text can be difficult to read and off-putting on the web. Shorter paragraphs separated by white space are easier to read.

5.1 Tips for breaking down content

- Make sure each paragraph contains **one idea** only.

- **Summarise that idea in the first sentence** (see the inverted pyramid).

- Keep paragraphs short – **2 or 3 sentences per paragraph**.

- When the topic is complex, **break up information** into many paragraphs, sections or pages.

Lead paragraphs

The lead paragraph appears at the top of the page. Its role is to provide a summary of the **information the page contains**, including **who**, **what**, **when**, **where**, **why** and **how** when relevant. It helps the reader decide **whether the page meets their information needs** at a glance. Lead paragraphs can also be used to **'tease'** or **'hook'** the reader and draw them into reading the rest of the page.

The summary is what goes in the top slice of the inverted pyramid, just after the main page heading.

Note   Most newspaper and magazine articles have a 'summary lead' immediately below the article title whose role is to introduce the article, summarise its content and draw the reader in.

5.2   Tips for writing summaries

- **Every content page should have a lead paragraph** – normally this is a short paragraph of of text, but a table of content (see section 3.2 about using lists) can also act as a summary.

- The summary should be **styled to stand out visually**.

- Keep summaries **brief** and **factual**.

- For stories with a human angle, **anectdotes** can sometimes make good introductions to catch the reader's interest.

Task

➢ Compare and contrast the way the following sites use summaries for their content:

- www.bbc.co.uk/news

- www.theguardian.co.uk

- www.bhf.org.uk/heart-health/prevention.aspx

Practice exercise

➢ In the 'Practice Exercises' document, complete **Task 8 Breaking down content into manageable chunks**

Task 6 Be credible, trustworthy and engaging

Objectives   To write engaging content and to enhance its credibility and trustworthiness.

Comments   Your Faculty Web and Marketing officers in the Public Relations Office can help with tone of voice.

Accuracy and reliability

Credibility and trustworthiness can take a long time to build, but can be quickly undone through lack of attention to details. Remember that your web page will be seen by thousands of people, so take lots of care over what you write!

6.1   Tips

- Make sure the information on your website is **up-to-date** and **correct**.

- Check **grammar and spelling** – *accomodation* [✖] or *accommodation* [✓]? *commitee* [✖], *comittee* [✖] or *committee* [✓]?

- **Be consistent**: make sure your copy complies with the **University house style guide** (www.bristol.ac.uk/visualidentity/house-style.html).

- **Give credit** where credit is due; when quoting provide a direct link to the source.

- Provide references and links to relevant sources (see section 4.4) to back up your claims.

- Always check your facts and claims.

Annoying and distracting language

We have already mentioned **clichés** and **buzzwords** as a potential source of confusion and misunderstanding (see section 4.2), but another reason for avoiding such words is that they can make your readers cringe and erode your credibility and reputation.

6.2   Tips for avoiding annoying and distraction language:

- **Substance not spin!** – well-written, interesting, useful and accurate information is preferable to boastful, unsubstantiated and potentially inaccurate claims.

- Aside from **clichés** and **buzzwords**, avoid **fashionable words/expressions** (e.g. *guestimate*; *upskill*; *long tail*; *empower*), **americanisms** (e.g. *touch base*; *24/7*; *authored*; *truck*; *movie*) and **slang** (e.g. *botched*; *take time out*; *dog's breakfast*) in your web copy.

Task

➢ Read the following extracts taken from the websites of three web design companies.

Which company would you be most likely to give your business to? Why?

Company X

> **Company X is a full service Web development company** located in the city of [name of city]. We are committed to educating and assisting small and medium businesses (SMB) identify Internet-based, website solutions to enable e-commerce and effective marketing of their business online.
>
> We have over 15 years of expereince working with web projects. We

combine innovative design with efficient code structure, resulting in improved search engine results and increased accessibility and Web usability. Using the latest technologies, we specialize in creating clean, simple, fast and effective websites that conform to W3C (World Wide Web Consortium) standards.

