



How to write web articles that charm readers and search engines

by *Simon Hillier*

The Wonderfully Weird Web has opened up a whole new spectrum of opportunities for writers—from website copywriting, online journalism and e-newsletters to blogging, ebook writing and social networking. Of course, learning to write effectively in an environment that is growing and changing at such a frenetic pace can be confusing, frustrating and scary at times, especially when many of the techniques drummed into us at school seem to have been nonchalantly flipped on their heads. If that's not enough, we are all expected to happily type away under a relentless barrage of new technologies and baffing jargon.

As the quintessential techno-incompetent who has made a living in the web world for more than a decade now, I would like to assure you, there is nothing to fear. Peek behind the 'dot this' and 'dot that', the code words, the lingo and the self-important speak and you'll find much of the same old grammatical mutton you've known and loved. Only now, it's dressed up as lamb to catch the eyes of an impatient and fickle 21st century audience.

Writing for the web is like speed dating

Such is the web readers demand for instant gratification that writing for the Internet has become a bit like speed dating. For those of you not familiar with this new age courting phenomenon, speed dating involves a group of eligible singles coming together in a room filled with tables for two. Over the course of the event, swaggering Romeos work their way around the room in an attempt to woo the blushing Juliet's seated at each table. While online writers don't have the luxury of five whole minutes to charm their audience, the similarities between our role and that of the speed dating Master Montague are almost uncanny.

First of all, both writer and speed dater are communicating with their audience in a rather uncomfortable environment. Just as a loud room full of hungry, competitive single-folk is hardly the ideal setting for romance; monitor resolution, screen glare, and a reading surface that won't move can easily distract all but the most infatuated reader.

Secondly, both web readers and speed daters are busy and impatient breeds. They don't have time to sit and listen to long-winded stories. Instead, they would prefer we get to the most important points up front before deciding whether to take the relationship any further. And finally, both scribe and sweet-talker must sound like a really good catch, because our audiences have plenty of fish in the sea to choose from. Juliet is well aware that a school of eligible

chaps are circling just tables away, while web readers can cast out their line and reel in a competitor's article with little more than a search and a click on Google.

When writing for the web it's vital we make a big impression within the first ten seconds so our target audience can't help but say, "I think we'd be good together".

How people read and search on the web

There have been numerous studies undertaken to test how people read on the web. Possibly the most fanatical researcher is Dr Jakob Nielsen of the Nielsen Norman Group (www.useit.com), widely considered the guru of web usability. His research has found that a) people read from computer screens 25% slower than from paper, b) for optimum viewing, web copy should occupy 50% the space of its paper equivalent, c) approximately 80% of Internet users always scan web pages rather than read every word, and d) websites are found through search engines almost 50% of the time.

Yes, you read it right. Only one in five people who visit your article will attempt to read all the fruits of your linguistic labour. As a writer, it's a rather deflating statistic. However, things get a little brighter when you understand that these figures are a co-dependent family based on how people read the majority of web pages. The fact is, most web pages are not reader friendly. Many consist of an ambiguous headline followed by body text that doesn't speak to the target audience; or a stream of long, wordy paragraphs that never allow the reader to come up for air. The majority of impatient web users take one scrolling glance at content like this and decide there are much better ways to spend their valuable surfing time. By writing and structuring articles that are easy to absorb, and relevant to your target market needs, you will see more people reading and enjoying the heart and soul of your work and less giving it a semi-fleeting glance.

Make your content search engine friendly

Writing to gain a higher position in search engine results is really no different to writing for your audience. It's all about relevance. When people type keywords or key phrases into Google, the displayed pages appear in order of relevance to the request. Even with all their technical wizardry, search engine experts rely heavily on the right content to improve the ranking of a website or article. One of the main reasons sites are banished to the depths of

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Google's search page results is that the language used completely misses the mark. The website copy of a company that prints brochures might proclaim, "Our business delivers a fully integrated suite of digital printing solutions". It all sounds like a very impressive and professional operation, but these words are unlikely to bring in customers via search engines. Most people looking for brochure printing services are typing in phrases like 'brochure printing' or 'discount brochure printing company'. By including the keywords and phrases that your target audience uses, search engines will view your content as far more relevant to their request and rank your page accordingly.

