

10 **ways** **to Better Web Copy:**

A Quick Guide to Writing Effective Copy for Your Web Site
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10 Ways to Better Web Copy: *A Quick Guide to Writing Effective Copy for Your Web Site*

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The Challenge of Writing for the Web

In the mid-1990s when the Internet came along, I already had 20 years of corporate and freelance writing experience. The first few Web sites I wrote were pretty similar to the brochures I'd been writing for clients. But it soon became apparent that the Web was a whole new ballgame, and I would have to learn a new style of writing to help clients succeed in this exciting new medium.

Alas, it is still easy—more than a decade into the Internet era—to find Web sites where it's clear that the copywriter has yet to learn how to write effective Web copy. There are sites with dense copy that no one will ever read, sites that make no real attempt to provide useful information

for viewers, and sites full of hype and self-promotion. And often, all of this is capped off with poor grammar and a boatload of typos. Such mistakes result in a Web site with no credibility.

Whether you're writing copy for your first Web site or launching a new generation of an existing site, the tips in this e-book will help you create effective copy that is believable, enticing, and helpful to viewers. Included throughout these pages are links to resources I've found useful as I've learned how to write effective Web site copy.

Good luck and good writing!

1 Tip #1: Understand the connection between content and credibility.

[Stanford University's Web Credibility Project](#) has done extensive research about what makes a Web site credible to users. According to these researchers, Web credibility has two components: trustworthiness and expertise. If people judge a site to be truthful, unbiased and well intentioned, they will judge it to be trustworthy. Expertise is determined by whether people deem a site's content to come from people who are knowledgeable, competent and experienced.

The Stanford research looks at dozens of factors that impact credibility, many of which relate to content. Based on feedback from thousands of users, each factor is ranked with regard to how big a positive or a negative it is for building credibility.

Examples of factors related to content that are positive are:

- Adding an author's credentials with an article is a plus.
- Being specific about the source of information.
- Including a privacy policy.
- Providing a snail mail address.

Negatives include:

- Having outdated statistics.
- Promoting an event that is long past.
- Typos.
- Bad grammar.

If people do not think your site is credible, they won't take the action you want them to take. Follow the guidelines in the rest of this e-book to help build credibility for the content of your site. [The Consumer Reports WebWatch](#) site also is a good source for additional information on the topic of credibility and Web sites.

2 Tip #2: Realize that good writing needn't be expensive, but bad writing is always costly.

As you know from your own on-line habits, Web readers are extremely impatient. Lack of clarity, verbosity, grammatical errors, and typos will cause them to quickly move to the next site in their search engine results. This means the writing on your Web site had to be crisp and flawless. Also, the Web requires a different style of writing than most people are used to doing. For example, do you know how to use keywords to improve search engine optimization? An experienced Web writer does.

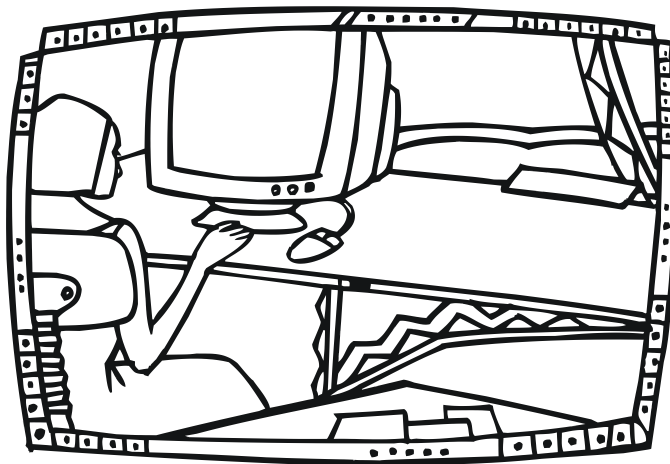
Have a professional write your Web site content if at all possible. However, if such an expense is absolutely outside of your budget, at least hire a professional to edit the copy you write. To do otherwise is to risk losing credibility with your site visitors.

