

Some principles of online writing

By Thom Quine

1. **Serve the reader.**

The reader has come to your site because they have something to do and need information to do it. Perform a thorough front-end analysis to identify who your target audience is and to understand what they need to do, then tailor your content to serve their objectives. Understand the questions your visitors arrive with – and provide the answers before they even have to ask.

2. **Cut information overhead.**

Information overhead is unusable information you must plow through to get to the usable information you're really after. Document overhead includes:

- Fluff
- Introductory paragraphs that say nothing
- Words that tell you nothing
- Color that tells you nothing
- Graphics that serve no purpose other than ornamentation
- Icons whose meaning is unclear
- Any form of dishonesty, misrepresentation, or falsehood

3. **Keep it short.**

Onscreen reading is hard on the eyes, and online visitors resent every lost nanosecond.

- Keep paragraphs short, ideally down to one or two sentences
- Keep sentences concise
- Avoid convoluted constructions
- Avoid semi-colons or sentences with two or more clauses
- Try to convert long sentences to bulleted lists.

4. **Make it scannable.**

Don't force the reader to click to a new page or scroll vertically or horizontally to finish reading a paragraph.

Make sure there are handy visual clues pointing the reader to the information they're seeking. Such visual clues include:

- Subheads
- Headers
- Bullets
- Numbers
- Bold or highlighted text
- Navigational images.

5. **Use graphics sparingly.**

A picture tells a thousand words. But only use pictures, charts, tables, and other graphics where they will serve to convey the information more quickly and effectively than text. Graphics must serve content – graphics as ornamentation or decoration is distracting.

6. **Don't allow page design to interfere with the message.**

Writing online is inseparable from presentation online. Lead your visitor straight to your message without forcing them to stop and think about the visual design of the message. Make the design as transparent as a pane of glass. If your visitor has to stop for a moment to wonder why your text is formatted red on a blue background, or to question your use of 12 pt. Edwardian Script – they're looking at the glass, not what's behind the glass. If the glass is an obstacle between the reader and the message, that probably means the glass is dirty. Clean it up.

7. **Don't allow writing style to interfere with the message.**

Don't write in any way meant to serve your ego rather than to serve your site visitor. Write to convey information. Style must serve content, and that means the reader must see straight through the writing to the content behind it. If the reader ever once stops to ask themselves, "I wonder why they chose to write this way" – you've failed.

8. Layer information.

Layering is the art of putting vital information in a short form with little explanation on the outermost layer seen by the online visitor, but providing links or some other path that allow readers to dig deeper for greater detail where they feel they need to. The paragraphs on this page are layered. Layering information empowers the visitor. It lets your content serve both highly experienced visitors who are familiar with your subject and novices who might need a longer explanation of background concepts or theory.

9. Chunk information.

Group information into logical, bite-sized pieces. A “chunk” of information should try to answer a single question on a single topic.

10. Structure information.

People think hierarchically, whether you’d like them to or not. Make sure your content has a hierarchical structure, and make sure that structure is visible.

11. Get to the point.

Put the key paragraph first; put the key sentence in the key paragraph first; put the key concept in the key sentence first. Let the reader decide whether to read further.

12. Engineer an efficient pathway to the information your audience is seeking.

The race goes to the swift! Get your audience to the information they seek in the shortest possible time and they will thank you for it. Because visitors come in through search engines, you’ll need to create a path from any page to any other piece of content.

13. Test everything.

No matter what you’ve written or how good a writer you are, you can always learn from a review by a second set of eyes.

14. Take a lesson from George Orwell.

On the next page is a short piece of advice from the greatest novelist and one of the greatest essayists of the 20th century. Memorize this advice and use it every time you write.

George Orwell's Elementary Rules of Style

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language* (May 1945)