Writing for the WWWeb

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Ten quick tips for writing for the web

1. Be brief. Get to the point. You are writing for people looking for facts. What is the most important piece of information you have for this page of the website? That should be the first fact in the first paragraph you write down. If people are really interested they will read/scan on. But give them what they need as quickly as possible.

2. Fragments vs full sentences. Fragments are better than crafted sentences on web pages. Remember most visitors are scanning for a fact. Scanning is easier with less words. Wish your former English teacher well and write in fragments.

3. Include information carrying keywords at the front of the sentence/ paragraph. The average scanning visitor is only prepared to read two or three words of a first sentence of a short paragraph. Consequently make sure that trigger words are in those key locations. *Getting married in church…. The Commissioners oversee… Clergy pensions are paid*….. you get the idea.

4. Cut back or delete. Many of us working in and for the Church, love words and language. We are not daunted by text. But we are in the minority. 75 percent of the population scan text, they don't read it. Sub editors on tabloid newspapers work hard at telling a story in as few a number of words as possible. It's an art. Try it for yourself. When you have written the text for your web page, see if you can then cut it down by as much as 50 percent. You will end up with a more succinct message, which will probably be more use to potential visitors.

5. Put **important information** at the top of the page. It's the first place visitors to your web page look for the information they are seeking.

6. Use **clear not clever headlines**. These aid scanning. Puns and intriguing headlines draw readers on the printed page not the web page. Use **clear sub headings** down the page. Again they are another useful guide for scanning visitors

7. Use **inverse pyramid writing**. In other words, put it all in the first sentence. "Consider giving time this Christmas to those in need," says the Bishop in his 2009 Christmas message

8. Actionable content. If the answer to the question is not on the page the second recourse for web surfers is to ask for an answer. So actionable content (links, phone numbers or Email addresses) are useful to consider. No one wants the phone ringing off the hook with members of the public making silly enquiries. So a well written page should have the information that most surfers require. But better the phone ring, than someone goes elsewhere for an answer or worse still leaves the Church site unsatisfied.

9. Avoid Church jargon. You understand what a Triennium is but believe me, you are in the minority. Use everyday words to explain your ideas. If you have to use Church terms, explain them; *The General Synod, the Church's parliament...*

10. Pictures are worth a 1,000 words and the Church is in the people business. But they should be used sparingly, especially on higher level pages. Photos increase page download time. Many of our visitors live in rural areas, where broadband speeds are significantly lower than metropolitan areas. Web surfers quickly click away if pages take too long to load. So the equation is value vs download time. However, images should always illustrate your text.

If you would like the rationale behind these ten top tips read on

What's in it for me and my department?

The Church of England is a Christian presence in every community and, through our new website, we can develop our presence in the fast-growing online community. The site offers each of us the opportunity to highlight our work as part of the Church's mission. If our key messages and information are carefully and succinctly written, they will be accessed and used by thousands over the lifetime of the site. This short booklet offers an insight to some of the theory about how surfers use websites and a few simply rules and guidelines which should help you write useful and meaningful pages.

Accessing the web is an active exercise

Think about your own experience of using the Internet. You need a detail; a name, a phone number, an Email address, a fact or statistic. You arrive on a suitable home page or on a web page via a search enquiry and you start scanning. What clues are there on the page that will lead to the answer to your enquiry? Is the detail on the web page on your screen or do you need to click a link to another page? It's an active process. When writing for the web we must never forget the dynamic nature of visits to each and every website.

There is a further complication. Reading text on a screen is much more difficult and time consuming than words on the printed page. Therefore, we read more slowly and have patience for less words. Only 16 percent of web surfers read word by word on the screen. We all tend to take short cuts to get to that fact we are after. Web readers move quickly. Terrifyingly, they may only read two or three words of a paragraph before moving on. (Again recall your own web surfing experience.)

So there is only one tip for good web writing, particularly at upper levels of your section of the website, improve 'scanability'. Make it easy for visitors to find what they seek.

Scanable text

This is going to make your former English teacher despair. When writing for the web, you will need to forget much of what you were taught about crafting good English. What do we mean? Below is a short item of promotional text.

Ireland boasts many internationally recognised attractions, which draw large numbers of tourists every year. In 2009 some of the most popular places to visit included Dublin, Giants Causeway, Belfast, Newgrange, Mourne Mountains and the Aran Islands.

The paragraph above is perfectly adequate for the printed page but hopeless on a website.

For a web page the same message should be paired down to;

In 2009, the six most popular tourist sites in Ireland were;

* **Dublin**
* **Giants Causeway**
* **Belfast**
* **Newgrange**
* **Mourne Mountains**
* **Aran Islands**