There are many excellent tools on the Web to help you learn how to write good content. Here are sites that we've found to be extremely helpful:

- Usability.gov – This site was prepared by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to guide government Web site developers. It has a huge amount of useful information, not only on writing, but on all aspects of Web site creation.
- Jakob Nielsen's Web site – Jacob Nielsen is one of the true gurus of the Internet. We recommend subscribing to his weekly Alertbox newsletter, which provides insights into site usability. His tips often apply to content creation.

3 Tip #3: Start fresh; what you've written for your marketing brochure won't work on the Web.

Writing on the Web must be much tighter than other types of business writing. This is because 79% of people scan instead of actually reading word for word on the Internet, according to [Sun Microsystems guide for writing for the Web](#). People are

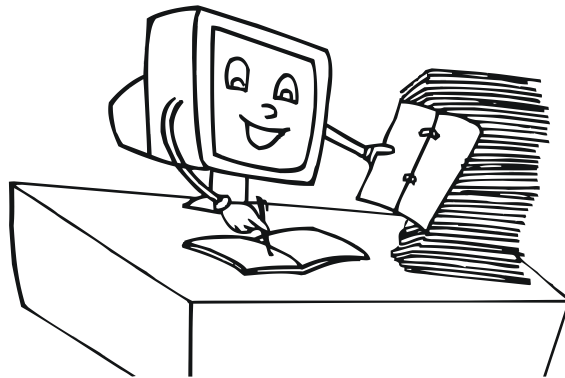


looking to find information quickly, whereas with a brochure or other printed material, they may read at a more leisurely pace.

Another big difference between printed material and a Web site is that that while people will begin reading a brochure from the front and move through to the back in an orderly fashion, with a Web site they can enter on any page. As a result, the content of each page has to be independent of the rest of the site because you can't count on people starting on your home page and then traveling all the way through the site.

4 Tip #4: Develop a Web personality.

People want to know there are real live people behind a Web site and therefore behind the organization they're considering giving business to. In your About section include brief bios and photos to make a person-to-person connection, But don't go overboard with sharing personal



information; include only details that are relevant to the topic of the Web site. Also, providing a physical address on the Contact page will help re-assure visitors that there is a real organization behind the Web site, as does providing information about such things as your memberships in professional organizations.

Another way to help people feel comfortable that they're dealing with real live people is to bring a bit of your personality to your site. This is easier to do if you're self-employed or there are only a few people involved in the organization behind the site. But even a large company has a personality that is expressed in its corporate culture and branding. Make sure these elements show in the writing and carry through to the design elements as well.

5 Tip #5: Keep it simple.

The best Web writing is simple writing. This is not the place for long, complex sentences or for showing off a fancy vocabulary. Here are generally accepted guidelines for creating simple, compelling Web copy:

- Use half the word count or less than non-Web writing. Impatient Web readers won't wait around to wade through wordy copy.
- Highlight keywords to catch the eye of users who are scanning instead of reading.
- Use lots of easy-to-understand subheads; these also help draw in people who are scanning.
- Use bulleted or numbered lists. Again, such lists are attention-getters.
- Use one idea per paragraph. Keep paragraphs short, no longer than six sentences. Long paragraphs are not conducive to easy reading on a computer screen.
- Make first sentences descriptive to help slow down visitors who are skimming.
- Write in inverted pyramid style, starting with the most important information first. This is how journalists write. They put the “who, what, when, where and why” in the first few paragraphs and the least important information at the end of their story so it is easy for editors to know where to cut. Following this style is quite useful on the Web.

6 Tip #6: Make it easy for your visitors to understand your copy and for search engines to find it.

Don't use overly clever headlines. When people are reading quickly through your site, they don't have time to figure out your favorite pun or some other clever word usage. Avoid "marketese," jargon or made-up words that aren't search-engine friendly.

If you're using a new term to establish your brand, always define it in terms that people already know and use—including the keywords they're likely to type into a search engine. Finally, use abbreviations and acronyms sparingly; most people are not going to use these in search engines.



