

Web content usability

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This article sets down some guidelines and tips for developing standards by which you can measure the usability of your Web site's content.

On many Web development teams, the focus is generally on design and business logic. Teams are eager to figure out navigation, color palettes, database design, and Java code.

While these are certainly necessary components of effective Web site design, it's the rare creative producer, designer, or developer that focuses on content. Content is a lot harder than code. Code can be measured and tested. If a servlet or rollover isn't working, then you have to fix it.

Content, on the other hand, can be good or bad for lots of different reasons -- some of them pertinent, some not. This article sets down some guidelines and tips gathered from over seven years of hands-on experience with interactive content. The goal is to give you some standards by which to measure your content's usability.

First things first: what makes content usable?

The start of any real discussion of content (Web or print) is simple: you have to **know the audience**.

Once you understand who your audience is, you've taken the first step toward creating content that is **appropriate** for them. You will also need to take into account what is appropriate for your organization to publish.

Appropriateness isn't the only goal, though. You need to use terms that are **familiar** to your audience. Again, you'll know a little about this from your initial audience analysis. A site for pediatric cardiologists will use different terms and tone than a site dedicated to corporate librarians. Familiarity will make people stick around, and maybe even cause them to come back to your site.

Then you have to be sure that they'll actually read the material. Web readers don't read, they skim. They jump around trying to find the content that is relevant to them. **Skimmability** means using headers, bolding keywords, and using lists to make important items stand out.

Related to skimmability is **readability**. Are you using the right font for online viewing? Is the font size big enough to enable easy reading? Furthermore, is the content free of grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors? Nothing's harder to read than a document full of spelling mistakes.

Your content has to have a goal. Are you trying to inform or teach? Persuade? Sell? A combination of these three? And it's important to align your content goals with your organization's goals.

Finally, is the content **delivered properly**? This isn't just about speed. We're also talking about using the proper medium. Just like you wouldn't dance about architecture, you should make sure to use the proper delivery mediums.

Now that the high points are covered, let's dive into the details.

Audience analysis: some suggestions

Audience analysis is the starting point for any project.

You need to figure out your audience's *demographics*: how old they are, where they work, what they earn, where they live, anything that's appropriate from a census-taker's perspective.

After you've done that, figure out their *psychographics*: what they want to accomplish, their hobbies, their dreams, anything that might come out in a counseling session.

How do you gather this kind of information? Visit the kinds of Web sites that your target users go to. Read the magazines they are likely to subscribe to. Pay attention to the ads, too, because advertisers are doing the same research you're doing to target an audience.

But demographics and psychographics aren't the only thing you should dig up. Schedule brief meetings with focus groups of target users. Ask them what kind of content they would most like to see on your site. Then ask them what kinds of problems they face every day, and how your company's products and services help alleviate those problems.

The key thing to remember about audience analysis is the goal: to have a well-defined audience at the end of the process. The only good audience definition is a specific target definition. The better you can pigeon-hole or niche your audience, the more likely your site will succeed. Think consumer magazines: although there are general interest magazines, most periodicals go after a well-defined demographic, such as triathletes, photography enthusiasts, and scuba divers.

Even if you only have some rough estimates at this point, you have a basic framework. If your audience is stay-at-home moms who want to earn extra income, then that's a completely different audience than 50-something COBOL programmers who need to learn JSP to keep their jobs. And they're both different from marathoners looking for training and nutrition information and race results.

Why all the homework? Because knowing your audience makes it easier to write effective, appropriate, and usable content. It's the cornerstone of your content usability foundation.

Be appropriate, with teeth

Earlier, appropriateness was listed as the first step toward usable content and that audience analysis is the key to understanding whether content is appropriate. Appropriateness is a double-edged sword, though. It's one thing to say that you know what content is appropriate for

your audience; it's another to say what's appropriate for your organization to publish. You have to take both factors into account.

In many organizations, content creation seems to start in an organic, ad-hoc fashion. Sales engineers and other experts put together answers to frequently asked questions. Marketing directors pull together presentations for conferences. Developers write technical specifications.

This kind of content, kept in-house or delivered to trusted partners or customers, doesn't need a lot of overhead or review. However, once you build a Web site, you have to have a business process in place to create, edit, review, and approve everything that goes on your Web site. And to do that, you have to have some kind of editorial policy in place.

