



Writing for the Web

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1. How users read on the Web

“They don’t.” (This is a famous quote from Web expert Jakob Nielsen.) People rarely read Web pages word by word; instead, they scan the page, picking out individual words and sentences, looking for the specific information they want.

Reading text on screen is much harder than reading print. This means people read slower, comprehend less, recall less and do less in response.

Most important, on the Web, **people are impatient**. If they can’t find the content they need at a glance, or if a page looks like it will take lot of their time, they’ll go to another page.

To write effectively for the Web, you have to keep all this in mind. You always have to remember that readers are digesting your content in an entirely different way than they digest print content. You have to write for distracted, impatient readers. It’s a new model—your readers are actively choosing their path through content, rather than passively being lead. And if your pages don’t give users what they want, they have billions of other pages at their fingertips—they *will* leave.

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2. Choose content wisely

Users are in control on the Web. They're short on time and can access billions of pages at the click of a mouse, so they're very selective in what they choose to read. They will only read content if it meets all their needs.

So, when you choose what to publish on a Web site, you need to pick your killer content. Ask yourself, what do your readers really want to know? What do they need to know badly enough that they will take the time to actively seek out your site?

Before you post content, put it aside for awhile. Then read it again with a fresh perspective and ask yourself:

- Is this as clear as possible?
- Is there a simpler way to say this?
- Is there a shorter way to say this?
- Is this absolutely necessary?

Don't fall into the trap of thinking it won't hurt to publish any content you have. Content isn't neutral. It either delivers value or destroys it. If you bore users or waste their time, you leave them with a negative impression.

Be task-oriented

When choosing content, keep in mind what tasks users want to accomplish on your site. Choose the content they need to accomplish their tasks, and organize it to help them finish their tasks quickly and easily.

It's difficult to break away from an organization-centered focus and move to a user-centered focus—to be driven by what the reader wants to know, rather than by what the site wants to say. But it's vital to creating successful content. One technique that may help as you're writing is, for each page you're working on, write a list of questions that the particular audience for that page would ask, if they were there in person. Then let those questions guide what content goes on the page.

Also, choose content that calls readers to action. Use the interactivity of the Web to get them involved with the site. Get them to subscribe to an e-mail newsletter or click on a link to another page. Any action will connect them more closely to the university. Users won't see these calls to action as pushy—they'll see them as an invitation.

Above all, focus on what your users *need to do*, not on what you think you need to tell them.

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3. Control voice and tone

The voice of www.du.edu should be:

- Active. Use strong verbs, and avoid passive voice. (See [section 7](#).)
- Consistent throughout the site. Too many voices can be disorienting and detract from university's unified brand image.

- Confident, but not arrogant or pompous.
- Informative and honest.
- Engaging, current and enthusiastic.
- Informal, but not colloquial (i.e., don't use slang heavily).
- Personal and conversational. Make users feel like you're sharing ideas with them, not lecturing them.
- Extremely focused. Avoid distracting users with a lot of off-topic text, links and images.

To achieve this voice, focus on keeping your writing succinct and straightforward. Clarity and simplicity are your ultimate goals.

To create extremely clear, simple text, you may have to let go of some of the rules you learned about formal writing. For example, Web writing should use

- Second person ("You can take tours," rather than "Prospective students can take tours.") This gives users the sense that they're in a direct, personal conversation.
- Contractions ("don't" instead of "do not").
- Sentence fragments. Occasionally. For variety or emphasis.
- Exclamation points! They can be used sparingly. But don't overuse them!!!!!!

Avoid marketese—the promotional writing style with boastful, subjective claims (e.g., "the most beautiful campus ever"). These unsupported claims hurt the site's credibility. Plus, Web users see this kind of text as a waste of time—they're looking for straight facts.

To test the voice of your writing, try reading it out loud. If you feel uncomfortable saying the words, then they're going to come across as phony or overly formal to users.

And remember, keep the site personal. Web users want to hear the voices of real people, not just the generic voice of an institution. Use photos and quotes of people from the DU community whenever possible.

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4. Keep it short

Readers don't spend enough time on Web pages to read a great deal of text. A Jakob Nielsen study from 2007 showed that users spend *30 seconds* on average reading a page before they decide to leave it; and *2 minutes* on an entire site. Even if they decide a site has the information they want, readers will spend an average of 4 minutes on the site as a whole. This means that if your pages more than 500 words long, most of that text is simply not being read.

