

Learning, Teaching  
and Student Engagement

# Writing for the Web

This module covers concepts such as

- Identifying the characteristics of effective writing for the web
- Demonstrating your understanding of writing in an online environment by changing a short text into a web-based style of writing

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## Web Writing

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Writing for the web can be different from many of the more conventional forms of writing at university, such as essay or report writing.

Generally, web-based writing permits greater use of features such as graphics, links, headings, lists, short sentences and plain English. The use of key words (for search engine optimisation) is also important in some forms of web-based writing where it is important to increase 'visitors' to an online site.

***With so many different ways of communicating on the web, and for so many different purposes, it is important to check your specific assignment expectations carefully.***

## Web-writing Wisdom

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There are five areas that an effective web-writer should look at in approaching any web-based assignment: audience and purpose; research and referencing; information structure; clear writing; and, proofreading and editing.

### **1. Audience and Purpose**

In web-based writing (or any writing really) you need to consider audience and purpose carefully.

There are different levels of formality in written language and this can be especially confusing in web-based writing because the range is very wide.

Some social media writing is almost like speech that has just been 'written down'. Other web-writing, however, requires you to use objective, impersonal and formal language.

Familiarise yourself with the expectations of your specific web-based assignment and only write when you are sure of your audience and purpose.

### **2. Research and Referencing**

Sometimes the online/web environment, and all the different technical features of this environment, can cloud the area of research and referencing.

When writing at university, it is always important to tell your reader/end-user the source of any external information.

You will still need to use an appropriate referencing system and to use this system consistently. Check your Subject Outline.

### **3. Structure**

Just as research and referencing is still important in web-based writing, so is the careful consideration of structure.

Paragraphs, for example, should still address one main idea. Sentences should still be structured effectively and your information, overall, should still be logically organised.

In an online environment, users are said to 'scan' rather than 'read' information so the use of headings, sub-headings, graphics and links is usually encouraged.

Some general advice on structure:

- Accessibility is an important issue to consider – is your writing 'easy on the eyes'? what web features can you use to make your writing accessible to as many users as possible?
- Heading, sub-headings and links should have descriptive headings/labels (not just 'click here').
- Don't just throw in a u-tube clip or image – or anything really - without explanation!
- Make good use of short paragraphs, lists and bullet points.
- An 'inverted pyramid' structure – putting the most important information first – is a common web-writing technique.

#### 4. Clear Writing

In web-based writing, sentences are often shorter than on paper, the active voice is common, and plain English is generally encouraged.

- **Short Sentences**

(don't over-do it with short sentences though or your writing will be too 'choppy' and actually harder to read)

- **Active Voice (subject-verb-object)**

("The dog ate my homework". Not "My homework was eaten by the dog")

- **Plain English (easy to understand)**

(eg. use familiar words where possible, active voice, short sections/sentences, make verbs clear, leave out unnecessary words)

#### 5. Proofread and Edit

Correct spelling, grammar and referencing are all still important in web-based writing. Some additional elements can be used (such as the abbreviations used when texting/tweeting) but make sure language is still inclusive and appropriate for your audience and purpose.

## All in the detail

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There are many different ways of using the web to communicate. There are also many different ways a web-based university assignment can be structured. You need to check your assignment details – including the assessment criteria – carefully.

- Will you, for example, be assessed on the frequency of your online contributions as well as the quality?
- Is your writing expected to be reflective and personal or objective and impersonal?
- To what extent is there a need to reference external sources?
- What are the expectations in regards to use of graphics, video clips, links and other visual or navigational display?

1. Check your assignment detail;
2. Be absolutely sure of your audience and the purpose of your writing;
3. And, make sure you fulfil specific assignment expectations (give your reader/web-user/marker what they want).

*The following writing is a short extract from the JCU LibGuide page on the internet. Can you see how the writer has made use of headings, sub-headings, lists and links?*

### LibGuides: Making life better for students ...and lecturers

Your one stop Library subject resources for students

#### Benefits of LibGuides

- LibGuides provide effective and attractive support for learning
- Interactive, engaging and Web 2.0 friendly
- Easily integrated into LearnJCU
- Can be tailored to course/lecturer needs

#### LibGuides and Graduate attributes

- They enhance the student's ability to:
- Find & access information using appropriate media & technologies
- Evaluate that information
- Select and organise information
- Communicate information accurately, cogently, coherently, creatively and ethically

#### LibGuides

- Support subject learning outcomes
- Offer situational support at the point of need
- Help students succeed

#### Did you notice?

Each of these sections would be a paragraph in an essay. The headings are like the 'topic sentence' in a paragraph and the bullet points provide the supporting detail – what would be the 'supporting sentences' in a paragraph.

