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CHAPTER 1

Copywriting for online versus offline

Overview

Copywriting for online readership requires an approach different from creating content intended for publication in print, whether being newly created or being re-purposed from existing material.

Copy length, pointers and links, typographic styles, interaction – these are among the items that require alternative treatment.

Chapter objectives

Through this chapter, you will discover the differences between how people read on screen and print.

You will also gain an understanding of how to create effective copy for the online readership, including writing styles, interactivity and relationship building.

Chapter structure

- Introduction – readers and skimmers
- Less is more – bytes and pieces
- Start Here – entry points
- Get to the point – pyramid style
- Bite the bullets – plus links, headings and sub-headings
- Accessibility
- Interactivity
- The one-to-one relationship
- Summary
- Checklist.

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Introduction – readers and skimmers

When we write for print, we expect the reader to closely follow our copy from start to finish following the logical path of our presentation.

However, as we recognized in this book's introduction, the online reader tends to **skim and scan content**. In addition, they will most often jump from **item to item**, **page to page** (which is what hyperlinks are for, after all).

NOTE

Skimming is when a reader quickly runs their eyes over your text to identify the main ideas presented.

Scanning is when they are running their eyes over the text and picking out specific words or phrases – either ones they are seeking or ones you have drawn to their attention through text styling.

The online copywriter, therefore, has to ensure:

- key content is quickly and easily consumed
- the most important information is near the start of the copy
- content is organized in an easy-to-follow and intuitive navigational structure.

to:

- enhance the readers' experience
- keep them on-site
- successfully gain the desired actions
- deliver the objectives.

Less is more – bytes and pieces

As if skimming and jumping around wasn't enough to cope with, it's also important to appreciate that web readers simply do not like long sections of copy (deep scrolling), particularly within the upper and introductory levels of content.

Therefore, content should be broken up into **smaller, logically organized sections**. Plus, since reading from a screen is somewhat painful compared with print, the **less is more** rule should be followed, with copy length being as condensed as possible – perhaps **half the length**

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and broken up into chunks.

Also, you should endeavour to:

- keep sentences to **about 15–25 words in length**
- use **one idea** per sentence
- include a sentence at or near the start of each paragraph that **conveys the point** of the whole paragraph.

This will deliver benefits to the scanning reader (who often only reads the first part of a paragraph to assess whether it's relevant to them) and will enhance understanding (since the point of the paragraph is made clear at the outset)

- bear in mind that paragraphs are optimally no more than **four sentences** and preferably two in length (ideally, **two or three lines** deep)
- use paragraphs that only contain sentences that relate to each other, with each paragraph serving a **particular purpose**. The scanning reader sees paragraphs as individual elements and you will, therefore, gain more if each paragraph presents a separate point.

Also, while it most likely will be a natural style if you are writing in a conversational manner, you should use **transitional expressions** and **hooks** to establish logical connections between paragraphs.

A transitional expression between paragraphs can, at its simplest, be a few words at the beginning of the paragraph following.

For example:

- accordingly
- after a while
- after all
- also
- and
- as a result
- as has been said
- at that time
- besides
- despite
- earlier
- elsewhere
- finally

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- for all that
- for instance
- furthermore
- however
- in addition
- in brief
- in conclusion
- in contrast
- in fact
- in other words
- in particular
- in the meantime
- indeed
- of course
- on the contrary
- on the other hand
- on the whole
- similarly
- still
- subsequently
- then
- therefore

and

- for example [!].

And simple hooks include:

- **The last word hook:**

  Use transitional expressions and hooks to establish logical connections between paragraphs.

  Paragraphs should be . . .

- **The last sentence hook:**

  As we recognized in this book's introduction, the online reader tends to skim content. In addition, they will most often jump from item to item, page to page (which is what hyperlinks are for, after all).

  When a reader jumps from item to item it should be remembered . . .

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- **The deeper hook:**

  Use transitional expressions and hooks to establish logical connections between paragraphs.

  It is important, however, to ensure . . .

- **The idea hook** (this refers to an idea just expressed):

  Since reading from a screen is somewhat painful compared with print, the less is more rule should be followed.