What's in it for me?

Online audiences are more likely to respond to your writing if you use a personal tone addressing their needs, wants and problems. Add a little humour, sophistication, or yes, even something racy, but only when and where it fits naturally. If readers don't connect with the tone, or feel it's inappropriate, they won't let you develop a relationship.

'Features and benefits' is a term frequently used in relation to copywriting. It's not something usually associated with print article writing because the reader is in a far less demanding frame of mind. When someone is flicking through a magazine in the comfort of their armchair, lounge suite or swaying hammock overlooking the Caribbean, they often stumble across random articles and read them without any real thought of "What's in it for me?" On the other hand, our impatient online readers are on a mission to find the best available source of information that satisfies their immediate need, so it's more important that our web articles not only describe what the subject of our piece does or can do (features), but what it can do for our audience (benefits/addressing problems).

A product review or hot tips article naturally presents opportunities to include both features and benefits/problems. For example, if you were reviewing a new blood pressure monitor for people to use while exercising, one feature might be an impact resistant case and armband. The benefit to your reader is that they can wear their new gadget during high impact gym workouts or a run in the park and not have to worry about it breaking. This might seem blatantly obvious to the writer and other people familiar with the product, however, the personal benefit is not always crystal clear to the uninitiated reader. Painting a simple real life benefit (or problem) not only answers every web users first question, "What's in it for me?" but also helps you develop a one-on-one relationship with your reader because they see that you understand their needs and lifestyle.

An interview with a young doctor on the rise for a medical website doesn't present benefit opportunities so easily. Think about something your audience can gain from the doctor's knowledge and experience, and how they can put it into practice. It may come down to your questions. While

not every article will focus on features and benefits/problems, web users still want to know how their investment in reading time will benefit them.

Laying out and structuring your web article

As we now know, most print articles are written and structured for an audience to appreciate in relative comfort rather than on a thermal radiating computer screen while squirming into seated positions only a chiropractor could love. As a result, most print articles directly copied and pasted to a webpage tend to repel web users. Taking the time to make existing print articles as web-friendly as possible is no less important than creating well laid-out and structured online originals for readers to enjoy.

So, to help you instil web article envy amongst your esteemed writing colleagues, here are some tips for creating reader and search engine friendly web page content.

Include keywords and key phrases

As discussed earlier, choosing the right keywords can dramatically improve your ranking on search engines. Where possible, include them in your headline, subheads, and first paragraph and then sprinkled throughout the rest of the article. Ideally, your keywords should make up between two and six percent of the total number of words. Anything more may be regarded by search engines as 'keyword stuffing' which can result in a slap on the wrist and lower ranking.

Avoid keywords that are too general. For example, if you are writing an article on, 'left handed flying pigs', don't just choose 'pigs' or you will be lost amongst the thousands of websites devoted to all things swine. Be careful using industry specific jargon and politically correct terms unless you are certain that your audience will search by that term. Beware of regional phrases such as 'petrol station' versus 'gas station'.

Keyword research tools can help you find the most popular words and phrases that web users are typing into search engines for different subjects. There are a number to choose from, but the most widely recognised is www.wordtracker.com.

Write clear and meaningful headlines

Your headline is arguably the most important element on the page. Remember the 80% of people who only ever scan web pages? Even they take time out of their busy schedule to read your headline. Search engines also place very high value on your headline to determine what your article is about, so always include your most important keywords.