Call us today to learn more - **949-370-0948**

Company X is owned and operated by CompanyQ.com, a Web services innovation company. CompanyQ.com services range from graphic design, architectural grpahics (CAD), custom web applciation development, database design and creation, Flash design and database itnegration, web marketing (SEO/SEM), to business process automation for small to medium-sized companies.

Company Y

Company Y is a web design agency based in [name of city]. Our strength is creating affordable websites for a range of clients, from small and medium sized businesses, to community organisations and individuals, which are also attractive, original and user friendly.

Company Y Services

We like to get to know our clients and find out what makes them tick, so that the website we build for them is not just functional but **reflects their business outlook.** Whether you require a static brochure site, a content managed website (CMS) or an increased web presence, we can offer a web solution tailored to your project.

Professional Designs to Promote your Business

We listen to our clients and what they want, whilst always trying to offer ideas and solutions that you may not have thought of. We work closely with you to develop **a web site solution that will enhance your business** and generate maximum search engine exposure.

Company Z

Company Z International prides itself on helping both small and large businesses to get an attractive online presence by designing great websites. We are professionals who have delivered stellar projects to global clients. We service all business sectors at very competitive rates. Our strength lies in innovation through out-of-the-box thinking and commitment to quality.

Our services are as follows:

- ✓ CMS Intergration
- ✓ eCommerce Solution
- ✓ XHTML Conversion
- ✓ SEO
- ✓ Blog Setup
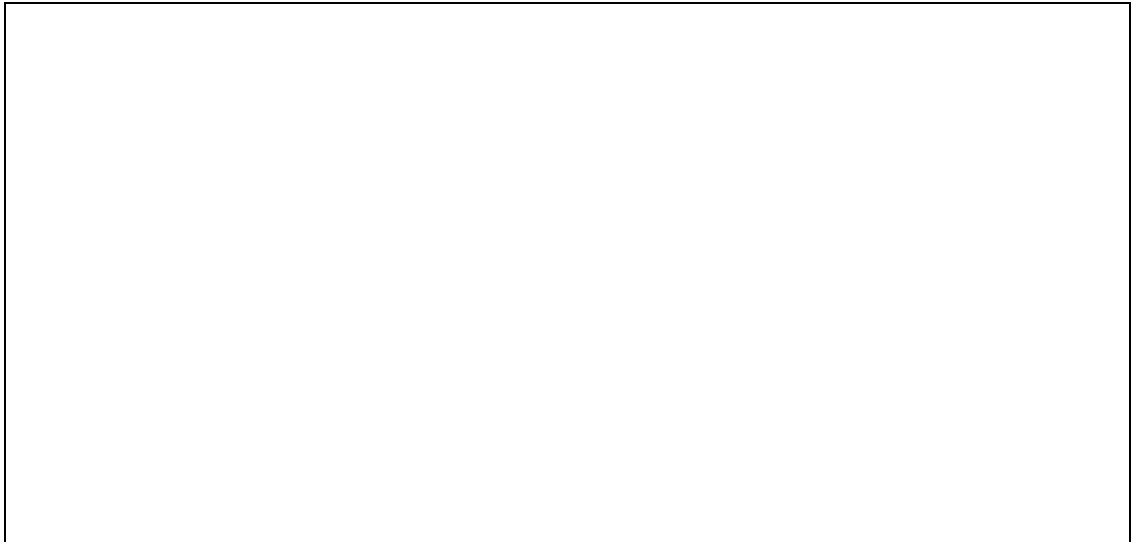
Tone of voice

Tone of voice refers to **how** we express **what** we write and say. Whereas what we say is dictated by what we do, our principles, values and aspirations, how we say it is informed by our personality as well as the impression we want to make and the image we want to project.

6.3   Tips for tone of voice:

- Remember that the **focus** of every web page should be **on the customer** (i.e. your target reader), not the University.

- Think of your **web pages as a conversation** between you (as representing the University) and your reader – use 'we' and 'you' to refer to the University and the reader whenever appropriate.