So you need to keep your writing as concise as possible.

When you write a piece for the Web, it should have half the word count (or less) of the same piece written for print. Try writing the text the way you would normally write it, then cutting out everything you can. Then put the writing away for a while, come back to it, and cut it yet again.

A good general rule of thumb for length is

- Headings and subheads—up to 10 words
- Sentences—up to 20 words

- Paragraphs—up to 70 words
- Pages—up to 500 words

These numbers aren't absolute. It's fine to go over these limits on occasion, but most pages should stick to these lengths.

A paragraph doesn't need more than one sentence. One-sentence paragraphs are fine—even ideal—on the Web. Sentence fragments are fine, too, as long as they're clear.

Don't duplicate any information that exists on another page of your site: link to the other page.

Remember, Web writing needs much more ruthless editing than writing for print. When you're editing Web copy, be aware that what might sound abrupt in print may be perfectly appropriate for the Web. Users don't expect a lot of modifiers and introductions.

In fact, printed-out Web text should look quirky, abrupt and telegraphic. On screen, that text will be easy to digest.

Longer pages

Keep writing short, but don't break content down into different pages purely for the sake of keeping each page short. People will scroll down to read a page if the information is important enough to them. Just make sure there's no unnecessary language or information there. (And put the most vital information at the top of the page, so users who choose not to scroll won't miss it.)

If your page is long, you can provide a brief summary (30–50 words) at the top of the page so readers know whether to read on. You can also provide links from the top of the page to each of the page's subheads, so users can skip to the information they're interested in.

If your content is extremely long, and if you think users may print it to read offline, or to keep as a reference, give users a PDF version of the text (as well as the HTML version). Make it clear in your link to the PDF that this file is intended for printing. (PDFs are difficult to navigate and read on screen.)

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5. Make it scannable

When users open a Web page, they glance over it to see if it contains the information they want. If it does, they may choose to read it more closely.

So Web pages have to be highly scannable—they have to be broken up so it's easy for the eye to pick out nuggets of information, and easy for the user to grasp a page's content at a glance.

Use scannable elements to break up your text:

- Short paragraphs—Long paragraphs are intimidating, and they'll dissuade users from reading the page. Use easy-to-scan copy blocks.
- Headings and subheads—Always break your text down with headings and subheads. Subheads break text into smaller, less-intimidating pieces, and users scan them to get a

summary of the text content. Use a general heading for each page, plus frequent subheads and, when you need them, some sub-subheads. Use more subheads than you'd be comfortable with in a paper document.

- **Highlighted keywords**—You can call attention to **important words and phrases** in your text with bold or colored type. Making words into a link also draws the eye and makes the linked words into highlighted keywords. Don't highlight more than two or three phrases/links in a paragraph. If there's more than that, turn them into a bulleted list.
- **Bulleted lists**—Lists are very easy to scan. Use them whenever possible.
- **Topic sentences**—Put the main idea or conclusion of each page in that page's first sentence. Put the main idea of each paragraph in the first sentence of the paragraph. Users will skip over any additional ideas if they aren't caught by the first few words in the paragraph. Try to write the first sentence of each paragraph so it can stand alone and make sense.
- **Summary paragraphs**—Each page's first paragraph should be a summary of, description of or key message from the page.
- **Charts**—If you need to present data, put it in a chart, graph or table.
- **Pull quotes**—On longer pages, take an interesting quote from the 2nd half of the article and put it near the top of the document, in a larger font.
- **Try creative ways of presenting information to make it scannable.** (Many of these can be broken off as sidebars, which are an easy way to draw the eye to important information.)
 - FAQs
 - Checklists
 - Glossaries—Define some relevant terms in a way conveys additional information
 - “At a Glance” boxes—A few representative details called out as bullet points

Remember that visual elements like photographs and graphic elements help break of the monotony of text and guide the user's eye down the page. Look for relevant, eye-catching visuals and use them where appropriate.

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6. Chunk it

Web users pick and choose what pages to read, and even what paragraphs to read within a page. So you need to put information in discrete chunks, each of which can be read and understood out of context.

And with the content management system, content you write may be syndicated to other DU sites. So create little Lego bricks of content, which can be assembled and reassembled in ways you may not always anticipate.