For example, you may have company secrets that you don't want posted for the world to see. Or you may be in the middle of litigation and shouldn't post comments or documents pertaining to the case.

On the surface, this may seem to have very little to do with Web content usability. However, the existence of an editorial policy and a publishing process will make your content measurable, and that will make the entire process of determining appropriateness a lot easier for everyone involved.

For example, at one company, the Web development team pulled together an editorial policy document with only four bullet points. The content for the site, a developer's community, had to be:

- Technically accurate
- Well-written (conversational tone, easy to read, good introductory hooks, etc.)
- Appropriately tied in to the product offerings
- Free of content that might cause legal problems (racist comments, libel, slander, etc.)

From this very brief document, an entire editorial process was created. This process ensured that the team gathered appropriate topics, and that content could be created, edited, reviewed, approved, posted, and maintained. Content that had already been created could be properly identified as appropriate and repurposed for the Web.

In time, this process spawned the creation of a content management system, which made it even easier to follow the process and maintain content that was already live.

The first step of audience analysis therefore led not only to a better understanding of the audience but also to a more streamlined process and tools to make the job easier. And when the job's easier, you can react to changes in the marketplace, your audience's needs, and your organization's needs much quicker.

Familiarity breeds content

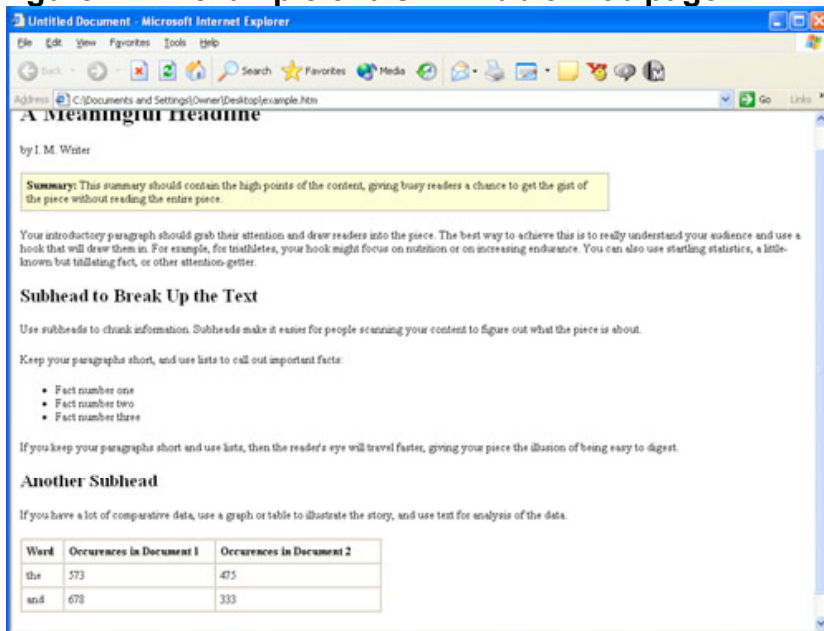
One of the biggest failings of most sites is the familiarity issue. Many usability experts want all content, regardless of site or audience, to sound the same: like it was written by a usability expert. From personal experience, I believe that your content has to be familiar to its audience, and terminology is the number one way to breed familiarity.

If your audience is largely composed of 17-year-old surfers, then using the terms "gnarly" and "bogus" will be familiar to them and will increase usability. A site for Java developers might be better off mentioning "feature creep" and reusable wrappers. We all want to be around people who talk our talk -- it's a natural human need.

Skimming and readability: redux

Now that you understand your audience and have a handle on appropriateness and familiarity, let's move on to the physical nature of reading online. Rule number one? Web readers don't read-they skim (see [Resources](#) for links to related articles). That's because most of them are after specific information or are trying to complete a task. Think scavenger hunt, not leisurely reading of a novel.

Figure 1. An example of a skimmable Web page



How can you make Web content easier to skim? Here are some suggestions:

- **Use lots of subheadings.** It not only breaks up your text into chunks, it helps people decide where to "jump in." Some even advocate telling an entire story just with subheadings.
- **Keep sentences and paragraphs short.** Sentences should be no longer than 25-30 words. Keep paragraphs down to one idea.
- **Use bullet and numbered lists.** Not only do they break up the page a little, but they cause the eye to jump right to the list. So use lists to showcase very important information. Use a bulleted list when the order of the items doesn't matter. Use a numbered list for a procedure or when the order does matter.

