Writing for the Web

writing for your audience
1. Your web copy is a Promise to your audience
   It’s a covenant, a pact, a guarantee

   Every link is a promise:
   links accurately describe the page it refers to
   destination fulfills what was promised

   Every page is a promise:
   words accurately describe your programs and initiatives
   pictures accurately portray your people and environment
2. Audience
Know your intended audience.
*Write for your intended audience.*

Anticipate your intended audience’s questions
*Write to address their questions clearly and easily.*

Be aware of your audience’s top tasks
*Write to get them to and through their tasks quickly.*
PRESUPPOSITIONS: Audience

“PEOPLE WILL READ WHAT I WRITE”

Not true.
Your audience scans. Glances.
...until they find what they want.

“Serious reading takes a hit from online scanning and skimming, researchers say.”
Washington Post, Michael S. Rosenwald, April 6, 2014

Changing Presuppositions about Audience

PEOPLE WILL READ WHAT I WRITE
Not true.
Your audience scans Web copy. Glances at it.
They don’t read until they find what they want to read.

That’s what we do as well.
I scan the NY Times content until I find the article I want to read.
I scroll quickly through a restaurant webpage to find the menu or how to make reservations.
“NPR Pulled a Brilliant April Fools’ Prank On People Who Don’t Read,” Gawker, April 3, 2014

Facebook followers proved the point of NPR’s April Fools prank when they commented on this spoof post without reading it.
PRESUPPOSITIONS: Audience

“PEOPLE WANT WHAT I WANT”

Not true.
Your copy must appeal to audience’s self-interest
— not yours

Program directors are often very fond of “Apply Now” buttons. But if many of your visitors aren’t ready to apply, it can be like asking them to marry you on the first date. It is more effective to ensure visitors can find and clearly understand each of the tasks that lead to applying.
PRESUPPOSITIONS: Audience

“PEOPLE HANG OUT ONLINE”

Not true.
Online to get something done.
Getting notices about other things.
Searching while doing other tasks.

PEOPLE HANG OUT ONLINE
Not true.
Your audience goes online to get something done. They are on their phone getting notices about other things. They are searching while doing other tasks.
In 2000, the average attention span was 12 seconds. Today, it’s 8 seconds. The attention span of a goldfish is 9 seconds.  
*Time Magazine, May 14, 2015*
PRESUPPOSITIONS: Web

“MY WEBSITE IS ABOUT MY (office/research/program).”

Not true.
It’s not about us. It’s about them.
It’s not about Brown.
It’s about what your audience wants or needs to know from Brown.

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It’s not about us. It’s about them.
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PRESUPPOSITIONS: Web

“I KNOW WHAT MY WEB CONTENT SHOULD BE.”

True, but only partially.
Know and understand audience needs through data and research.
Analytics, surveys, focus groups, interviews.

I KNOW WHAT MY WEB CONTENT SHOULD BE.
True, but only partially.
Identify your intended audience, and get to know and understand their needs through data and research. Analytics, surveys, focus groups, interviews. (Analytics slide)
PRESUPPOSITIONS: Audience

“I KNOW WHAT MY SITE SHOULD LOOK LIKE
— I’LL ADD CONTENT AS IT COMES”

Please, please, please NO!
Start with content!
Outline information and develop a content strategy.

Let content lead design, features & navigation—not the other way around.

I KNOW WHAT MY SITE SHOULD LOOK LIKE
— I’LL ADD CONTENT AS IT COMES
NEVER!

Start with content! Strategize! Make a plan!

Let content lead design, features & navigation—not the other way around.
Outline information and develop a content strategy:

to focus your writing for your audience.
to identify valuable, findable, meaningful content for your audience
to create and ensure you can maintain continued useful, usable content.

Let content lead design, features & navigation—not the other way around.
FRAMING CONTENT:
Identify your audience and frame your content for their needs
recruiting, advising, promotion of a program or event – make it easily actionable
information, policy – make it easily findable and digestible
WRITING FOR THE WEB: Framing Content

Framed for audience needs

- engaging and informative from the start
- concise and simple
- organize and clearly structured

Note in Yale’s application process page: clear header, followed by 2-sentence, large-text introduction, use of bullets and links.
Web writing differs from print writing.