Chunk your pages

Limit every page to one topic and function. This makes it easy for users to know whether they should read each page. It also makes it easier to link between pages—it lets you link users to pages that address nothing but the subject they need.

When you can, limit each topic to one page. In general, people would rather scroll to continue a single unit of content like an article or short story than click from page to page of the same article.

And remember, your context is only as large as your current page. Don't assume that users came to your page through the homepage, or through any other typical path you might imagine. They might have come from a search engine or an external, non-DU page. So, even on a page deep in your site, don't refer to text on another page and assume users have read it. If you do refer to another page, link to it.

Chunk your paragraphs

Write each paragraph as a separate object, about one topic and with one purpose. Each paragraph should answer a different question from the user. If this means you have one-sentence paragraphs, that's fine.

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7. Write clear sentences

Because users are skimming Web text so quickly, they can easily misinterpret what they read. So text has to be as simple and direct as possible.

To keep your text very clear, avoid these writing techniques:

- Subtleties, qualifications and irony. Don't make a statement and later explain that it's only true under some circumstances, and don't use sarcasm.
- Metaphors and similes. Users can misinterpret the comparison, take it literally or be distracted from your main point.
- Rhetorical questions. Users may misunderstand them, or not bother to read beyond the question to the answer.

Be ruthlessly specific.

Cut any phrases that reek of broad abstraction (“appropriate professional awareness”), vague promises (“will exceed expectations”) and general boasting (“first-class scholarship”). Replace all these phrases with specific, concrete details that support your claims. *Show* your users, don't *tell* them.

Support your claims with facts—but not just any facts. Use evidence that's credible, relevant and important to your users. For example, don't prove academic excellence to students by citing the percentage of faculty with PhDs; prove it by giving examples of student/faculty interaction. Don't just write about features (we have weekend schedules, convenient locations), write about specific impact of those features on users' lives (students can study while working full time, save driving time).

Craft simple sentences

Be informal. Use contractions, sentence fragments and informal language if they can make the text simpler and clearer.

Avoid passive voice. (“The new dates were announced by the registrar.”) Use active voice. (The registrar announced the new dates.”)

Use pronouns precisely. Make sure a pronoun replaces only one word in each sentence, and make sure it's obvious what word it replaces. (E.g., don't say “The professor gave the student

his essay,” because it’s unclear whether “his” refers to the professor or the student.) Don’t imply a general topic and then refer broadly to “it.”

Avoid complex syntax as much as possible.

- Avoid putting clauses in the middle of a sentence. (E.g., “DU students, who are all required to have laptops, often prefer to take notes electronically.”) Try not to separate the subject and the verb of the sentence, if possible.
- If you have to use clauses, try to put them at the beginning or end of the sentence—or make them their own sentences. (E.g., DU students are all required to have laptops. They often prefer to take notes electronically.)

Avoid nominalizations—Don’t turn verbs into nouns. (“We plan to achieve improvement.”) Instead, use the verbs themselves. (“We plan to improve.”)

Use modifiers sparingly. Users won’t believe a program is “innovative” or “world-class” just because you say so, so cut those adjectives. Delete any words that you’ve included just to emphasize your sincerity, like “really,” “truly” and literally.

Avoid using negatives to modify a word—it slows people down. For example:

<u>Rather than</u>	<u>Use</u>
Not many	Few
Not the same	Different
Not strong enough	Too weak
Will not prohibit	Will allow

Find shorter synonyms. Instead of “vehicle,” say “car.” Instead of “hiatus,” say “break” or “gap.”

Avoid noun strings (“site development project team”). Break them down into their precise meaning. (“Our project team is developing the site.”)

Don’t cut too much. Make sure the text you leave behind isn’t cryptic or confusing. Preserve words like “that” and “which,” and “a” and “the,” which help clarify sentence structure.

Writing simple, clear sentences doesn’t mean that your text needs to be monotonous. You can vary the length and structure of your sentences, so long as their meaning remains straightforward.

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8. Focus on the small things (titles, subheads, links, etc.)

Small elements like titles, subheads, links, lists and captions (also known as microcontent) do extra work on Web pages. They organize the page and point users to the content they’re searching for. To be effective, they need to be precise, specific and carefully written.