- **If you have comparative data, then put it into a table.** No sense in putting complex comparisons in free prose -- no one will get through it. Use your prose paragraphs for analysis and commentary on the data
- **Use as many illustrations as you can.** For products, include beauty shots and screen shots. To show change over time, use a fever chart (also known as a line graph). To show a process or procedure, use a flowchart. Visuals like this convey lots of information in a compact form.
- **Bold or italicize keywords.** This will make your important points stand out. Don't use underlining, though, as that has come to signify hyperlinks.
- **Shorten your line length.** The longer your line length is, the harder it is for the human eye to track it, and therefore the harder it is for the mind to comprehend the words. Keep your lines down to 40 to 50 characters in length.
- **Fonts, line leading, and all the rest, too.** Use fonts that were designed for online reading, such as Verdana (a sans serif) and Georgia (a serif). Be sure to punch up the font size to something bigger than the tiny script that most designers tend to favor. And line leading (the space between lines of text) should provide enough white space for easy reading.
- **Links can help in skimming, too.** A good rule of thumb is to give enough information in a link to rule out people clicking on it by mistake. Assume that your readers are hunting for a piece of information on your site. If your site is about home repairs, what would be a better link: "Tools" or "Tools for fixing bad plumbing"?

Note that many of these actions will not only make your content easier to read, it will make it clearer (by reducing ambiguity) and shorter.

Matching delivery with goals

By now, you should have some goals in mind for your site's content. Perhaps your organization is a non-profit, and your goal is to raise money and awareness for a certain cause. Your team decides that the site's content should inform visitors about the cause and persuade them to volunteer their time or open their checkbooks.

Now you have to think about delivering that information. You could try flat HTML files with some photos, or you could do that along with multimedia pieces, like short audio and video clips. Or you could build a completely personalized experience with a back-end database that dynamically changes the site according to the visitor's profile and behavior on the site.

Once again, audience analysis is key. If your audience analysis uncovers that your likely visitor will have the latest and greatest multimedia plug-ins and likes a media-rich approach, then by all means, use every tool at your disposal. On the other hand, if your analysis reveals that your audience is more persuaded by a low-key, soft-sell approach that emphasizes words and still images, then use that approach.

From a usability standpoint, delivery options should be:

- **Fast.** No one likes to wait on a huge multimedia presentation to load. If you feel you must use video clips or other methods to demonstrate something, then put as much critical information into flat HTML and make the presentation a secondary link from that page.
- **Accessible.** If your site requires all the latest plug-ins, then you'll be limiting the number of visitors who can view your content. Also be sure to accommodate visitors with disabilities by providing alternate versions of content. See the article, "Making Web sites available to users with disabilities" (*developerWorks*, November 2000) for more information. A link is provided in the [Resources](#) section.
- **Intuitive.** No one wants to learn a new system. They just want to get at the information they need. So build delivery vehicles that are intuitive: search engines and information topologies a la Yahoo come to mind as good tools.

Case study

To help ground these concepts, let's examine one case in detail, and walk through all the steps to make content usable. The case study is for a fictional site for retirees interested in golf resorts.

Audience analysis

By looking through the company's marketing reports and other due diligence, we know that the audience is composed of upper-middle-class and affluent recent retirees, both male and female, who are seeking to spend their leisure time golfing at the nation's better resorts. These recent retirees were all top officers (vice president and higher) of major private and public companies, own expensive homes and cars, and have children in college, law school, and medical school.

When looking at other competitor's sites that offer information about golf resorts, we note that the content is relaxed, laid-back, and semi-formal in tone. The content is rarely about basics, but delves into advanced topics and rarely published information about golfing and the different resorts. The designs are usually conservative, with block colors.

The ads are for top of the line golf resorts, equipment, and travel packages. Most of the images feature retirement-age men and women enjoying the amenities of said golf resorts. The only young people pictured are caddies and other employees of the golf resorts.