- Be **friendly** (i.e. inclusive, welcoming, supportive and unpretentious) while remaining **professional** and **authoritative**.

- Try to include **testimonials/comments** from internal experts and also customers.

- Work with colleagues to get a uniform style and tone.

Task

➢ Compare and contrast the tone of voice in the following pages:

- University of Leeds > Undergraduates > Choosing Leeds (tinyurl.com/cqv5yjv)

- Brunel University London > Courses > Open Days > Virtual Open Day > Why Choose Brunel? (tinyurl.com/ctc5m76)
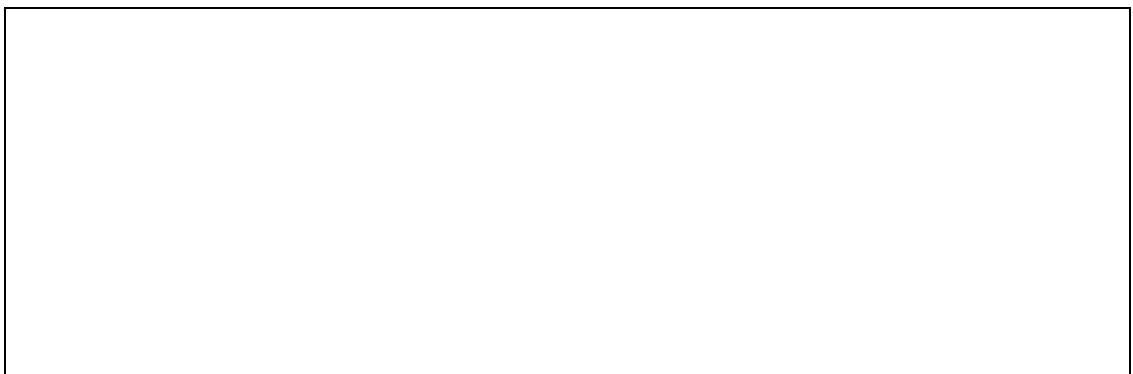
The power of stories

> *"...if a picture is worth a thousand words, a story is worth a thousand pictures."*
>
> Terrence L. Gargiulo[10]

Stories are about **relating events** from the point of view of **people**. As such, they don't seek to relate how things actually happen, but rather how the people involved experience them.

Stories are a powerful way of bringing facts and events to life, and to arouse the interest of readers. We tend to remember stories better than drily presented facts and figures.

Ultimately, they are about **change** from an existing to a new situation.

Stories usually consist of the following steps:

1. Opening
2. Trigger
3. Development
4. Climax
5. Resolution

Task

➢ Think of a film or play are familiar with and try to identify the 5 steps identified above.

Title: _____

Opening	
Trigger	
Development	
Climax	
Resolution	

---

[10] Framework for story-based consulting (http://www.scribd.com/doc/60269088/Framework-for-Story-Based-Consulting)

6.4 Tips for using stories:

- Use stories to illustrate a topic or the point you want to make.

- Use stories when you want to create an **emotional response** in your reader (e.g. inspiring, affecting, reaching out).

- Stories are particularly good for marketing (e.g. student stories) and public engagement (e.g. research stories) activities.

- Get the people concerned to write them – ensuring that you check and edit before publishing.

- Use a blog to write stories.

- Stories can also be told using audio-visual technologies (e.g. videos).

Task – When drowning does not look like drowning

➢ Open the page mariovittone.com/2010/05/154/ in a browser. Read it and consider the following questions.

What is the main message? How is the topic introduced? Does it fit the Inverted Pyramid model? How effective do you think it is?

Task 7 Ensuring quality

Objectives   To reflect on how to ensure quality from draft to published states and beyond.

Comments   You haven't finished writing until you have edited, revised and proofread your work, and made sure that it is fit for publication (within UoB standards and statutory accessibility requirements).