## 1. Plain English Quick Quiz

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### 1. Which is the best example of a 'plain English' sentence regarding paragraph structure?

- a) The writing of paragraphs should be done so as to contain a topic sentence, immediately followed by supporting sentences, which precedes a linking sentence.
- b) Paragraphs should start with a topic sentence, followed by supporting sentences and a linking sentence.
- c) Paragraphs are units of thought that contain one main idea, with this idea firstly presented in the first sentence and then, secondly, followed by supporting sentences and then, thirdly, by a linking sentence which is also the sentence that closes the paragraph.
- d) Paragraphs have topic, supporting and linking sentences.

### 2. How would you change the following sentence into plain English?

*The submission of assignments shall be via the dropbox and should be made on the date on which it was stipulated to be due.*

[Consider: one idea=one sentence. Active voice. Familiar words. Making verbs clear. Omitting unnecessary words]

## 2. Web-writing: True or False

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1. You should never use lists or headings when writing for the web.

TRUE      FALSE

2. Referencing is not so important on the web.

TRUE      FALSE

3. Blogs, wikis, social bookmarking, websites and other web media all require exactly the same type of writing tone and style.

TRUE      FALSE

4. You should always check the specific expectations and assessment criteria for an assignment.

TRUE      FALSE

5. Making your web-writing look good is the most important writing factor.

TRUE      FALSE

### 3. Which of the following writing extracts is more likely to be found on the web? Why?

A.

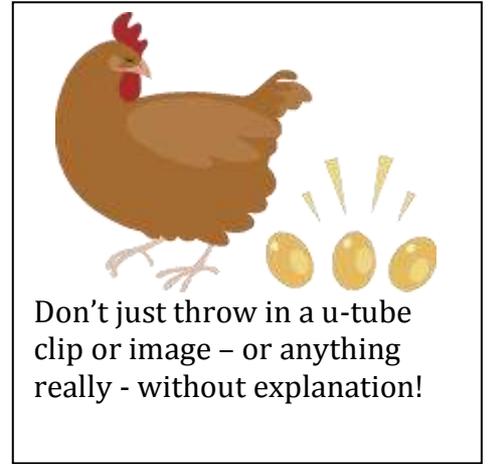
*Heading, sub-headings and links should have descriptive headings and labels (not just 'click here').*

An 'inverted pyramid' structure – putting the most important information first – is a common web-writing technique.

When writing for the web, remember to:

- Make good use of short paragraphs
- Headings and sub-headings
- and lists/bullet points.

These are just some of the ways to structure your web-writing. Structure counts! Especially because most users don't read but rather 'scan' your writing.



B.

There are several ways to achieve an effective structure when writing for the web. First, the writer can use descriptive labels and headings. Second, the writer can use an inverted pyramid structure where the most important information is placed first. Third, the writer can use stylistic devices such as short sections or paragraphs, headings and sub-headings, as well as lists or bullet points. Structure is important in web-writing as end-users rarely read from beginning to end but rather scan the text for what is of most interest or of most importance to them.

## Answers

### 1. Plain English:

1. b
2. eg. "You should use the dropbox to hand-in/submit your assignment [on the due date]"

### 2. Web-Writing:

1. False. Headings and lists are often encouraged.
2. False. Referencing is always important.
3. False. Tone and style change depending on audience and purpose.
4. True. Always check assignment detail.
5. False. Visual appeal is important but so is substance (*what* you are writing).

**3. Extract A** is more likely to be found on the web. Because it uses headings, lists, bullet points and visual appeal. It also speaks directly to the reader (eg. "your" web-writing).

## Extra (optional) activities: web-writing practice!

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### **4. Now that you have an understanding of how to write effectively for the web – let's put that knowledge into action!**

**Change the following paragraph from its formal essay style of writing into a web-based style of writing.**

One significant problem with social media in recent times is that consumers are being bombarded with an ever increasing volume of information, commonly called 'white noise', making it difficult to get messages through to these consumers. A primary strategy in breaking through this white noise is to carefully target all social media communication. Instead of adopting a generalist, mass-media approach, for example, web-writers are increasingly being encouraged to tailor their tone and style to their targeted end-users. A second strategy, related to the first, is that in targeting end-users, a web-writer can deliberately cultivate a 'culture' or heavily stylised web-presence. This is similar to the building of a brand but pushes these boundaries further as it is more than just a focus on a product but, rather, on filtering through a variety of messages that are of key relevance to the end-user. In order to successfully carry out these strategies of targeted communication and the establishment of a web-culture, a writer must have an in-depth knowledge of their intended audience.