Use your headline to emphasise the key benefit of your article to your target market. Asking a question can be an effective technique, as it implies that you are aware of your audience's needs or problems and creates intrigue to read the first paragraph or subheadings. Numbered lists are also

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popular because they suggest to the impatient web user that their answer is a few simple steps or tips away. Examples of these headlines would include:

‘Yoga: The easy way to increase muscle and decrease stress’

‘Are hot liquids a risk to your baby’s bottle?’

‘7 simple steps to healthy skin in 30 days’

You’ll notice that each clearly states what the article is about. Unlike print articles, web pages are no place for overly clever or ambiguous headlines. I recently saw a headline for a hay fever web treatment article titled ‘Kerchoo it’s springtime’. While regular visitors to the website might find it intriguing and read on, the chances of anyone looking on search engines for hay fever treatment articles ever finding it, let alone clicking to find out what it means, are very slim. This is not to say you shouldn’t try to be creative on the web. With so much new content being added everyday, it’s important to stand out. Just make sure your genius is not at the expense of your objective – attracting more readers. In this case, a minor change like ‘Kerchoo—bless our spring hay fever remedy’ would fix the problem.

Use subheads to guide the impatient

Subheads are road signs along the path of your story that keep web readers inspired to continue on to the end. They also offer a quick synopsis of your article to those who haven’t yet started the journey. Depending on how long your piece is, you should use subheads every two to four paragraphs to help break up long chunks of text.

Like headlines, each should include a keyword, or related word, and a clear benefit to the reader. If the subject allows it, try using verbs to encourage action such as ‘Get your heart pumping, build core muscle, eat healthy food’

‘Chunk’ your short paragraphs

Ideally, article paragraphs should be no longer than 100 words, each built from short, sharp sentences of less than 20 words. When web readers see longer paragraphs they instinctively think, “Phew, this looks tiring. Do they really think I’ve got the time and energy to navigate through that alphabetical jungle?” Short paragraphs say, “I’m easy! I won’t take long at all! Read me!” Also, single column articles of no more than 10 words per line are the easiest to absorb online.

Words or phrases in bold font help readers scan for the information they want. However, combining boldface and subheadings can be confusing so don’t overdo it. Including links and bolded words in the same paragraph can have the same result. While we’re on the subject of typography, sans serif fonts such as Verdana, Arial and Tahoma are generally considered easier to read online than serif fonts like Times New Roman and Georgia because the latter’s fancy little appendages disappear amidst pixels and bright screens.

If your article is long, try breaking it up into digestible ‘chunks’ of two to three paragraphs that sit neatly within one screen, ‘top and tailed’ by subheads. The benefit to your audience is that they can see small milestones ahead as they read and scroll. Online, we subconsciously look for navigation guides rather than read line by line, so despite the eloquent name, web users love their chunks.

Finally, be concise. Write tight. Omit all unnecessary words. ‘Nuff said.

Make use of sharp-shooting bulletpoints

Bulletpoints slow down the scanning eye and are a fast and effective way to convey important or discrete points to your audience. For this reason, they are a perfect writing tool for web copy, online articles and newsletters. Bulletpoints work like mini headlines, so include keywords and a benefit, promise or call to action. Try to keep each to the same length—one line each, two lines each, etc—so they are easier to read.

Take advantage of hyperlinks

Wikipedia describes hyperlinks as, “a reference or navigation element in a document to another section of the same document or to another document that may be on a (different) website.” I just call them “a bloody brilliant invention for web writing”. The particularly nice benefit of using hyperlinks within an article is that they allow you to introduce additional relevant material without distracting your audience from the main flow of the story, or from a particular order of presentation of ideas. Our control freak web readers can then choose to click your hyperlink immediately for further information, ignore it completely, or go back later to explore the details.

Where possible, display your hyperlinked text in blue. While it’s no longer necessary to underline hyperlinks (and it looks messy), web users understand that blue text means a link. Using an array of fluorescent colours may look prettier, but our goal as writers is to make the reading experience as easy and familiar for as many people as possible. Try to position your hyperlink near the end of a paragraph to maintain the flow. Also, search engines place greater relevance on hyperlinked words. By linking from your keywords and phrases, rather than ‘Click here’ or ‘Read more’, your article becomes just that little bit more Google friendly.