Think of writing as an iterative process

For many of us writing can be a daunting prospect which often results in some form of 'writer's block'. One of the main reasons is that we tend to aim for perfection at our first attempt. This in turn causes anxiety, even fear, which prevents us from taking the jump and inevitably leads to procrastination.

The key to breaking this vicious circle is to approach **writing as an iterative process**; in other words starting small and building on it through a series of iterations. This is similar to the way a painter approaches a new painting: starting with rough sketches which gradually gain in definition, until the application of colours can begin, layer after layer until the painting is deemed finished.

7.1   Tips for writing iteratively:

- Regularly set some **quiet time for writing** and stick to it, eventually you will overcome your writer's block.

- **Say what you are trying to write** as if you were trying to explain it to somebody standing in front of you – record it!

- **Don't be too hard on yourself**, accept that you will not produce a perfect draft at your first attempt.

- Start by sketching out your copy and flesh it out as you revise it.

- A good way to start is to think of what you are trying to say (i.e. your message) and **think of the questions readers will want answered**. Use these questions as the main sub-headers (i.e. `<h2>`) and fill in the gaps.

- **Read your work, revise it**, read it again, revise it again and so on until it is **fit for purpose** (i.e. effectively communicates its intended message to its intended audience) - remember that publishing a web page is sending an email to thousands of people!

Check, review and edit your work

Although you do this throughout the writing process, it is worth having a final, thorough check once you think you have finished. You should be your first own critic, but you should also involve others.

7.2   Tips for checking, reviewing and editing your work:

- **Allow your final draft to rest for a day or two**, the next time you look at it you will read it with fresh eyes (when we are too close to something we often don't notice obvious flaws).

- **Check for spelling and grammatical errors** – spell-checkers are there to be used!

- **Check your links** – Do they work? Is the link text meaningful?

- **Check your facts** – Where do they come from? Are they accurate, valid and from a reliable source?

- Check that it **complies with University standards and house style guide** (see www.bristol.ac.uk/visualidentity/house-style.html).

- **Test the readability of your pages** using an automated tool like The Readability Test Tool (see task below).

- **Ask others** (e.g. colleagues, friends and if possible members of the intended audience) to read it and comment – Is the key message clear? Are the style and tone of voice appropriate?

- **Keep a lid on your ego!** – be open to criticism, and when writing on behalf of the University, **readers should hear the University voice**, not yours (however it's ok to write with your own voice when appropriate, e.g. for a personal blog).

- **Plan future revisions** – your content may be accurate and valid at the time of writing, but will it be in 3, 6 or 12 months time?

Task – Test the readability of your pages

➢ Open **The Readability Test Tool**, (www.read-able.com) in a browser.

➢ Find a web page you want to test (from a website you maintain or are familiar with – make sure the page is long enough to get meaningful results).

1. First copy and paste its address (URI) in the **Test by URI** box (default). Make a note of the results.

2. Next, select and copy the content of the page you just tested, and paste it in the **Test by Direct Input** box. Again make a note of the results.

Here is an example test for the **Why choose Bristol?** page (www.bristol.ac.uk/why-bristol):

This page has an average grade level of about 10.

It should be easily understood by 15 to 16 year olds.

Tweet this result!

👍 Like 291 people like this. Sign Up to see what your friends like.

Readability Indices

Flesch Kincaid Reading Ease	54.4	
Flesch Kincaid Grade Level	8.7	
Gunning Fog Score	10.6	
SMOG Index	8.3	
Coleman Liau Index	14.5	
Automated Readability Index	8.8	

Text Statistics

No. of sentences	77
No. of words	924
No. of complex words	156
Percent of complex words	16.88%
Average words per sentence	12.00
Average syllables per word	1.66

Figure 3 – Readability results, test by URI

This page has an average grade level of about 13.

It should be easily understood by 18 to 19 year olds.

Tweet this result!

Like   291 people like this. Sign Up to see what your friends like.