  Such a view might seem alien to those who believe quality is measured on quantity.

EXAMPLE

From startups.co.uk's *Startup* guides:

There are few things more tempting than the smell of fish and chips.

So the idea of owning your own fish and chip shop will probably seem like a similarly alluring prospect.

Don't fall into the nostalgia trap, though, this isn't Last of the Summer Wine. The modern day takeaway has big competition so you need to put a lot in to get it right.

Get the winning formula, however, and you'll soon be cashing in your chips.

In the past few years, there has been a pretender to the throne of Britain's favourite takeaway, chicken tikka masala. However, traditionalists can now breathe a sigh of relief: fish and chips is firmly back on top according to a recent survey by the British Potato council.

But its place there isn't down to traditional values. This market of independents has enjoyed leading the field for much of the first 100 years of its history. Gradually, the customer has been faced with a large number of alternatives, from Chinese to burgers, Indian to pizza.

Increasingly, fish shops can't just open when they please and customers will vote against poor quality with their feet. This isn't consistent throughout the industry, however, so a good business will have its own very high standards.

Broadly, it's about brighter, spotlessly clean shops, well-trained and pleasant staff, good economic practices – and most importantly a flawless product. Vinegar soaked newspaper wrapping no longer meets customer expectations and when 70 to 80% of your business is repeat, this is very important.

And it's important to make the most of the product you have.

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http://www.startups.co.uk/

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But don't force it. This is **not essential** for every paragraph and, if it feels uncomfortable when you read it back, it is! Rules are meant to be broken and the best medicine is always taken or served in moderation.

In addition, your reader will not appreciate any form of verbosity, the use of an excessive number of words. So try to avoid writing, for example, '**a large number of**' when '**many**' will do or '**despite the fact that**' instead of '**although**'.

Writing less is, in any case, also much more effective – and often more difficult to create – in any medium.

As others have said:

- *If I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter.*

  — Marcus T. Cicero

- *Brevity is the soul of wit.*

  — William Shakespeare

- *Not that the story need be long, but it will take a long while to make it short.*

  — Henry David Thoreau

- *You know that I write slowly. This is chiefly because I am never satisfied until I have said as much as possible in a few words, and writing briefly takes far more time than writing at length.*

  — Karl Friedrich Gauss

- *It is my ambition to say in 10 sentences what others say in a whole book.*

  — Nietzsche

- *The more you say, the less people remember. The fewer the words, the greater the profit.*

  — Felelon

- *My aim is to put down on paper what I see and what I feel in the best and simplest way.*

  — Ernest Hemingway.

- *Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.*

  — William Strunk Jr (*Elements of Style*)

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- *The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do.*

  — Thomas Jefferson

- *A multitude of words is no proof of a prudent mind.*

  — Thales

NOTE

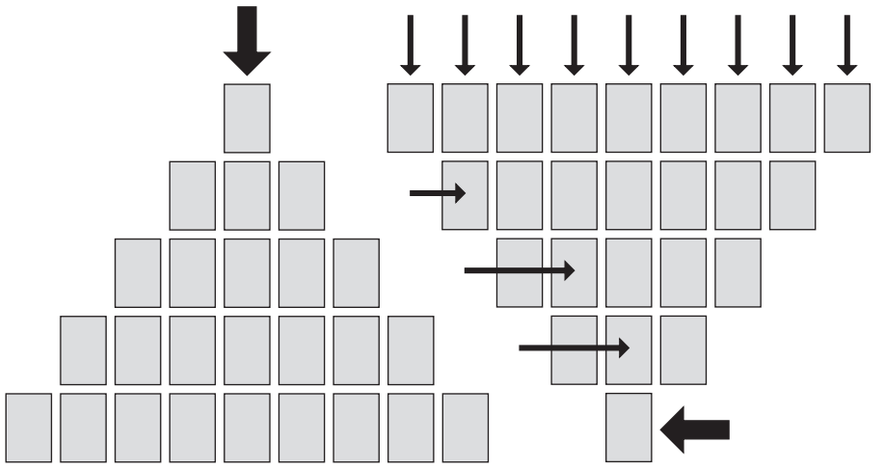
If you have split a long article into separate sections, you should also consider providing your readers with a separate, printer-friendly page containing the whole item. These complete documents can also be presented within a single archive.