Also, microcontent is highly weighted by search engines. The engines presume that the words that show up in your titles, subheads, captions and other microcontent are highly relevant to the

content on your page, so they will rank your page highly for those words. For more information, see the [search engine optimization section](#).

Guidelines for all microcontent:

- **Keep it short.**
- **Write in plain language.** Avoid puns, and cute or clever headlines.
- **Avoid teasing users.** Don't try to entice them to click and see what you're talking about. Curiosity isn't enough to make users open a new page, scroll down a page or read through a list. They won't take the time to read content unless they have clear expectations for what they'll get.
- **Frontload everything.** Make the first word an important, information-carrying one. This makes scanning easier.

These examples are frontloaded:

- Health care and vacation time are important employee benefits
- Deadline for applications is August 21.
- Teens spend three hours a day online, study finds.

These aren't frontloaded:

- What is it that employees want when it comes to benefits?
- Note: the committee has announced that the deadline for applications is August 21.
- Recent study finds teens spend three hours a day online.

Page titles

These are titles that appear in the bar across the top of a Web browser window. Also, if a user minimizes a Web page, the first few words of the page title appear in the bar of the minimized window at bottom of the screen. Page titles should be 5–8 words long.

- Skip articles at the beginning of titles (like “the” and “a”).
- Don't start all your page titles with the same word. For example, don't call pages “University of Denver libraries” and “University of Denver history.” Frontload the distinctive words.
- Don't write general titles, like “Welcome to the University of Denver.” Let users know what they'll find on the page.

Headlines

Start every page with a unique, precise, explanatory headline.

- **Headlines need to stand alone.** Online headlines are often displayed out of context: in a list of articles or a directory of links, for example. Even on the page, many readers will just scan the headline and skip the body copy. Make sure your headline makes sense, even if the rest of the copy isn't available. A well-written, specific headline tells users whether reading on will get them to the information they want.
- **Include key words** about the content in the headline. This will help users who are scanning. It also helps search engines find your page.
- **Don't make the headlines too short.** Don't limit yourself to just one or two words. Titles this short are often ambiguous.

Subheads

These are the individual section headlines that divide up body copy.

- Use a subhead any time you move on to a new topic.
- Write your subheads like headlines.
- A good subhead predicts what content will follow, letting visitors decide whether or not to read the content in that section.
- After you write the headlines, do a critical review. Look at your headings and subheads as a group, separate from the text, to make sure that users can scan the subheads and see the general organization of the text.

Links

Links are a good way to give users access to a great deal of information without weighing down the page with a lot of text. They're lean, efficient content if used correctly.

When to use links:

- **Background information** (history, archives, appendices). Take information that is interesting or relevant to only a fraction of your audience or information most of your audience already knows and make it into a secondary page. Then link to it.
- **See-also information.** Users rarely land on precisely their desired page, especially if they've come from a search engine. Give them links to other DU pages that are closely related to your page.
- **Key terms** in the text that are discussed on other DU pages. (This is particularly helpful to users who linked directly into a subpage—this lets them explore the rest of the site).
- **Don't use links as footnotes.** They shouldn't just repeat or support what you say. Links should provide users with information your text didn't give them.
- **Links must be optional.** The page must stand on its own; it must make sense whether or not users choose to click on the links. Links are for additional information, not for information that's vital to understanding the current page.
- **Use links systematically** whenever possible. In one category of page (e.g., news articles, academic departments), always have the same kinds of links available, and always in the same place on the page.
- **Only link to credible sites.** If you link to sites outside of du.edu, make sure they're high-quality, accurate, well-respected sites. The quality of the sites we link to reflects on the quality of our site.
- **Don't overuse links.** *Too many* links are visually distracting and disrupt the flow of your content. Also, you don't want to overload your reader with choices—your users won't know which links are genuinely relevant and useful for them. In general, don't put more than 2-3 links in a paragraph, and select those links carefully.

How to write text for links:

- Make sure the words you make into a link are a descriptive title (e.g., [Bioengineering research](#), not [Learn more](#)). Most links should be nouns, stating what you'll get if you go to the linked page, rather than verbs. Never make "[click here](#)" into a link.
- Make link-text **self-explanatory and descriptive** so users know exactly what they'll find when they click. When possible, make the link text match the headline of the page that will open.