Readability Indices

Flesch Kincaid Reading Ease	47.8	
Flesch Kincaid Grade Level	11.7	
Gunning Fog Score	14.1	
SMOG Index	10.5	
Coleman Liau Index	14.3	
Automated Readability Index	13	

Text Statistics

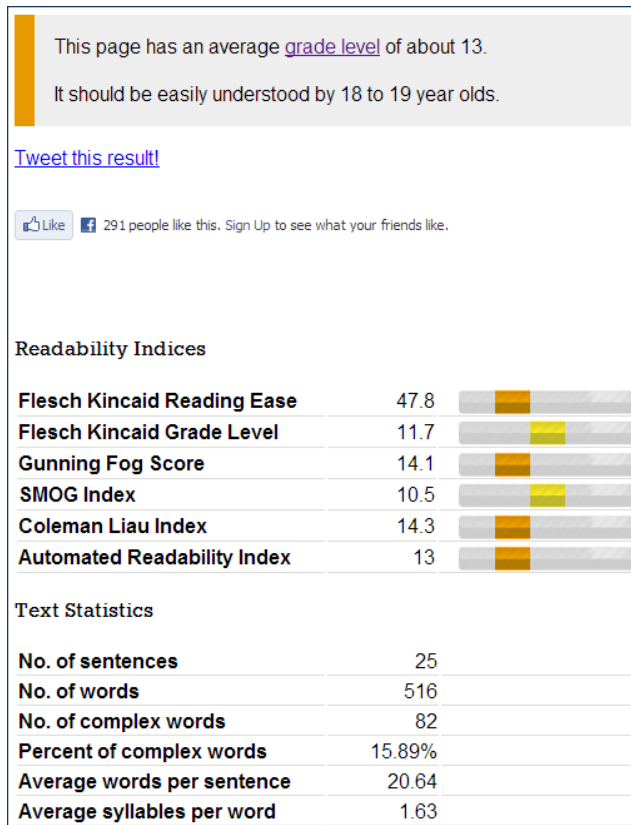|	
No. of sentences	25
No. of words	516
No. of complex words	82
Percent of complex words	15.89%
Average words per sentence	20.64
Average syllables per word	1.63

Figure 4 - Readability results, test by direct input

➢ Did you get a similar difference (i.e. the direct input showing as more difficult to read)? Why do you think that is?

Interpreting the results

As well as giving basic statistical information (e.g. number of words and sentences, average words per sentence, etc), the tool provides more specific measures to assess the readability of the page. The most popular are:

- **Gunning Fog Index:** a rough measure of how many years of schooling it would take someone to understand the content (aim for a score of between 8 and 12).

- **Flesch Reading Ease:** an index number that rates the text on a 100-point scale (aim for a score of between 60 and 70).

- **Flesch-Kincaid Grade:** similar to the Gunning Fog Indes, a rough measure of how many years of schooling it would take someone to understand the content (aim for 6 to 7).

For more information on these indices, you may want to read:

- *Clear Writing: How to Achieve and Measure Readability,* The Writing Clinic, Postscripts [02/11/2006] (notorc.blogspot.com/2006/09/devils-in-details-measuring.html)

- *Gunning Fog Index*, Wikipedia (bris.ac.uk/slink/t5te)

- *Flesch-Kincaid Readability Test*, Wikipedia (bris.ac.uk/slink/ycph)

Appendix A   About web accessibility

> Web accessibility is about making sure that **everyone** can use the web **regardless of disability** or what browsing technology they are using.

Why web accessibility matters?

7.3   Plain common sense!

Accessible website:

- perform better,
- are more search engine friendly,
- are easier to maintain,
- are easier to use.

7.4   A legal requirement

Making websites accessible is a legal requirement that is covered by the *Equality Act 2010[11]*.

Although the act does not specifically refer to the World Wide Web, it *"imposes a duty to make reasonable adjustments"* for disabled persons. It requires that a person with disabilities must not be put at a *"substantial disadvantage"* compared to a non-disabled person. When this requirement *"relates to the provision of information"*, reasonable steps consist in ensuring that *"the information is provided in an accessible format."*

7.5   Quality standards in Higher Education

The *Quality Assurance Agency's Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality in higher education* was integrated into the QAA audit scheme in 2001.