Start here

If only! As well as creating our smaller, logically organized sections, we require to make allowances for the fact that, on the Web, readers can enter content by way of **many paths**, particularly if they have followed a search engine link (Fig. 1.0).

Therefore, each section should, where possible, be capable of standing alone, effectively acting as an **individual doorway** into the site. Clear **explanatory headings** and useful – **introductory paragraphs** help this to be achieved.

Article summaries are also extremely useful. According to the Stanford-Poynter reading news on the Web study (http://www.poynterextra.org/et/i.htm), most readers (nearly 80 per cent) read article summaries rather than complete articles.



[Fig. 1.0]
Web readers don't always enter by your home page and then drill down. They can enter the site through many doorways.

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In addition, **pointers** and **links** to other sections will help readers to navigate throughout the rest of the relevant content.

As an example of section organization, a series of articles I created on the subject of Internet Marketing included the following items:

- Introduction to Internet Marketing
- Search Engine Optimization
- Search Engine Pay Per Click
- Email Marketing overview
- Email Marketing creatives
- Email Marketing deployment
- Viral marketing
- Link building
- Internet advertising banners and buttons.

Of course, there were more but the key was that each could be independently consumed – rather like a set of related but individual fact sheets.

The same approach can be taken to individual sections which have depth. For example, Search Engine Optimization might further break down to:

- Overview
- Keyword research
- Title tags
- Keywords
- Descriptions
- Optimization of textual content
- Site structure
- Links.

Get to the point – pyramid style

In time, this should become an instinctive writing approach for you. As it happens, it is also another rule which is common to the Web and good newspaper content. That is, to:

- start the story with the **conclusion**
- follow with the most important **information**
- end with the **background**.

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And, when creating your introductory material (the lead statement), the other key newspaper rule should be at the forefront of your mind:

- Who?
- What?
- When?
- Where?
- Why?
- How?

As earlier discussed, the majority of newspaper articles begin by answering most of these questions.

EXAMPLE

From the *Daily Mirror*:

A £1BILLION drop in mortgage lending suggests the house price boom could be starting to slow.

Borrowing dipped from £24.8billion in April to £23.8 billion last month.

The Council for Mortgage Lenders said sky-high prices and rising interest rates were putting the brakes on the market.

Crucially, it added that the drop in lending was driven by a fall in the number of people taking out a mortgage to buy a house.

Separate figures from the British Bankers Association showed May had the smallest monthly rise in mortgage advances since November last year.

Lending by major banks rose by £4.9billion, well down on the record £6.4billion increase in April.

Bank of England governor Mervyn King issued a stark warning last week about the outlook for house prices, suggesting a fall was more likely.

A senior economist said yesterday: 'Maybe the message is starting to get through. But one swallow doesn't make a summer.'

The Building Societies Association said: 'People should be sensible about the amount they borrow as house prices are likely to rise less rapidly.'

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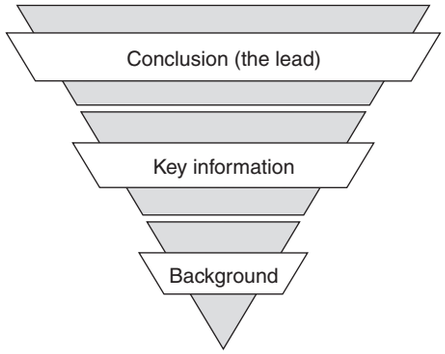
This is known as the **inverted pyramid** style of writing.



The effectiveness of the inverted pyramid style of writing on the Web is because the reader (the one who skims, scans and skips) can **quickly consume the key information at the beginning** (yes, the lead statement – the first two-to-three paragraphs) without necessarily reading the whole article.

This, of course, is opposite to the approach that is often taken, for example, with academic work, which is usually written in the more traditional pyramid style with conclusions coming last.

NOTE

It can sometimes be difficult to create the conclusion before you have written the whole piece. Therefore, all you have to do is write your material as you would naturally and, when the conclusion becomes apparent, move it to the beginning.