- Put hyperlinks at the **end of sentences**, where they have the most emphasis and don't interfere with the reading of the sentence.
- If a link is to a page on **another Web site** (outside of du.edu), say so.
- If a link opens a **different type of file** (not a Web page), state the type of file in parentheses. Because non-HTML files generally take longer to load, warn your users ahead of time so they aren't stuck waiting to load a PDF file they don't really want. If it's a particularly large file that will take a long time to download, give approximate download times for broadband and dial-up connections. (Generally, the only file type other than HTML that you would use for text content would be a PDF. You should never post content as a Word or Excel file.)

Lists

Turn any series of items into a bulleted or numbered list, rather than writing it out as body copy.

- Limit lists to 10 items. Studies show users can only deal with 7–10 options at a time. If you have more items than this, use subheads to break the list down into smaller sub-lists.
- Give each list a descriptive heading.
- **Boldface the lead-ins** for long list items. Start each item a few words that summarize that item, and put those words in bold.
- List items in the order that's most logical for the user.
- If you can, put the longest item at the end of the list, so it won't slow down users' scanning of the other items.
- Avoid single-item lists.

Captions

Web caption text usually is small or otherwise hard to read, so keep it very short—ideally 10 words or less. Answer the user's natural questions: "What am I looking at?" and "Why are you showing me this?" Use present-tense verbs, and make sure the caption relates directly to the photo and the story.

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9. Create evergreen pages

Web content must never seem dated. While some Web pages may go for months without being updated, it should always look like they could have been written today. Users expect Web pages to be living documents.

To avoid dated content:

- Don't use relative terms when discussing time—like "now," "last fall," "in the next six months," or "shortly." Use specific dates instead—"by June 2008," or "in early 2006."
- When talking about people at DU, refer to position titles or roles when appropriate, rather than giving the name of an individual. That way the page won't become outdated if someone changes jobs. If you have to provide contact information, try to use a generic contact address like `communications_and_marketing@du.edu`, or link to the department's staff page.

If you add new information to a page that doesn't change much over time, help users find it by indicating new items with a little “new” symbol.

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10. Help the search engines

Search engine optimization—that is, making your site appear as high as possible in the list of results users get when they perform searches—is constantly becoming increasingly important.

Most people who come to your site will reach it by searching. (One recent report said 91% of all Web traffic begins with a search query.) But the farther down your site appears in the list of search results, the less users will click on it.

According to Web content expert Gerry McGovern ([see article](#)):

- Over 40 percent of people click on the first search result.
- Over 90 percent click within the first 10 results.
- More people have been on top of Mount Everest than have been to the 1,000th search result.

How it works

Though the precise formula used to calculate search rankings varies among individual search engines, all search engines base their calculations on two basic factors: 1) how relevant your page is to the terms that have been searched and 2) how much importance other sites place on your site.

Search engines use “spiders,” programs that constantly crawl across the Web and collect data about page content and the links between pages. Using the data from the spiders, search engines rank your page on the search results page based on two factors:

1. How relevant is the content on your page to the searched term(s). This isn't just a question of how many times the search term shows up on your page. The engines also factor in *where* the term appears—whether it's in the page title, subheads and links, whether it appears closer to the top of the page or the bottom.
2. How important and how trusted is your page overall. Google calls this factor your PageRank. It's determined by how many other pages link to you, and the quality of the pages that link to you (i.e., the higher the PageRank of the pages that link to you, the higher your PageRank will be).

To increase your page's search engine rankings:

- Pick focused, very precise keywords that describe what your page is about. And make sure they're the words your *audience* uses, not necessarily the words you're used to using in your department. Imagine you're a user who's trying to find the page, and imagine what search terms you would use.
- Use those keywords in you the text on your page and, most important, your page title, headline, subheads and links. Search engine spiders put more weight on this text than on ordinary body copy.

- Get other legitimate, well-respected sites to link to your site.
- Update your content regularly. Frequently updated sites are ranked higher by search engines.

Metadata

This is text that describes a Web page. Users don't see it when they view the page (other than the title metatag, which appears in the top bar of the Web browser), but spiders use it. It includes a title, a description, which can be up to 300 words, and a set of keywords. (Many search engines don't use keywords anymore, but some still do.)