7 Tip #7: Create a style guide and use it!

A style guide sets standards for language usage, capitalization, punctuation and other aspects of writing. Establishing such a guide before you start writing is vital because your site's credibility can be damaged if the language is used differently throughout the site. Equally important, as your Web site is added to over time, make sure new contributors follow your standard style. This supports credibility.

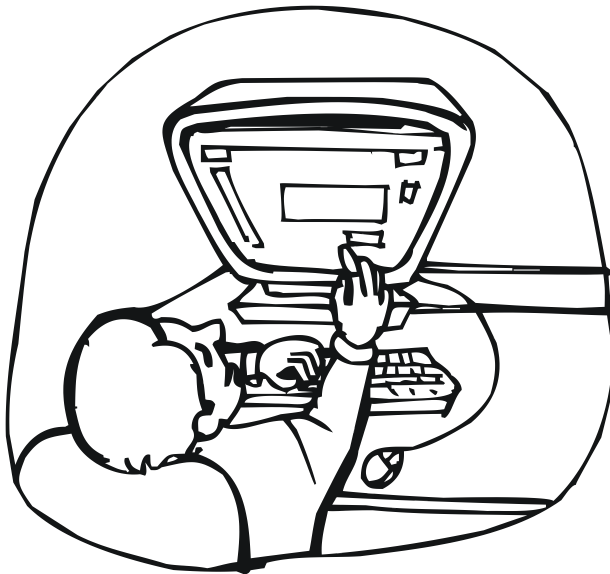
Here's an example of a style guide put together by [Carnegie Mellon](#). Yours doesn't have to be this extensive, but this sample will give you some good ideas about what you may want to include in your own style guide.



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Tip #8: Provide value-added content.

Surveys show that if Web site visitors see nothing of use on a Web site after three visits, on average, they won't return. Make sure you're providing value-added content full of useful, credible information that people will want to revisit... perhaps even bookmark or share with others.



Here are ways to add credibility to your copy:

- Cite other sources, as we've done in this e-book. This indicates to readers that you've done your research. It also makes it easy for people to verify your information, which further adds to your credibility.
- Don't just say you're an expert by touting your credentials; prove it by providing fresh, valuable information.
- Let your clients do the talking where possible; testimonials are great. Case studies also work well on the Web.
- On the other hand, don't give away too much information without getting something in return. If you have a valuable report, for example, put this information in a section where people must register to get it. Or perhaps consider charging a fee for it.

9 Tip #9: Update content regularly so the site does not become stale.

Having a Web site that is up to date greatly reinforces credibility. Keep statistics, calendar listings, and other numbers current. If you're unable to keep refreshing areas such as the News section, remove it. It's better to not have such

a section than to have one where the newest press release is two years old. When visitors come across pages like that, they wonder if the company behind the site is still in business.

10 Tip #10: Proofread, proofread, proofread.

According to the [Stanford Web Credibility Research](#), "Typographical errors...hurt a site's credibility more than most people imagine." Before letting the whole world see your Web site, do a beta test and have as many people as possible proofread it. Do not rely on your own ability to spot errors; it is virtually impossible

to accurately proofread copy you've written yourself. And if you hire an outside writer for your site, carefully proofread their work as well. They're people too and can make mistakes.

About the author

Jeanne Yocum is president of Tuscarora Communications, Ltd., in Granby, MA. She ghostwrites books, book proposals, newspaper and magazine articles, newsletters, and Web sites and also has over 30 years' experience in planning and implementing corporate communications and public relations programs. She has worked with clients in commercial and residential real estate, retailing, health care, legal and financial services, manufacturing, business consulting, architecture, banking and investment banking. She also has worked with many nonprofit clients.

Jeanne holds a B.A. in Journalism from Pennsylvania State University and a Master's degree in Journalism from Boston University. Her work has appeared in numerous publications, including the Boston Globe, the Boston Business Journal, the New England Real Estate Journal, Banker & Tradesman, the Washington Business Journal, Promo Magazine, and US Banker. She has co-authored two business books and ghostwritten two others. Her most recent book, *New Product Launch: 10 Proven Strategies*, is about how to launch new consumer products. To learn more about Jeanne's professional experience and her services, visit www.yourghostwriter.com.

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