However, while it may not come naturally to some at first, it is the most effective way of approaching copywriting for the online readership.

The beginning is the most important part of the work.

— Plato

If you start with a bang, you won't end with a whimper.

— T.S. Eliot

In addition, since your readers can only see one screen at a time, the pyramid approach allows chunks of related information to be included within short, viewable sections of perhaps three – five paragraphs.

Bite the bullets

While you may have some difficulty imagining the usage of **bullets points** or **sub-headings** in the works of Shakespeare or Dickens, they

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are essential elements to **grabbing** and **holding** the attention of the online reader and assisting their navigation.

And it's that **attention** that matters most in the first place, otherwise any actions you seek – or readers' goals sought – will not have a happy conclusion.

- Headings
- Sub-headings
- Bullets and other typographic devices
- **Emphasis**
- *Highlighting*
- Links.

They all help the skimming readers to find the key elements of your copy without reading complete articles.

Accessibility

The approach described above will also make your content more accessible to people with disabilities. For example, usability testing by The Communication Technologies Branch of the United States National Cancer Institute found that most blind users are just as impatient as most sighted users.

They want to get the information they need **as quickly as possible**. When using a screen-reader, they do not listen to every word on the page – just as sighted users do not read every word.

They '**scan with their ears**', listening to just enough to decide whether to listen further.

They listen to the first few words of a link or line of text. If it does not seem relevant, they move quickly to the next link, next line, next heading or next paragraph. Where a sighted user might find a keyword by scanning over the entire page, a blind user may not hear that keyword if it is not at the beginning of a link or a line of text.

Therefore, the guidelines are as follows:

- Write for the web.
- Write in short, clear, straightforward sentences.
- Use bulleted lists.
- Put the main point at the beginning of a paragraph.
- Write links that start with keywords.

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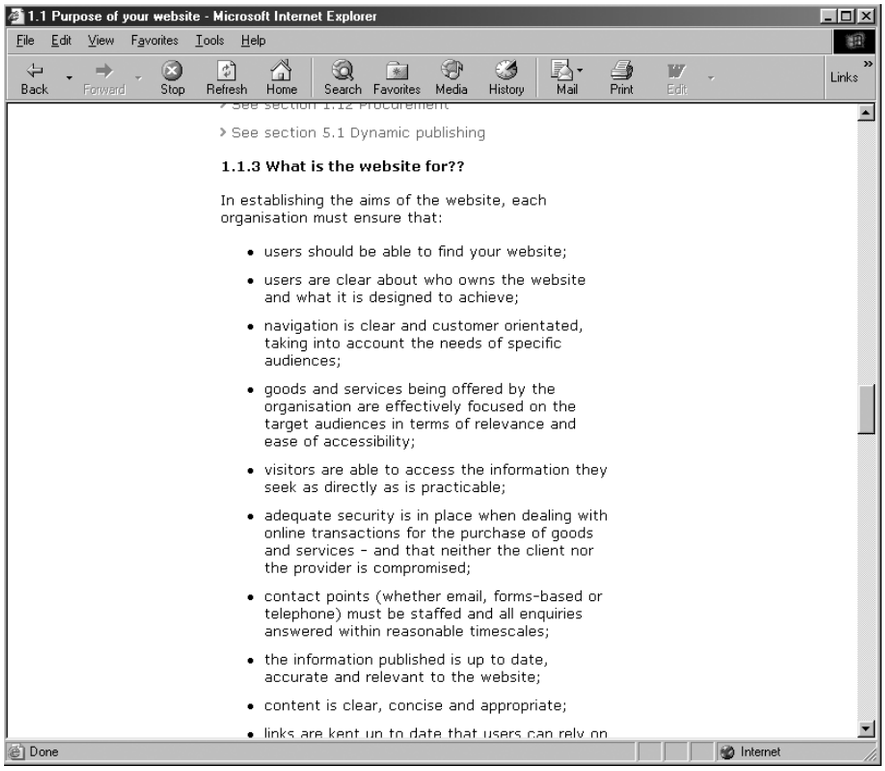

[Fig. 1.1]
The Cabinet Office (e-Government Unit) – practising what they preach.
http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/e-government/webguidelines/

And, in its **Top 10 Guidelines for UK local government websites**, the Cabinet Office (e-Government Unit) says:

- Text should be in plain language.
- Text should be short, scannable, broken up by unambiguous (rather than clever) sub-heads, and by bullet-point lists.
- Upper levels of the website should quickly make clear to users what is on offer and whether it is relevant to them.
- Lower down in the site, text and design should aim to communicate main messages and explain services simply and quickly.