Section 3: Disabled students[12] states:

> *"Websites and any other sources of computer-based information for prospective students, current students and alumni should be designed according to professional standards of accessibility. Gaining knowledge of these standards should be part of the professional development of relevant staff in the institution."*

Accessibility and usability

Too often web accessibility tends to focus on technical aspects and conformance to standards at the expense of the human interaction aspect.

This is why, when we assess the **accessibility** of a website we also need to assess its **usability**, in order to achieve "usable accessibility"[13]. In fact, accessibility can be seen as a subset of usability.

7.6   Accessibility

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[11] http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents
[12] http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Code-of-practice-Section-3.aspx
[13] http://www.uiaccess.com/upa2002a.html

Accessibility means **making it possible** for people (particularly the disabled) to access and use something (e.g. a public building, a website). It is about **enabling** people and **increasing the number of readers**.

An accessibility issue on your website is likely to exclude people in one or more disability group from accessing its content.

7.7 Usability

Usability means providing a user interface that is **effective**, **efficient**, and **satisfying**. It is about **enhancing** the user experience and **increasing reader satisfaction**.

Any usability issue on your website is likely to cause difficulties for all readers, but exponentially more so for those with a disability affecting their access to web content.

Note According to Jakob Nielsen, usability is defined by five quality components[14]:

✓ **learnability** – How easy is the website to use?

✓ **memorability** – Will visitors remember how to use the site on their next visit?

✓ **effectiveness** – Can visitors easily navigate through the site, determine what to do next and understand the content?

✓ **efficiency** – Can visitors find what they want in a reasonable time?

✓ **satisfaction** – How enjoyable is the site to use?

Task – The accessible and usable library

➢ Think of a **library**:

What makes it accessible?	What makes it usable?

➢ Can you think of examples where this distinction applies to a website?

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[14] Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox, 25th August 2003 – http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20030825.html

You probably identified the following characteristics:

What makes it accessible?	What makes it usable?
The presence of: • ramps • automatic doors • lifts • clear signage (font size/type, location, colours) • wide aisles • library assistant (is there one when needed?) • alternative formats (e.g. audio, braille, large font, etc)	• cataloguing system (should be familiar, e.g. by topic, audience, etc) • clear organisation • layout • signage (labelling) • pleasant atmosphere (lighting, seating, etc) • library assistant (how approachable and knowledgeable are they?) • a good search facility

In the purest sense, checking for accessibility tends to be a box-ticking exercise, and it does not tell how easy to use these features are (e.g. a ramp might be too steep, making it difficult to climb for someone who uses a wheelchair).

This is why it is crucial to ensure that they are usable as well as accessible. A good example of this is signage, which can meet the accessibility requirements from a purely visual perspective (i.e. it has large, clear font, good colour contrast, etc) but fail on usability (if the labelling – the text – is ambiguous or confusing). People are also more inclined to come and spend time in a library if it is welcoming and offers a pleasant environment, and if they can find what they want.

Potential accessibility issues on the web include using colour combinations that make it difficult to read for some categories of visually impairments, or using images to present navigational element without providing a textual equivalent (a problem for a blind person using a screen reader). Web readers also rely on good organisation and clear navigation (i.e. signage) to help them find what they want on a website. They are also more likely to revisit the websites that give them a pleasant experience.

Types of disability[15]

Visual impairments

Visual impairments cover a wide range of disabilities including blindness, low vision and colour blindness.

Blindness

Blind web readers access the content of websites through **screen reader software**, a type of software that reads aloud the textual content of web pages and provides text alternative to visual content (e.g. images). Also, they will be using their keyboard rather than a mouse to navigate around the site.

Low vision

Depending on the severity of their condition, people with low vision may rely on screen magnification software (either the one supplied with their operating system or a commercial product) to help them read the content of web pages. Those with less

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[15] http://www.web-accessibility.co.uk/types-of-disability.asp

severe conditions (including age related vision loss) may simply require the ability to control text size through their browser.

