

Writing for the Web

writing for your audience



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PROMISE

Your web copy is a promise to your audience

- Every link is a promise:
 - link accurately describes 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



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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

AUDIENCE

- Know your intended audience.
Write for your intended audience.
- Know your audience's questions
Write to address their questions clearly and easily.
- Know your audience's top tasks
Write to get them to and through their tasks quickly.



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



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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.

PRESUPPOSITIONS



NPR

What has become of our brains?

"PEOPLE WILL READ..."

Not true.



Why Doesn't America Read Anymore?

npr.org

In an age of readily available information and countless ways to get it, we seem to be losing touch with our powers of comprehension.

Like · Comment · Share · April 1 at 1:00pm · 🌐

"NPR Pulled a Brilliant April Fools' Prank On People Who Don't Read," Gawker, April 3, 2014



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["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



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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.



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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.

PRESUPPOSITIONS: Audience

"PEOPLE HANG OUT ONLINE"

Not true.

AVERAGE ATTENTION SPAN:

2000 = 12 seconds.

2016 = 8 seconds

Goldfish = 9 seconds.

Time Magazine, May 14, 2015



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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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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.

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.



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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.



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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.

PRESUPPOSITIONS: Audience

"I KNOW WHAT MY SITE
SHOULD LOOK LIKE..."

Content Strategy

- **to focus**
- **to identify**
- **to create and
ensure you can maintain**

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



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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.

WRITING FOR THE WEB: **Framing Content**

Identify your audience and
frame your content for their needs

- recruiting, promotional:
–*make it easily actionable*
- information, policy:
–*make it easily findable and digestible*



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FRAMING CONTENT:

Identify your audience and frame your content for their needs

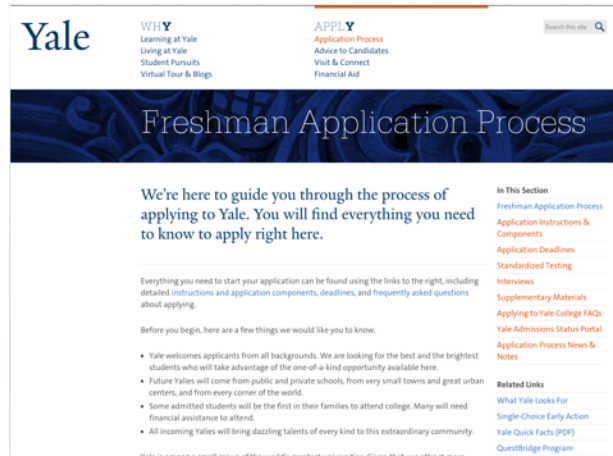
recruiting, advising, promotion of a program or event – make it easily actionable

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



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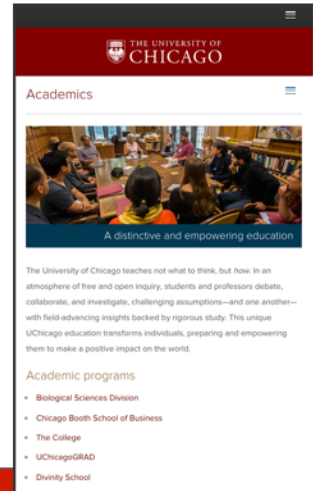
Make content engaging and informative from the start
Keep content as concise and simple as possible
Organize your information well and make the structure apparent

Note in Yale's application process page: clear header, followed by 2-sentence, large-text introduction, use of bullets and links.

WRITING FOR THE WEB: **Writing Style**

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.



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Web writing differs from print writing.

Focus on quick comprehension.

Use signposts to get busy people quickly and easily to where they need to go. Focus on informing quickly. Focus on how you can save people time.

Write clearly, succinctly, putting important phrases and concepts front and center. (Don't "bury the lead.")

