

Tips for Writing Online Content

Web users are an impatient lot—if they don't find good information, fast, on your Web site, they will leave and probably won't be back.

Below you'll find some tips to help you write your content so your target audience can quickly sift through your text and find the information it needs:

- Get right to the point, and deliver your message clearly.
- Use conversational language that your target audience will understand (avoid jargon and large, vague words).
- Use powerful words that convey immediacy (now, new, current, today, latest, updated, recent, soon). In addition, use the active voice (i.e., use "workers will complete the new facility" instead of "the new facility will be completed").
- Don't use long quotes, puns, and obsolete terminology (such as "check it out!," "cool stuff," "click here," "hot links," and "under construction").
- Don't be afraid to use appropriate humor to give your site a personality and consistent tone.

Make your content "scannable" so visitors can find what they are looking for quickly. These guidelines are not hard and fast rules so use what works best for your content and target audience.

- Use headlines and summaries
- Use menus or tables of contents
- Use subheaders
- Use bullets
- Use typographical elements to pull out important phrases (larger type, bold face—but NOT underlines, unless it is a hyperlink)
- Keep sentences short (no more than 20 words)
- Keep paragraphs short (no more than three sentences)
- Keep pages short (no more than three to four paragraphs). For content that is more than three to four paragraphs, consider "chunking" your content.

Good headlines:

- Include a subject and a verb ("*Training begins* on Wednesday")
- Are written in the present or future tense ("Workers begin construction")
- Are 10 words or fewer

Good summaries:

- Are no more than one to two sentences in length
- Entice the reader to explore the item further by using first or second person, explaining how the story will benefit the reader, or using questions to capture the reader's curiosity
- Include an action item for the reader (if applicable)

Include hyperlinks to other relevant Web sites or sections of your site in your text (try to have at least one hyperlink for every screen of content). Effective hyperlinks:

Web Guidelines and Standards

- Are short and precise
- Do not refer to a Web "function" (wrong: "Click here for a list of our researchers." right: "Scan our list of researchers to see who might be able to answer your question.")
- Are written so it is clear where in the document they lead (wrong: "next"; right: "next chapter")
- Emphasize only the distinctive words in a list of links (wrong: "renewable energy info for homeowners, renewable energy info for small businesses"; right: "renewable energy info for homeowners, small businesses").

Be sure each page makes sense out of context. Don't assume readers see all the surrounding content (they may not have entered from the home page).

- Build in interactive elements where appropriate.
- Consider graphics and multimedia options when developing content—because different people gather information in different ways.
- Write a descriptive title for your page. This is important because page titles are generally used in title tags, which appear in the title bar of browser windows, in bookmark and navigation lists, and in search engine results. And page titles contribute to your page ranking in search engine results.

Good titles:

- Are unique
- Describe the page content
- Include the most important keywords in the first 70 characters (including spaces)

Good title tags:

- Are the same as the page title
- Indicate to what site the page belongs (i.e. "Publications – National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service")
- Tell users when the page is a home page

Good title fields are filled in for PDFs and other downloadable documents (to help your documents rank high and display well in search engine results).

Write a specific description for each page for the description Meta tag. Writing good descriptions using targeted keywords (200 to 250 characters) contributes to the page ranking in search engine results.

If you decide to include keywords in the Meta tag section of the HTML head, keep them brief and focused on the specific content of that page. Very few, if any, search engines use keywords in ranking the relevancy of a given page anymore. However, keywords may prove useful your our own internal search engine. See below for more information on keywords.

Optimizing content for search engines

Search engines visit Web pages, index the words on those pages, and put the pages into a database. When a user does a search, the search engine compares the user's search terms against the pages in its database to find pages that contain the user's search terms. Here are some ways to optimize your content so your pages will rank higher and display properly in search results:

- **Determine key terms**—Develop a list of terms (singular and plural) that describe what your content is about. Your list should include terms users will use to search for that content in search engines, and appropriate synonyms, acronyms, and abbreviations. Good sources of terms include your statistics and your search logs.
- **Position key terms on page**—Your key terms should be used in the first 150-200 characters of text on your page (including spaces), as well as in your header text (which is also used in the title tag). Be sure your page header is text-based, not graphical. For the rest of the text, you should plan to use your key terms three times for every 100 words (don't go overboard, or search engines might suspect you of "spamming"). In addition, your key terms should be placed close together (i.e. "organic peach production").
- **Use H1-H5 HTML code for header text**—Some search engines will rank your pages higher if your header text is in "H" headers in your HTML code, instead of using bold tags or other styles.
- **Optimize your PDFs and other downloadable documents**—You can also optimize the titles and Meta data for your PDFs and other downloadable documents to help your documents rank high and display well in search engine results. Read more about optimizing PDFs and other downloadable documents. (See Formatting PDFs for detailed information.)

Other Considerations

- Hyperlinks to the page should include the main keyword(s).
- The URL should contain the top keyword(s) not abbreviations, i.e., attra.ncat.org/beefmarketing.html or beef_marketing.html NOT beefmark.html.
- ALT tags (used on images) should contain keywords.

Portions of this document were excerpted from U.S. Department of Energy - Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy Communication Standards & Guidelines.