Colour blindness

The most common form of colour blindness is the incapacity to distinguish between red and green. However there are many other forms such as blue/yellow deficiency.

Hearing impairments

Hearing impairments range from **mild hearing loss** to **profound hearing loss** (deafness). The main issue for individuals with hearing losses is that they cannot access content that relies on sound, such as video and audio files (e.g. podcasts).

Also, readers who were born deaf may experience reading difficulties.

Mobility impairments

Mobility impairments cover a wide array of disabilities, including those resulting from accidents or injuries (e.g. quadriplegia, loss of limb, Repetitive Strain Injury), and diseases or congenital conditions (e.g. cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, arthritis, etc)

People with mobility impairments may have no or limited use of their upper limbs, and lack fine motor control. Consequently they may be unable to use a mouse or a keyboard (although some may be able to press one key at a time).

A whole range of assistive technologies is available to users with mobility impairments, including voice-activation software, mouth sticks, eye-tracking devices, etc.

Cognitive and learning impairments

People with cognitive or learning disabilities include those with dyslexia, short-term memory deficit, Asperger's Syndrome, acquired brain injury, etc. What they have in common is **difficulty in reading and understanding written text**.

Appendix B   University of Bristol web audiences

What are they looking for? And what do they want to do?

Before you start to write, check if this information already exists somewhere on the University's website. If it does, link to it rather than duplicate it. The Faculty Web and New Media Officer can advise you with this. You can also refer to the personas for more detailed information about how our audiences behave when they come to our website.

External

- **Global research community (researchers, other HEIs, funding councils)**
  Research achievements and breakthroughs, UoB and dept research profiles, news, events, employment opportunities…

- **Home and international prospective students (research postgraduates, taught postgraduates and undergraduates)**
  Why Bristol?; course details; entry requirements; how to apply; student, research and teaching staff profiles; faculty/school profiles; Open days; UCAS fairs; campus life etc.

- **Prospective students' opinion formers/influencers (parents/carers, schools; career advisors)**
  Overlaps with above, plus graduation events.

- **Alumni and friends**
  Ways of keeping in touch, how to help UoB's continued success, latest UoB developments, events, news.

- **Business and industry**
  Collaborative opportunities, research profiles, services, knowledge transfer etc

- **Local and regional community**
  Engagement opportunities, schools outreach, consultancy services and other expert help, local developments, events and activities.

- **Media**
  Achievements, breakthroughs, expertise directory, contacts.

- **General public**
  Engagement opportunities, latest news, events, activities, conference and tourism info, employment opportunities, access to services and facilities like sports centre etc.

- **Government bodies**
  Research achievements and breakthroughs, other??

Internal

Consider options such as an intranet or Blackboard for internal audiences. It creates confusion for external audiences to have this kind of information alongside promotional web pages. It also looks unprofessional.

- **Current students (home and international undergraduates, and taught and research postgraduates)**
  Academic support (IT, library, e-learning), services (health, student help, accomm, finance, counselling, careers, etc), news and events.

- **Staff (academic and non-academic)**
  Key information, holidays, salaries, policies, procedures, internal services. Plus for academics: e-learning, teaching and research support.

Appendix C   Resources

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On the web:

A regularly updated list of online resources relevant to this course can be found at:
www.delicious.com/uobittraining/web writing

Books

Krug, Steve (2000) *Don't make me think*; New Riders

McGovern Gerry (2006) *Killer web content: Make the sale, deliver the service, build the brand*; A&C Black

McGovern, G. Norton, R. & O'Dowd, C. (2002) *The web content style guide: An essential reference for online writers, editors and managers*; FT Prentice Hall

McGovern, G. & Norton, R. (2002) Content critical: Gaining competitive advantage through high-quality web content; FT Prentice Hall

Redish, Janice (2007) *Letting go of the words: Writing Web Content that Works*; Morgan Kaufmann