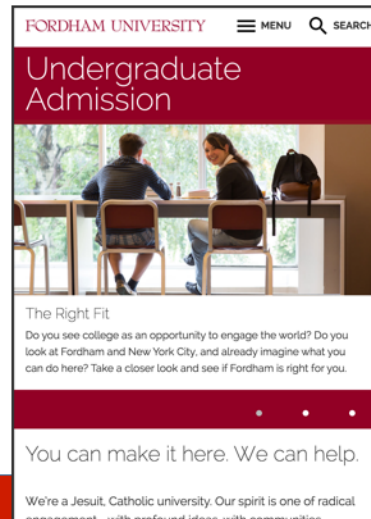
Clarify by removing, not adding whenever possible. Less is more. When in doubt, leave it out.

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.



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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!
Dense wall of text	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.
School names buried in a paragraph full of institutional acronyms	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 (C-ARTS), the Collegial Divinity School (DIVINITY), the School of Drama (CSD), the School of Engineering and Applied Science (CSEAS), the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies (SFES), The Law School (LAW), the School of Management (CSM), The School of Medicine (CSOM), the School of Music (SM), 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.



Example of "Wall of Text"

language is too formal

use of "Welcome" as a page title or subtitle is uninformative

WRITING FOR THE WEB: **Writing Style**

Page content clear from page title

Text broken into short blocks with subheadings

No institutional acronyms. Rather, description includes common terms that the audience will use in a web search.

Graduate & Professional Studies

Collegial offers advanced degrees through its Graduate School of Arts & Sciences and 12 professional schools. Browse the organizations below for information on programs of study, academic requirements, and faculty research.

Graduate School of Arts & Sciences

Collegial's Graduate School of Arts & Sciences offers programs leading to M.A., M.S., M.Phil., and Ph.D. degrees in 73 departments and programs. [\[Learn more. >\]](#)

School of Architecture

Our students understand architecture as a creative, productive, innovative, and responsible practice. [\[Learn more. >\]](#)

School of Art

The Collegial School of Art has a long and distinguished history of training artists of the highest caliber. [\[Learn more. >\]](#)

School of Drama

Collegial School of Drama graduates have raised the standards of professional practice around the world in every theatrical discipline, creating bold art that engages the mind and delights the senses. [\[Learn more. >\]](#)

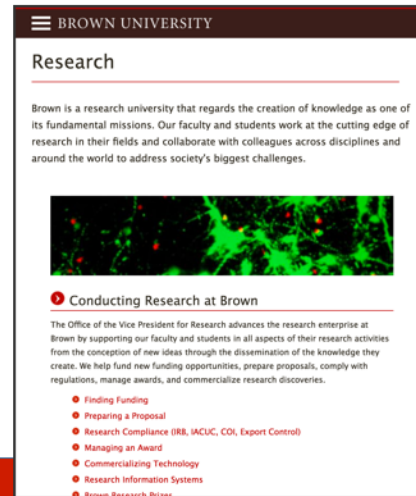


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Use of headers and subheaders
brief and to the point
gets visitors where they want to go as quickly as possible

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



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SCANNABILITY:

Structure your writing to be easily understood

Keep headings short, direct and powerful

Use subheadings to keep reader moving forward

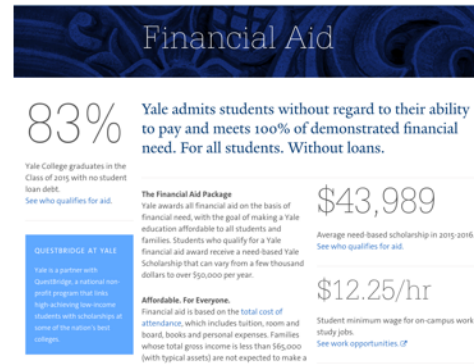
Include active links (judiciously) —*don't make the text impossible to read. Too many links in a paragraph of running text are like pot holes and speed bumps.*

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.



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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.



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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 “**repurposable**.” 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 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