- Quick comprehension (think mobile).
- Save valuable time.
- Clear, succinct...Don’t “bury the lead.”
- Less is more. When in doubt, leave it out.

University of Chicago Academics page gets to the point quickly and leads to the visitor to the list, on mobile as well as desktop.
WRITING FOR THE WEB: Writing Style

Web writing differs from print writing

• Speak to audience and not at them.
• Use your audience’s vocabulary.
  • Is your audience the prospective student?
  • Or, target professionals with specialized, precise, professional vocabulary?
  • Avoid Web-technology jargon and internal-office speak.

Speak to readers and not at them.
Use vocabulary that your audience will recognize or understand.
  Is your audience the prospective student?
  Or, is your audience target professionals with specialized vocabulary that will communicate more precisely and professionally?
  Avoid Web-technology jargon and internal-office speak.

Fordham’s Undergraduate Admission page is immediately friendly and naturally includes the words a prospective student will use in the search engine, like: New York City, college, Jesuit, Catholic, etc.
WRITING FOR THE WEB: Writing Style

Uninformative title
Welcome!

Welcome to graduate and professional studies at Collegial University. Graduate and professional studies at Collegial were established with the mission of academic excellence and rigorous research, within a cooperative environment that nurtures the individual and supports a community of learning. Collegial graduate, professional and research students are among the most celebrated and successful intellectuals in the nation. Hundreds of graduates pass through our doors each year, proud to have earned a graduate or professional degree with the Collegial name.

Dense wall of text
Graduate and professional studies at Collegial consist of an array of advanced degrees that can be obtained through the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (GSAS), the School of Architecture (CSA), the School of Art (CAR), the School of Divinity (DIVINITY), the School of Drama (CSD), the School of Engineering and Applied Science (CEAS), the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies (SFES), the Law School (LAW), the School of Management (CSM), The School of Medicine (CGM), the School of Music (SMM), the School of Nursing (NURSING), and the School of Public Health (CSPH).

GSAS and each of the twelve professions schools has its own programs of study, academic requirements, and faculty research. Please refer to the website of each school for further information.

School names buried in a paragraph full of institutional acronyms
Example of “Wall of Text” language is too formal
use of “Welcome” as a page title or subtitle is uninformative
Use of headers and subheaders
brief and to the point
gets visitors where they want to go as quickly as possible
WRITING FOR THE WEB: Scannability

- Structure your writing to be easily understood
- Keep headings short, direct and powerful
- Use subheadings to keep reader moving forward
- Include active links (judiciously)
- Use lists
- Keep sentences simple

SCANNABILITY:
Structure your writing to be easily understood
Keep headings short, direct and powerful
Use subheadings to keep reader moving forward
Include active links (judiciously) — don’t make the text impossible to read. Too many links in a paragraph of running text are like pot holes and speed bumps.

Use lists
Keep sentences simple
WRITING FOR THE WEB: Scannability

• Show. Don’t Tell.
  • Writing should complement other visuals: data, pictures, infographics, video.
• Highlight Facts:
  Audiences hunt for facts online.

SCANNABILITY:

SHOW DON’T TELL: Writing should complement other visuals: data, pictures, infographics, video.
HIGHLIGHT FACTS: Audiences hunt for facts online, so factually rich content will attract readers and keep their attention.
WRITING FOR THE WEB: Searchability

• Make it findable!
  • use the terms your audience uses to search the web
  • As you write, keep a list of keywords
  • Consider your content flexible and “re-purposable.”
    — from long-form article to twitter post.

  More in future workshops.

Make it findable: use the terms your audience uses to search the web.

(Example: if your program has an idiosyncratic title like “Future-centric Entrepreneurship,” make sure your text includes the real words your potential applicants will search, like “executive MBA,” “business strategy,” and “management analyst.”)
As you write, keep a list of keywords that you might use to tag your page content for search, and review how many of those words flow naturally within your text

Consider your content flexible and “re-purposable.” Keep in mind various ways your content might be presented, edited, or reused in different media (e.g. from long-form article to twitter post.).

— more on meta data, and preparing your content for search and social media it in future workshops.
Successful Web Writing

- For an identified intended audience
- Led by audience needs and tasks
- Led by strategic planning
Successful Web Writing

• Speaks in the audience’s language
• Easy for audience to use
• Gets them where they are going
• Helps them accomplish their top tasks