Appropriateness

From this basic research, it is possible to narrow the list of content choices to a manageable number. We know we should write material that is appropriate for experienced golfers (less emphasis on the basics of swinging a club, for instance) who want the inside track on different resorts (travel reports and reviews). Of course, to be competitive, you may decide to have an entire section devoted to basics of golfing, as it may draw more readership from those retired executives who waited until retirement to take up the sport.

The site should also have information about health and fitness for the older person (stretching, joint pain, arthritis, and so on). And above all, the content and ads should be of interest to the retired executive.

This list of appropriate content items should be codified into an editorial policy. That way any content created by staff writers, freelancers, or affiliates/partners can be objectively tested against the policy. Your editorial policy document should also state the kind of tone to use in content; in this case, the editors decide on a conservative but light touch on all pieces.

Familiarity

Another thing to watch out for is familiarity of terms used. If *mulligan* and *lie* are terms that an experienced golfer would use in his or her everyday speech, then by all means, use them in your content. Just be sure to stay within the bounds of your editorial policy.

Skimmability and readability

Because you know that your main readership is retired and well educated, you'll want to make the site easier for them to skim and read. For any given content page, be sure to chunk the articles into bite-sized pieces, each piece with its own header. Use numbered lists for procedures or steps, and use animated GIFs or Flash to demonstrate difficult topics, such as the effect of wind on the flight of a golf ball.

Always use lots of photos to show what the golf resorts look like (rooms, greens, lounges, clubhouse, and so on).

To make it easier for them to see, remember that your audience is likely well into the age of needing reading glasses. Help them out a little bit by making the font size larger and the line length shorter. Keep ads and other distractions at the tops, bottoms, and sides of content pages. Mixing animated ads with text will just cause confusion.

Delivery

Make sure that the delivery of your content is appropriate for your audience. If they're not using the latest greatest browser, then avoid heavy use of multimedia effects. Instead, give them text-only options and links to the multimedia-rich versions.

Goals

Finally, understand that your Web site is just an extension of your organization. Its goals should be an extension of the organization's goals. Do you want to make more money? Make sure that you sell ad space and golf clubs in an e-commerce section. Want to create goodwill among customers? Make sure that your content is honest and useful. Want to increase your exposure? Then make sure that it will appeal to your audience, and that they will come back often, and tell many other people about the site.

Conclusion

Although content issues can be complex, from a usability standpoint there are only a few guidelines that need be followed. Doing so will make sure that the content on your site is appropriate, familiar, skimmable, goal-oriented, and properly delivered.

Resources

- Read "Prioritize: Good Content Bubbles to the Top" at <http://usableweb.com/link.cgi/000240> for some guidelines on guiding readers to important content.
- For information on integrating content across Web sites, see [Content Integration](#).
- "A Divided Approach to Web Site Design" at <http://www-106.ibm.com/developerworks/library/wireframe/wireframe.html> provides some good advice on separating content from design. (*developerWorks*, June 1999)
- Read "How to Involve Users in Site Design" at <http://www-106.ibm.com/developerworks/library/design-by-feedback/expectations.html> for tips on getting user feedback into a design. (*developerWorks*, June 1999)
- Read "Finding Out What Users Want from your Web Site" at <http://www-106.ibm.com/developerworks/library/moderator-guide/requirements.html> for user testing methods. (*developerWorks*, June 1999)
- For information on designing accessible Web sites accessible, see "[Making Web sites available to users with disabilities](#)" (*developerWorks*, November 2000)
- For tips on getting organized see "CNET Site Planning Tips" at <http://builder.cnet.com/webbuilding/pages/Graphics/CTips2/ss10.html>.
- To learn how to write more consistently across your Web site, read "Writing Consistently Across Media" at http://www.clickz.com/design/onl_edit/article.php/838051.
- "Writing for Readers Who Scan" at http://www.clickz.com/design/onl_edit/article.php/836621 includes specific advice on chunking content for scanners.
- A humorous take on writing without ambiguity is "Fruit Flies Like a Banana: Writing Unambiguously," which can be found at http://www.clickz.com/design/onl_edit/article.php/835891.
- Read "Effective Web Writing" at <http://www.webtechniques.com/archives/2001/02/kilian/> for some straight-up advice on what Web readers are really after in a reading environment.
- For an article on writing clearly, see [Clarity by Design](#).

About the author

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