What's important is that the keyword you select for your page appear in the metadata. It's also important that your metadata matches the actual content on your page. If it doesn't, search engines will give your site a low ranking.

Also, in some cases, the metadata description may be the text the search engine displays with the search result. So it's important that the text be descriptive and accurate.

For a good basic grounding in SEO, see Google's [Search Engine Optimization Starter Guide](#) (PDF).

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11. Keep text legible

Text is fuzzier and harder to read on screen than on paper, so make your text as easy to read as possible.

Choosing a typeface

- Avoid using small type; it's hard to read on screen.
- Make sure there's a lot of contrast between your text and the background of your page. (It doesn't have to be black text on a white background, though. Some studies have shown that black text on a light-grey background is actually easier to read than black text on a white background.)
- Dark text on a light background is much more readable than light text on a dark background. Avoid using reversed-out type (white text against a colored background).
- If text is large enough, it doesn't matter whether you use sans serif fonts (fonts like Verdana and Arial that don't have tiny cross-hatches at the ends of the lines) or serif fonts (fonts like Times New Roman and Garamond that do have cross-hatches). At small sizes on a computer screen, the cross-hatches get blurry, so serif fonts become hard to read.

All the typefaces included in the University's Web-page template have been chosen for their legibility. If you're using a DU template, then your typeface meets all these criteria.

Making your words reader-friendly

- Use italics sparingly. Long blocks of italicized text are difficult to read on-screen.
- ALL CAPITAL LETTERS are difficult to read.

- Don't use colons or semicolons; they're hard for users to see on a screen. Instead of colons, use em-dashes (—). Instead of using semicolons, separate the sentence into two sentences.
- Don't underline text (unless it's a link).
- If you use color to highlight text, use only one color. Multiple colors get confusing.
- Be careful when you use the letter O and the number 0, as well as the letter I and the number 1. They're extremely easy to confuse on screen, so make sure it's obvious at a glance whether you mean the letter or the number.
- Spell out all numbers lower than 10. (E.g., write the word "six" rather than using the numeral 6.) This makes them easier to read at a glance.

In general, keep the page's appearance simple, functional and fast-downloading.

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12. Make your pages accessible

To help users who are visually handicapped or hearing impaired, provide text descriptions for any audio files, images, videos or animations you include on your Web page. This "alt text" also helps search engines find your content.

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13. Remember multimedia opportunities

Remember that text may not be the most effective or efficient way to communicate the information you want to give to users. You have a number of multimedia options:

- Photos
- Video clips
- Sound clips
- Slideshows (with or without audio)

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14. Resources

For more information about writing for the Web:

Online resources

Web pages

[UseIt.com](#)

The Web site of Jakob Nielsen, the world's best-known expert in Web usability (which includes making sites easy to read)

[CollegeWebeditor.com](#)

A blog about higher ed Web sites by a former university Web editor.

Google's [Search Engine Optimization Starter Guide](#)

PDF, 22 pages

www.content-strategy.com/Web_Writing/

www.edit-work.com

How to edit Web content

Newsletters

Bob Johnson's *Your Higher Education Marketing Newsletter*. Subscribe at www.bobjohnsonconsulting.com/newsletter.html

Covers trends in higher ed Web sites and examples of what other sites are doing well.

Bowen Craggs *Website Effectiveness* newsletter. Subscribe at www.bowencraggs.com.
Biweekly newsletter that analyzes the effectiveness of a few sample sites and suggests improvements.

Gerry McGovern's *New Thinking* newsletter. Subscribe at www.gerrymcgovern.com.
A Web content expert who writes about a wide range of site types.

Books

Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content That Works, by Janice Redish (Morgan Kaufmann, 2007). If you're new to Web content, this is a good book to start with. It's clear, straightforward and a relatively quick read.

Content Critical, by Gerry McGovern and Rob Norton (Financial Times Prentice Hall, 2001)

Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Guide to Web Usability, by Steve Krug (New Riders Press, 2nd edition 2005). Addresses the technical, design and content aspects of creating easy-to-use sites.

Hot Text: Web Writing That Works, by Jonathan and Lisa Price (New Riders Press, 2002)
A good source of in-depth examples. Every chapter features before-and-after samples of writing that's been fine-tuned for the Web.

For general style, usage, grammar and punctuation:

The Associated Press Stylebook
University of Denver Stylebook

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