

Writing for the WEB

How to Write an Effective Website

When a visitor comes to your website, how much time do you have to communicate your message? Not much! Perhaps as few as 3 seconds to gain people's attention and as many as 30 seconds to get them through the page content. Your website must be organized, inviting, readable, and interactive. The following tips will help you write an effective and engaging website.

Organize the Page

A web page can be structured for the fastest absorption without sacrificing content.

Heading styles are the best way to begin because they serve several functions. They provide a structural hierarchy for both readers and search engines. They create a visual map so that the reader can quickly scan the content.

Use Heading Styles

On the web, H1 through H6 web heading styles are actually HTML "tags" or code. This code tells search engine web crawlers about the hierarchy of information on your page.

"A web crawler is a computer program that browses the World Wide Web in a methodical, automated search for up-to-date website data. Other terms for web crawlers are ants, automatic indexers, bots, spiders or scutters.

Heading styles inform your visitors about the structural outline of information on your page.

Heading styles also announce and summarize the subject in the paragraphs following them and visually break up dense text on a page.

Tips for Writing Headings

Pull the heading from the body text.

Think about the content of your paragraphs. Where does the subject change? Can you summarize the nature of the content in a few short words?

Use headings as much as possible, but without cluttering the page. If a section of text has two topics, use a heading for each topic.

As an example, Figure 1 uses the same text styles as this document. "Carousels" is Heading 1 and declares that this page's content is about Carousels.

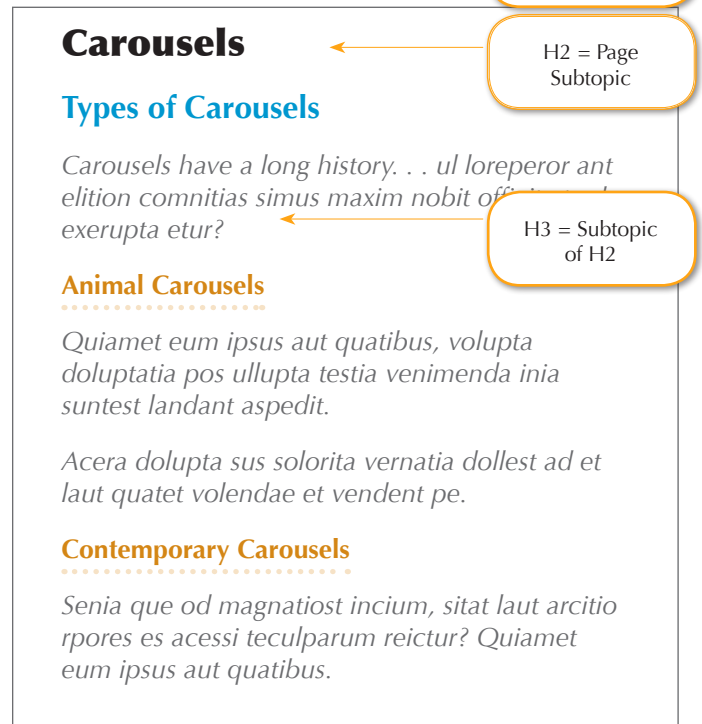
The next heading "Types of Carousels" is a Heading 2. It

contains two short sections about two types of carousels, "Animal" and "Contemporary," which are identified by Heading 3.

Use of this descending hierarchy helps clarify your message and visually guides visitors to the information they most want or need.

Examples of Heading Styles

(Figure 1)



Make It Consistent

Consistency is the key for formatting for the web. The effect of moving through a website is similar to that of watching movie. As we move through a website's windows (the pages), we experience them like frames in a nonlinear movie. If the horizon jerks suddenly, it can take us out of the story.

Consistent organization will guide visitors so they stay in the experience you provide.

Keep in mind that while these organizational conventions are important, they are not hard and fast rules. Sometimes content won't fit a rule no matter how much you tweak it. When it seems better to do so, break with established conventions.

Keep It Brief

Shorten everything to the bare essentials. Eliminate any extra words that do not support your messages. If you

can remove articles (“the,” “and,” “a,” and so on), do it. Keep reducing your copy to the smallest number of words possible to convey your message.

The web is a visual medium versus a literary medium. Every dot of text on the page counts for or against its success. If you can support your text with a picture, or convey a meaning with a picture instead, do it.

If you can break up long paragraphs, do it. In a perfect world, web paragraphs should contain no more than two or three sentences. Be rigorous about the paragraph rule: everything in a paragraph should relate to the paragraph topic (new topic, new paragraph).

Find ways to introduce a paragraph or a section of paragraphs with a heading. As noted above, headings organize the page and make the text more accessible and more search engine friendly.

Your goal is to drop out everything that’s not absolutely necessary. What remains then becomes very powerful.

Create Emphasis and Punch

The best way to achieve emphasis on the web is to use the formatting available as designed for the site. The headings or block text designed as call outs can provide the visual punch needed to draw a visitor’s attention.

Make formatting decisions that can be used consistently and globally for the same type of content throughout the site.

Don’t crowd your page content. Use “white space”.

“White space in page layout is that portion of a page left unmarked: the space between graphics, margins, gutters, columns or blocks or lines of type. The term comes from graphic design practice, where printing processes generally use white paper.

White space should not be considered merely ‘blank’ space — it is an important element of design which enables the objects in it to be read easily.

A page crammed full of text or graphics with very little white space runs the risk of appearing busy, cluttered, and is usually difficult to read.

Ask your designer how to best create emphasis tailored exactly to your content.

Keep Punctuation Simple

Avoid using bullets, ampersands, dots and dashes, forward slashes and other textual decorations or extra characters. They clutter the page, slow down the read time and look

unprofessional.

Use periods instead of colons or semicolons. If possible, instead of one sentence using colons or semicolons, create two shorter and sweeter sentences.

Emphasis can be added with a dash — like this. Bolding or italics can be used to emphasize single words or phrases. Do not use underlining because it tends to indicate links and can confuse your readers.

How to Deliver Text to Your Web Designer

Text is formatted for your web page by your designer, so you don’t need to add any extra formatting such as bold face or case. In fact, it generally saves time if you do not, but check with your designer.

Many designers will ask for your page copy in a plain text file in order to avoid formatting conflicts.

Spell Check and Proof

After all your hard work to get your site up and running, you don’t want to cancel the effect with sloppy spelling or grammatical errors. Be sure to spell-check, then proofread your content several times before you populate your web pages.

If your copy is not written or edited by a professional copywriter, have it reviewed by colleagues, friends or family. It’s easy to miss mistakes, create unintentional meanings, or think you have communicated something and miss the boat entirely.

Unless you have a prior agreement to do so, your designer may or may not be making corrections to copy, and you may or may not want to pay designer rates to catch typos.

For best results, be sure to discuss delivery of copy with your designer. Some web designers/developers work directly with copywriters/copy editors, and this may be the best way to save you time and money and achieve the best outcome.

Summing Up

Use the interactive power of the internet to engage your visitors.

Focus webpage visitors on your message. Organize content for readability. Use white space effectively. Keep content concise. Spell-check and edit.

Your web designer can work with you to determine how best to represent you and your page content on the web.