In other words, you will create the most effective online content if you '**accessify**' **it for all**!

Interactivity

Interactivity is one of the key differences between print and online, whether it be **hypertext links** or the **opening of a dialogue** between reader and author through email or forms.

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As a writer, you can enrich the reader's experience by, for example, providing links to external or additional related content.

You can also **elicit feedback** which can perhaps be used to influence future content – allowing the reader to become a more active participant in the process.

This participation can be given a sense of immediacy through, for example, **polls** related to your content and even live discussion or newsgroup-style **message boards**.

With or without your own participation, these discussion areas can bring a completely different form of life to your content. Forget the 'Letter to the Editor'. Your initial writing can be the catalyst for **lengthy discussion** and **contributions** from readers across the globe, putting them squarely into the action.

In addition, your writing for email or the Web can feature **strong interactivity**, by encouraging responses and entering into a dialogue with your readers.

On email, it's important to note that your writing very often takes a **one-to-one** form of communication rather than a broadcast to an audience and, in these cases, it should be particularly designed to motivate that person to act.

Alternatively, the interactivity sought may be more **viral-related**, to encourage people to encourage others by passing the email to their friends and associates.

The one-to-one relationship

As mentioned above, a one-to-one style of writing should often be adopted when writing for email.

However, this approach of **speaking** '**with**' **readers** as opposed to 'at' them is extremely effective in all forms of online content creation.

A colleague more accustomed to financial numbers rather than written words, once asked me how to write.

My answer? '**Speak the words as you write them**.'

If it makes sense when speaking to yourself, it should be equally clear to your reader. Of course, you don't have to speak out loud – or you just might be taken away, my friend!

And, while your writings may be read by thousands of people, if you keep 'talking' to that **one reader** in a fluent manner you will have gone a long way to engaging **each of them** individually.

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Also by engaging them in a **conversational style** you can draw them more easily to your main objectives and develop a personality they can relate to.

Summary

Once you've mastered the art of copywriting for online, the style and approach will come naturally. Indeed, the structured approach along with adding elements of style along the way should also enhance your enjoyment, self-organization and productivity when writing.

Checklist – copywriting for online

[ ] Can my key content be quickly and easily consumed?

[ ] Is the most important information at the start of my copy?

[ ] Have I enhanced the readers' experience?

[ ] Will my copy keep readers engaged?

[ ] Have I written in such a way as to gain the desired actions?

[ ] Will my copy deliver the objectives?

[ ] Have I answered the questions Who, What, When, Where, Why, How?

[ ] Have I included article summaries?

[ ] Have I organized content in an easy-to-follow and intuitive structure?

[ ] Is my material broken up into shorter-than-print, logically organized sections?

[ ] Have I started articles with the conclusion, followed by the most important information and ended with the background (pyramid style)?

[ ] Is each of my sections capable of standing alone?

[ ] Have I used pointers and links to assist navigation between sections?

[ ] Are my sentences kept to about 15–25 words?

[ ] Have I used one idea per sentence?

[ ] Are my paragraphs kept to no more than four sentences and, preferably, two?

[ ] Do my paragraphs only contain sentences that relate to each other?

[ ] Have I used logical transitions between paragraphs?

[ ] Have I effectively used headings, sub-headings, bullets, **emphasis** and *highlighting*?

[ ] Is my content likely to assist accessibility?

[ ] Have I used plain language?

[ ] Do my introductory sections make it clear what is on offer?

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[ ] Does my other material describe, explain and inform simply and quickly?

[ ] Have I provided separate single-page articles for printing purposes?

[ ] Have I used elements encouraging interactivity?

[ ] Have I used a one-to-one, conversational style of writing?

Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret.

— Matthew Arnold