



CARTER RAE COMMUNICATIONS LTD



# WRITING FOR THE WEB

A BRIEF GUIDE TO WRITING CONTENT  
FOR INTERNET AND INTRANET SITES

## Writing for the web v writing for print

Reading onscreen material is a very different experience from reading print – writing content for any internet or intranet site needs to reflect this. (Simply treating computer screens as an alternative form of paper results in ineffective communication).

Online readers tend to scan text rather than read it in full, have shorter attention spans and become impatient if they cannot access or understand the information they require. They prefer short, straightforward, informative, objective, credible text that can be processed quickly and efficiently.

Onscreen text can't be as subtle as print. You must get to the point quicker and with more emphasis. The goal is not to see how much time you can get readers to spend on a document but how little time they need to get all the information they require.

Research shows that less than ten per cent of internet readers ever scroll beyond the top of web pages, so attracting and retaining them requires great care and effort. Because readers can't scroll through onscreen text easily, they depend on explanatory headings/headlines, summaries, captions, highlighting and links (microcontent) that catch their eye, showing them what else is available (macrocontent) and how to get there.

To be effective, onscreen text must at the very least be:

- Quick to access
- Easy to scan
- Brief but linked to full information and contact points
- Straight to the point.

Online communication depends on the ability of the designer and writer to make an instant impact. Design and navigation are an integral part of the writing process – consider navigation and design *before* writing but *after* outlining.

## Outlining

It is important to plan and arrange your information into an outline, restricting each section to a single theme or topic of information. Structure your material so that readers can immediately see where they should go to get exactly what they want. Aim to answer all their natural questions and make it clear how they can access additional information or provide feedback.

Paragraphs should be short and centred around one main idea, made apparent in a topic sentence. The other few sentences should be supporting ones. Often one-sentence paragraphs are acceptable, especially if you're using narrow columns. Ideally a paragraph should be no more than five lines long – readers will often skip past longer paragraphs.

Keep paragraphs short by eliminating unnecessary material. Where possible, use simple tables, charts, bulleted lists and graphics to reduce page scrolling.

## □ Headings

In print, the reader is drawn to a picture first; online, the reader is drawn to the heading. Titles and headings need to grab attention and interest without being misleading. They should stand on their own and make sense when the rest of the content is not available. Ideally, they should be straight to the point and the reader should be able to scan them quickly. They don't need to be grammatical sentences but more like billboard slogans.

## □ Summaries

Summaries involve more reader processing and should therefore consist of only one or two sentences. Often a summary alone can provide all the information the readers want. Make sure summaries are informative rather than descriptive. For lengthier articles, provide a persuasive and concise one-paragraph link description.

The print maxim **AIDA** translates well to the net:

- Grab your readers' **A**ttention
- Arouse their **I**nterest
- Stimulate their **D**esire
- Tell them what **A**ction to take.

## □ Helping the reader to scan

- Get straight to the point
- Use short, informative, straightforward headlines – without playing on words
- Bring in brief summaries or introductions (and consider using them as hyperlinks) so readers know the bottom-line up front
- Use short, meaningful subheadings
- Break down narratives into lists with bullets/numbers/indentation
- Cut down wording as much as possible – 'every sentence, every phrase, every word has to fight for its life'
- Don't underline as this can cause confusion with hyperlinks
- Select easy to read common typefaces and sizes, making use of varying font sizes (sans serif fonts such as Arial and Helvetica are easier to read onscreen)
- Consider using **bold** text for key phrases and words – but use sparingly.
- Use line spacing between paragraphs
- Use rules (lines separating text) including graphic rules
- Consider using graphs/charts/illustrations wherever possible
- Use surrounding white space to make the text stand out
- Consider using colour – but be aware that lighter colours can make text difficult to read onscreen.

## **Further Information**

If you have any questions in relation to the information contained in this brief introductory guide, or would like assistance in preparing copy for your internet or intranet site, please contact:

**Ron Aitken**  
**Director**  
**Carter Rae Communications Ltd**  
**24 Ainslie Place**  
**Edinburgh**  
**EH3 6AJ**  
**Tel: 0131 225 9979**  
**Fax: 0131 220 2895**  
**Email: [ron@carterrae.co.uk](mailto:ron@carterrae.co.uk)**  
**[www.carterrae.co.uk](http://www.carterrae.co.uk)**

## **Content criteria quick checklist**

- Accuracy** – is it correct?
- Brevity** – could it be any shorter or tighter?
- Clarity** – is your message immediately clear?
- Detail** – should you provide further links?
- Emphasis** – are your main or new points emphasised?
- Feedback** – how can readers respond to your message?
- Good looking** – does your material look inviting?