

Briefing Document: How to write for the web

When people visit websites, they really don't want to have to read too much to find the information they need. Research has shown that visitors to web pages usually only scan the text – they don't read it as they would read a book or newspaper. In fact, someone has found out that decisions about whether to spend time on a website are made in the first 50 milliseconds after arriving! That isn't very long! So you need to make sure your website doesn't put visitors off by having too much text that is difficult to read.

Hints for writing for the web

- Write half as much as you would if you were writing hard copy (material that someone would print and read, such as an essay).
- If you have a lot to say, use **hypertext** (See **How to use basic HTML**) and **hyperlinks**. For example, if you wanted to explain something in more detail, turn the key term you want to explain into a hyperlink and link to a different page that has the explanation. This is the way the Glossary works on The Agency site.
- Whenever you can, use bullet points. This works really well by presenting spaced out information that can be clearly seen. Look at the examples below – these give bad, good and better ways of writing some text

London is filled with internationally recognised attractions that draw large crowds of people every year. In 2005, the most popular places were the Houses of Parliament (45,000 visitors), Greenwich (395,000 visitors), Buckingham Palace (340,000 visitors)...

Bad example

In 2005, five of the best-attended attractions in London where the Houses of Parliament, Greenwich, Buckingham Palace, St Paul's Cathedral and Piccadilly Circus.

Better example

In 2005, five of the most-visited places in London were

- The Houses of Parliament
- Greenwich
- Buckingham Palace
- St Paul's Cathedral
- Piccadilly Circus

Best example

- The tendency for people to scan web pages rather than read them means you need to grab their attention as quickly as you can. Use titles and headings that are meaningful (that really reflect the content that follows). Use emphasis (bold) when you really want to make a point and make good use of hyperlinks if you want to elaborate a point. Hyperlinks are well used by visitors to sites – they like clicking through a site and seeing something new.
- Use plain language expressed in short sentences. Don't try to be too clever or make jokes that might only be understood by your own age group! There are age-related uses of words that should be avoided, because not everyone will understand what you mean. For example, many older people think 'fit' still means someone who exercises a lot!
- Chunk your information into sections or paragraphs, but don't make them too long. If you can, use themes that can be described in headings. For example, if you're creating a biopic of a music star, you might want to divide the information into chunks that reflect his or her likes and dislikes. You might have favourite movies, favourite food, 'what I like to do when relaxing', and so on.
- If you are presenting lots of facts and figures to make people give to your good cause in Project 2, break these up into tables or use bullet points. Put the key figures up front so visitors don't need to look too hard to find them.
- Check your spelling, grammar and punctuation. Visitors will be put off if you have spelt words wrongly or expressed yourself clumsily. I leave websites as soon as I see an apostrophe in the wrong place! The impression is that poor grammar and use of punctuation usually means the content won't be very good either. Ask someone to proof read (look through) your content if you're not good at picking up your own mistakes.
- You are the author of your own website content and that means you have to take responsibility for it. Cutting and pasting from other sites is not really an acceptable way to generate content – in fact, it could be classed as plagiarism (copying someone else's material) or breach of copyright. You should prepare all the content yourself specifically for the main purpose of the site. Understanding your audience is really important here (see **How to assess an audience** for some help).