



The 10 Commandments of Information Design

by Garth A. Buchholz, BA, CUA

1. Print content is structurally and functionally different from online content. Understand the differences when you write for Web sites. Print is formally written and passively read. It's linear, narrative, dated and presents a continuous view. Online content is informally written, chunked out, non-linear, interactive, dynamic and current. One involves reading paper, the other involves reading light. For further explanation of the differences, read this article on [Jakob Nielsen's Web site](#).

2. Don't just "repurpose" documents; write "Webitorial" content. One of the worst things you can do is to simply "PDF" everything. "Repurposing" or means when you repackage a document created for print and simply attach it to a Web site in Word, Acrobat, Excel or other such popular formats. While sometimes this is necessary, it's the laziest, most ineffective way to put content on the Internet. Instead of editorial writing, write "Webitorial" by re-thinking how the content can be rewritten, laid out and designed in context with its specific online environment. Read point #6 in this [Jakob Nielsen article](#).

3. Online content is not just about words. In Latin, content basically means a wrapper that contains something else. It's images, hyperlinks, applications, streaming media, etc. When you write for the Internet, think "presentation" and "interaction." Factor in the other content objects that may be part of it. Analyze the environment where the content will be found. If you were writing for a television ad, for example, you wouldn't simply write text without knowing what audio and visuals will be part of it.

4. Words are graphical images, too. [The composition and layout of a Web page](#) impacts its readability. People often notice the font style, the color of the text, the size of the text and how the text appears as a visual block or grouping before they actually extract its meaning. Layout and design are critical in a visual medium like the Web, so learn about typography, too.

5. Chunk it out, chunk it down. Even if you're writing an actual content object such as a Word document or a PDF, content on the Internet has to be easily scannable. Partly because of the Internet and broadcast media, people have far less patience and tolerance for large blocks of narrative text. When you create new Webitorial copy, make sure it's "chunked out" (broken into smaller blocks of text separated by a break) or, if you're editing something for the Internet, chunk it down. Another technique is to use bulleted or numbered lists wherever possible rather than embedding this information within a block of text. Remember – if no one reads it, what value will it have?

6. **Write strong meta-text** (navigation titles, headlines, subheads, cutlines, labels, etc). Writing headlines, subheads, cutlines (captions), labels and other “meta-text” (also called metacontent or microcontent) is often the most effective way to make your textual content readable on the Internet. Internet readers have a “search-and-retrieve” mentality – they prefer to scan for the information or keywords or links they need, while bypassing the rest. Good headlines and content labels also help the reader to cognitively understand the organization and navigation of the content.

7. **Don’t reinvent the wheel – just link to it.** How much of your copy could be trimmed down if you simply linked to other Web pages that offered the same information? Here’s my 100/25 rule of content originality on the Web: If the Web were like 12 people having a meeting in a boardroom: One person would be saying something original; two people would be commenting on it; and nine people would simply be referencing what the first three had been saying. 100% of the content is created by 25% of the people. Readers like to interact on the Web, so give them links as non-linear “rabbit trails” they can follow.

8. **Use the traditional newspaper structure for “inverted pyramid” writing.** In most cases, good Internet writing is like [newspaper-style writing](#) because, like newspapers, it’s a fast read, involves a lot of content and has to catch the reader’s attention. Make sure your five W’s (who, what, when, where, why, and also how) are close to the top of the text. Details of lesser importance should follow, from general to specific – that’s why the pyramid is wide at the top and narrow at the bottom. The idea is this: If the reader only reads the headline, they should have a good idea of what the article is about. If they read only the first few lines, they should have a very good idea of the main points in the article.

9. **Make the writing compelling, personal and energetic.** [Active voice writing](#) is always the best. Use consistent style and conventions. Use “you” when appropriate to personalize the text. Take a stand. Give your writing attitude. People like to read writing that feels truthful, creative, positive and individual. [Avoid “marketese” or corporate jargon](#), but do write promotionally, as long as it’s truthful (if you sound bored about what you’re writing about, the reader will be bored, too.) You can use “plain writing” style without sounding plain. And most importantly, keep it tight, unpretentious and free of unnecessary verbiage.

10. **Know your Internet community.** In print, you have to know your readers, and in broadcast, you have to know your audience. On the Internet, it’s also crucial to know your “community” of readers. Are you creating content for a portal? An Intranet site? An opt-in email newsletter? A Web log (blog)? What are their interests? Education? Age range? Biases? And what is their user experience on the Internet site you are writing for? How will they use the information, and how will the other information in that environment be used? When you write for the Internet, you write for a community — one reader at a time.

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