

COMPOSING AND SHAPING OF WEB TEXT

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Annotation: *Designing and creation of a Web page is like production of a book. It's a creative work, involving many a task like writing, maintenance of style, designing, adding of pictures and graphs, and shaping up the appearance. In the same line, the Web page offers scope for conveying and communicating information using a variety of options including text, graphics, photos, video, sound, animation, and link to other sites. In this article, we shall, however, confine to discussion on composing and shaping of Web text.*

Keywords and expressions: *Web sites; information; reading materials; scanning; web users; creditability; Web Page.*

Readers' Approach to Online Pages

Reading habit of Web users should be kept in mind while writing the text. Before reading a book in full, a reader would have already made a cursory look and determined to go ahead. However, the case of Web reading is different. He is not sure whether any among the plethora of sites he visits and documents therein will be relevant to his requirement. Hence, he will not spend time going through every document in Web sites. As a result, strategies have been evolved in quickly assessing the Web sites as to whether the Web in question serves his purpose. If anyone is found useful/relevant, he will settle down to read the item page by page. We shall discuss in this section some of the strategies.

One reads every day for various purposes like enjoyment, information or for doing a job. Newspapers, magazines, fictions, textbooks, mails, journals, online documents, Web pages etc constitute the reading materials. People adopt different strategies of reading without being really aware of them. The important techniques followed are word-by-word reading, skimming and scanning. In Web reading it's the last two that are followed. You resort to scanning if you are searching for information. Skimming is done when one is exploring/reviewing a matter. However, people often mistake skimming and scanning as search techniques. They are, in fact, reading techniques only.

Skimming. Skimming is the process of reading only main ideas within a document to get an overall impression of the content. It is applied when you are confronted with a lot to read within a limited time. In the same vein skimming can be used to assess whether a resource document would be of any use for you research/further close study.

There are many techniques applied in skimming. One is reading the first and last paragraphs, or the headings and summaries. Another way is to read the title, sub-title, sub-heading and illustrations. Noticing pictures, charts, or graphs, italicized or boldface words or phrases, words in the blurb of a book or the preface or table of contents can also pass as skimming for information. Another strategy may be to read the first sentence of each paragraph.

In other words, skimming can quickly identify the major ideas of a text. The high speed is possible because skimming is estimated to have three to four times the speed of normal reading. Thus skimming is not reading for comprehension of the content but for getting an impression about the text. For the same reason skimming is practiced in Web reading as one is not sure about the utility of the content at the outset. On realizing the utility of a material after skimming, one may resort to word-by-word reading, as done with textbooks or serious documents or research outputs

Scanning. Scanning is a reading technique that is used when you want to find specific information quickly. If I am interested in finding the number of public libraries in the state of Kerala, I read a passage or item only for the purpose of finding that answer, ignoring unrelated information. It's like scanning to locate your friend in a crowd, ignoring all other faces.

Scanning is quickly moving your eyes through the text to locate specific word or a phrase or ideas. It's similar to looking up the dictionary for a specific word or looking for information in reference book.

In Web reading people resort to scanning as a strategy for the same reason as explained earlier on skimming. You are not sure whether the Web under consideration will meet your requirement and also you need to do it fast as many such pages/resource documents need to be assessed.

Once you find the information you were looking for, and thereby establish the resource document as useful in answering your requirement, you may resort to skimming to get an over all impression about the document or go for full-text reading. While skimming it, if you find a particular one as the right document, you may go for a thorough reading to meet the purpose, which may be for enjoyment, information or for getting a job done.

Textual Elements of Web Page: Guidelines

It is an accepted fact that reading online takes more time than otherwise. According to a study conducted by Jacob Nielsen of the Nielsen Norman Group, reading a book on any electronic devices whether it's Kindle or iPod, takes longer time than reading the standard paper version of the same book. Also one is not sure what he reads will be of use at the end. Hence most online readers are compulsory scanners or skimmers who skim Web pages rather than the read word-by-word.

Even systematic readers also would love to have special online reading structures in the text so that they do not have to slow down picking their way through the pages.

Writing for Web, so, is different from that for print. Hence, the Web designer should have in depth knowledge on how to compose and shape web text. Following are guidelines for creation of textual elements for the Web:

Chunk the Information

Web readers dislike long pages and irrelevant segments of information. They prefer to have the pages structured in order to access information direct and easily. One way is to provide information in short chunks to facilitate location and scanning.