Page titles—the writer’s forgotten child

Without wanting to go all technical on you at the last hurdle, there is one area of the page we need to talk about that rarely gets a mention in the web writing analogues—page titles. The title is found in the blue bar at the very, very top of your screen. They are added into the html code, rather than content area, which usually means the job of writing page title copy is left with the web designer. There are a number of reasons I believe the writer should make it their own.

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Firstly, your title, and not your headline, is displayed in search engine results. People will quickly overlook a result with an unrelated title and be far more likely to click on one that entices them. Secondly, search engines adore keywords in page titles. And thirdly, if nothing else can convince you, 'Favourites' are listed by page title. The reason you can never find any of those great sites that you saved months ago is because someone forgot to write a meaningful page title. Each article on a site should have a unique title of no more than 60 characters with keywords placed at the front.

In the end, there's only one way to really know whether your web article stands a chance of charming those impatient readers and fickle search engines. Move to the other side of the table for an impartial view and ask yourself, "Do I think we'd be good together?"

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Peer reviewer's gross breach of confidentiality

A peer reviewer, Steven Haffner who is a diabetes researcher at the University of Texas, has a lot of explaining to do but so far his explanation has only been "Why I sent it is a mystery. I don't really understand it. I wasn't feeling well. It was bad judgement". Admittedly it is very difficult to believe what he did. He was asked to review an article for *The New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)*. This article was the meta-analysis that linked GSK's drug Avandia (rosiglitazone) with an increased risk of a heart attack and was subsequently published by the *NEJM* online on 21 May 2007. In a gross breach of reviewer confidentiality Haffner faxed the manuscript he had been asked to review to GSK. Thus GSK were well prepared when only 15 days later on 5 June, and also in *NEJM* online, GSK-sponsored researchers published an interim report in which they referred to the meta-analysis arguing that the data 'were insufficient' to show whether Avandia increased the risk of a heart attack.

Source: <http://www.nature.com/news/2008/080130/full/451509a.html>

Answer: Comprise, consist of and include

(see page 16 for question)

Comprise (or *consists of*) can only be used when all the components of the whole are listed. *Comprise* cannot be used when only part of the whole is described. The correct use of *comprise* can be explained by comparing the word with *include* which leaves open other unmentioned parts that make up the whole. In contrast, *comprise* is exclusive and leaves no room for unmentioned parts. The following correct and incorrect sentences that describe a committee of 8 people illustrate this point:

The committee comprised 5 experts and 3 members of the public. (correct)

Alternatively: The committee consisted of 5 experts and 3 members of the public. (correct)

The committee comprised 3 members of the public. (incorrect)

Alternatively: The committee consisted of 3 members of the public. (incorrect)

The committee included 3 members of the public. (correct)

The incorrect sentence in the *BMJ* was:

[Women with osteopenia] comprise more than half of the world's postmenopausal women.

Equally incorrect would be:

[Women with osteopenia] consist of more than half the world's postmenopausal women.

A correct sentence would be:

[Women with osteopenia] make up more than half the world's postmenopausal women.

But better would be:

More than half of the world's postmenopausal women have osteopenia.

And why is it *consist of* and not *comprised of*? *Consist* is an intransitive verb. This means it cannot be followed by an object whereas *comprise* is a transitive verb and is followed by an object. In effect *to consist of* = *to comprise*.

Finally, there is another, uncommonly used, meaning of *consist*. The phrasal verb *consist in* means 'to have as an essential feature': thus, good English style consists in short sentences composed of short words, unambiguously expressed.

With thanks to Neville W. Goodman (coauthor of *Medical Writing A prescription for Clarity* see www.cambridge.org/9780521858571) for alerting *TWS* to the sentence in the *BMJ* and for his contribution to the explanation above.