Web writing basics for complex information

Writing for the web follows the basic rules of clear writing. However, web content has some specific requirements in structure and format, mainly due to how people use the web, and how search engines and AI platforms interact with online content.

Headings and structure

Write clear and informative headings. Headings and page titles are often displayed out of context on search engine results pages, so they must contain enough information for readers to identify the content. Start headings with keywords instead of *the*, *a* or *an*.

Place the most important or summary information in the first 2 paragraphs. This is an 'inverted pyramid' construction – rather than introducing and slowly building the story, load the most important information at the top of the page.

Write for scannability – create white space by using lists, subheadings and short paragraphs.

Language and length

Be succinct. Online readers skim content and will quickly abandon longwinded pages. If articles are long (1,000 words or more), add a short summary up front.

Write short paragraphs to make it easier to scan long blocks of text. Single-sentence paragraphs can draw attention to key points that might otherwise be buried. Bullet lists are useful.

Write in plain English – use the active voice and simple words that people can relate to.

Speak to readers, not at them. Have a conversation with readers, and help them engage by using I, we and us (check your organisation's style guide preferences).

Use numerals (1, 2, 3), not words (one, two, three) – numerals help people scan and identify numbers. When reading online, users scan the page for clues that might answer their question. If the answer they seek is a number, the numerals stand out on the page and are easier to identify.

Accessibility

Format the text using styles to tag content (e.g. headings, lists, bold or italic text). Use heading levels in sequential hierarchy (i.e. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5), without skipping any.

Create proper tables – enter your table as a table (not tabbed text, text frames or an image). Specify header rows, and keep the structure of the table as simple as possible. Do not use subheading rows. Do not rely on colour to convey meaning – use text as well.

Ensure visual contrast in graphs, figures and images. Use an online colour contrast checker to test your colour combinations against Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) standards.

Provide alternative (alt) text for all meaningful nontext elements (figures, maps, photos, etc). Alt text should provide an overall description of the contents and message of the picture. Mark any nonessential images as decorative so they're ignored by screen readers (e.g. header and footer graphics).

Search engine optimisation (SEO)

Write clear, unique and informative metadescriptions. The metadescription appears on search engine results pages, and when URLs are shared on social media sites. It needs to tell users what the page is about and encourage them to click through to the site.

Include keywords in all headings and page titles. This helps the search engine understand the content on the page and how relevant it is to the search query. Do not stuff content with keywords – this undermines the user experience and makes pages harder to read.

Speak the user's language and use simple terms that people are likely to search for – avoid cute headlines or made-up phrases.

Offer stable URLs. Ensure that other sites can link directly to each piece of content, and make sure links remain up to date and functional.

Generative engine optimisation (GEO)

GEO helps your content be found by AI models and included in AI answers to user searches and questions. Good structure, accessibility and SEO are all essential for GEO, and there are a few more things you can do to improve GEO.

Think about the specific questions that your users may be asking, and tailor content to respond. AI models look for content that matches the questions that users ask. Frontload information so the first sentence or 2 answers the question, then add extra detail.

Write 'self-contained' information – AI models will often use a statement from a source without rewording it, if it answers the user's prompt. Making your content as self-contained as possible will also help ensure your content is accurately captured in AI summaries.

Example

If your content is about the importance of backyard birdbaths, make sure the statement can stand alone when taken out of context.

Use:

- Birdbaths attract birds to your garden by providing reliable sources of fresh water.

Instead of:

- They attract birds to your garden by providing reliable sources of fresh water.

Use descriptive headings that clearly state what the section contains. Headings act as signposts for AI crawlers and help AI map your content to specific user queries.

It is sometimes recommended to structure your headings as questions to meet the needs of AI. However, question headings can make scanning content harder for human users and less effective for SEO. In most cases, making headings as clear and specific as possible will be just as effective as using question headings, and will meet the needs of human and AI users.