Chunking is the method of presenting information which splits concepts into small pieces or chunks so that they can be understood faster and easier. Opposite of chunking is reading consequently, where all the information is given in continuity and one reads from one end to another. In research and administrative documents reading consequently may not be required and, hence, the demand for chunks of information in Web pages.

Chunking of information goes well with Web for many a reason. Concise chunks of information are better suited for computer screens as they (screens) provide limited view of long documents. Scrolling through pages is not liked generally as readers tend to forget the scrolled screen leading to their disorientation. In case of long text they prefer to take print or save on to disk for comfortable reading later.

Instead of providing all information on a topic on a page, it is advised to break up the body of the information to logical parts, provide each with its own page and connect them with links. In this situation the reader can skip from one chunk to another easily without having to read sequentially. However, on the flip side of it one should take care not to break long documents arbitrarily. It should be done intelligently so that each page will contain comprehensive information. The users should have direct access to topics that are interested in and do not have to wade through irrelevant materials.

Make Texts easily Scannable. One golden rule in Web style is that the text should be done in an easily scannable form.

Jacob Nielsen research on how users read on the Web showed that people scan the Web pages, picking out individual words and sentences. He found that 75 percent of the test users always scanned any new page they came across and only 16 per cent read word-by-word.

In other words, Web users want actionable contents that meet his requirements immediately. The search is not casual/random but specific. It is a solution - hunting

approach. It is entirely different from expectations from print publications like newspaper or magazines where words may be spiced up with narratives and anecdotes and examples. In the case of Web such approach is not appreciated as it comes in way of getting to the information fast.

In this context, it should be concluded that Web pages should focus on scannable text and employ following style/rules;

- a. Highlight keywords (hypertext, use differing type face or color)
- b. Use meaningful sub-headings
- c. Utilize bulleted lists
- d. Employ one idea per paragraph (first few words of the paragraph are important)
- e. Apply the inverted pyramid style. The inverted style starts with the conclusion. It is akin to style of the journalists who start their article by stating the conclusions and then provide the background information. It is all the more applicable in Web as users are reluctant to scroll and, hence, tend to read only top part of the article.
- f. Use fragments of sentences with information-carrying key words (in place of full sentences) because it is estimated that Web users read only 18 per cent of the verbiage.

The F-shaped Pattern for Reading. Jacob Nielsen studies show that users read Web contents in an F- shaped pattern. Users usually read the upper part of the content area in a horizontal movement. Next, the eyes move down the page a bit and read across horizontally (a second time) and finally the eyes hover over the document's left side in a vertical movement. The implications are: a) the first two paragraphs should state the most important information, and b) the latter part may employ sub-heads to paragraphs and also bullets with information carrying words as users tend to scan down the left side i. e the 3rd part of the F-behavior.

Creditability. Credibility is important in Web as to who is behind the page and whether the information provided can be trusted. This is a complex topic and may not be in the scope of this Unit. However, the thumb rules should be good writing (grammatically, in spelling, choice of words), utilization of higher quality graphic, and providing links to other sites implying thereby that the authors are not scared of information given elsewhere on the same subject. Exaggeration of facts is detested and considered as less trustful. People, in fact, want straight facts than exaggerated qualifications.

Use of Passive Voice. Use of passive voice in Web writing provides an edge over active voice. Passive voice directly represents action which enhances scannability. To illustrate this point, take the example of M/s Godrej Company that supplies library

stacks. Let us frame the statement in the following ways: 'M/s Godrej supplies library stacks' (active voice) and 'Library stacks are supplied by M/s Godrej' (passive voice). You will notice that the latter (passive voice) focuses on the library stacks and readers can arrive at 'library stacks' (the library is interested in the stacks than the supplier) easily.

For the same reason, a Web writer is advised to use positive statements (e. g: M/s Informatics deals in journal subscription) rather negative sentences (e. g: M/s Informatics does not deal in journal subscription) as the user has to make an effort to grasp the implication of the sentence or at times misses it altogether.

Conclusion

The text and writing for Web pages should be concise, scannable and objective. According to a study conducted by John Makers and Jacob Nielsen in 1977 a sample Web site scored 58 per cent higher in measured usability when it was written concisely, 47 per cent higher when the text was scannable, and 27 per cent higher when it was written in an objective style instead of the promotional style used in the control condition and many current Web pages. Combining these three changes into a single site that was concise, scannable, and objective at the same time resulted in 124 per cent higher measured usability.

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