Research suggests this is 124 percent more efficient than the promotional text. The linked pages lead to short items about each location, which should provide the answers to the questions surfers seek.
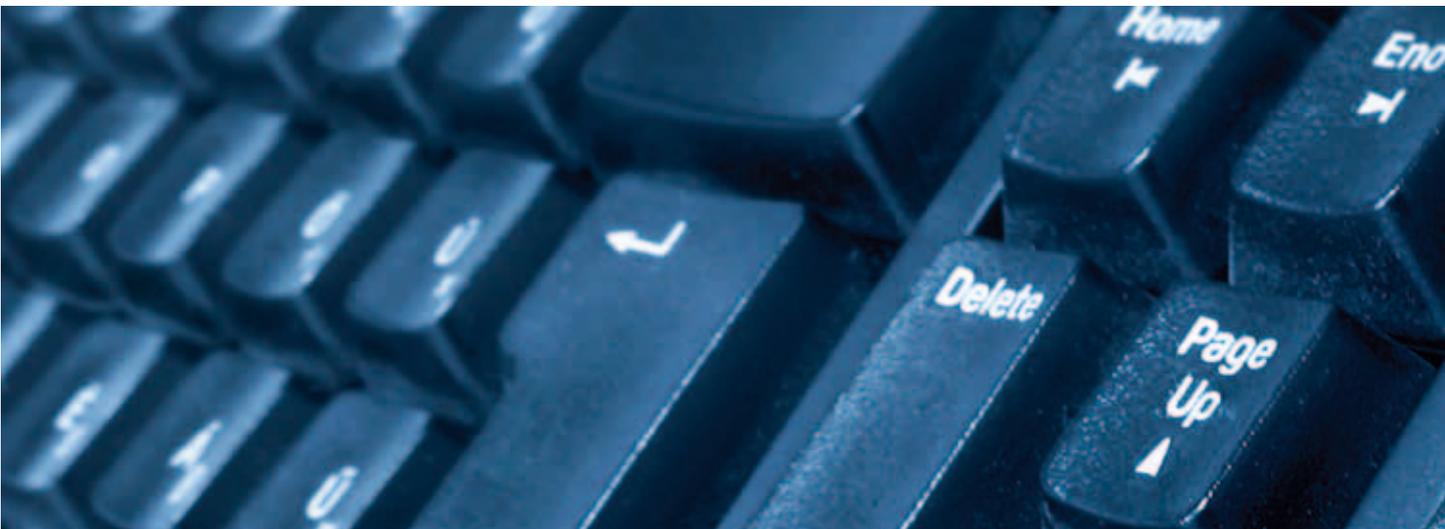
F Shaped Reading

How people read a web page has been the subject of much research. The answer is not left to right, top to bottom. In fact the dominant reading pattern looks like a capital F. (See illustration below.)

A study tracking the eye movements of over 200 web users found that the first eye movement (scan) is a horizontal sweep across the top of the page. The eyes then track down the left hand side of the page and make a second horizontal scan, usually about a third of the way down the page. Finally users scan the contents on the left hand side of the page in a vertical movement.

All of this gives web designers and writers vital clues as to where all the important information should be on a page. (At the top and in the left hand side navigation.)

Research Nielsen Norman.
The hotter the colour
the more attention received.
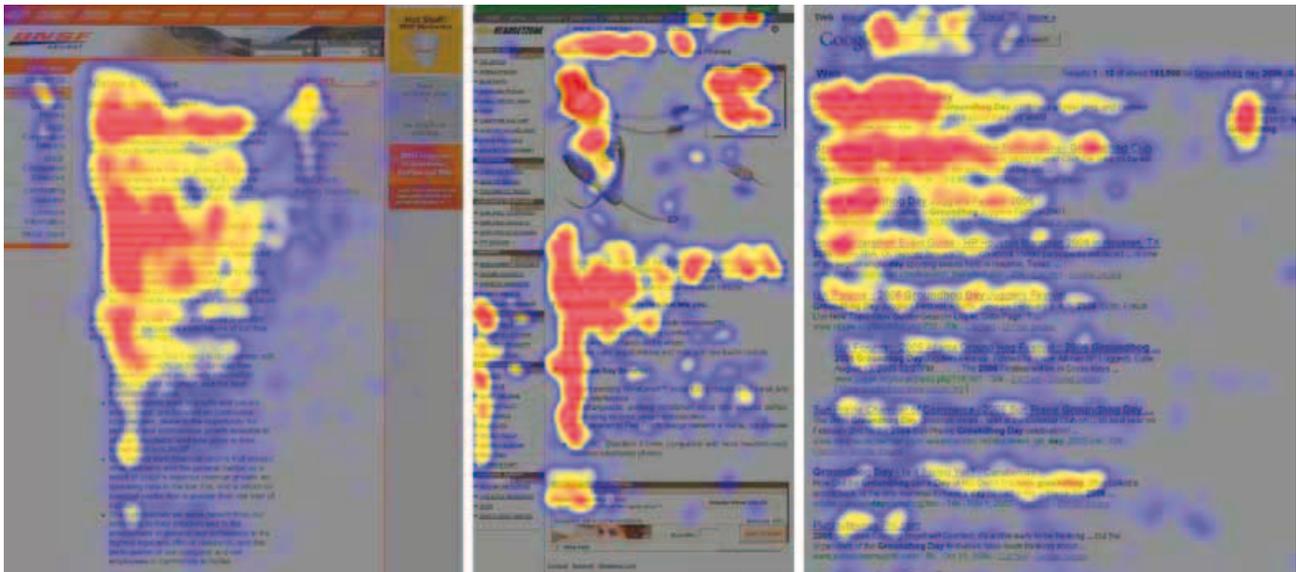
About us page   Product page   Search page

Writing for the web

Some general points about constructing your text for a web page.

Be brief. Get to the point. You are writing for people looking for facts. What is the most important piece of information you have for this page of the website. That should be the first fact in the first paragraph you write down. If people are really interested they will read/scan on. But give them what they need as quickly as possible.

Fragments vs full sentences. Fragments are better than crafted sentences on web pages. Remember most visitors are scanning for a fact. Scanning is easier with less words. Wish your former English teacher well and write in fragments.

Include information carrying keywords at the front of the sentence/paragraph. If the average scanning visitor is only prepared to read two or three words of a first sentence of a short paragraph, make sure that trigger words are in those key locations. *Getting married in the church…. The Commissioners oversee… Clergy pensions are paid…..* you get the idea.

Cut back or delete. Many of us working in and for the Church, love words and language. We are not daunted by text. But we are in the minority. 75 percent of the population scan text, they don't read it. Sub editors on tabloid newspapers work hard at telling a story in as few a number of words as possible. It's an art. Try it for yourself. When you have written the text for your web page, see if you can then cut it down by 50 percent. You will end up with a more succinct message, which will probably be more use to potential visitors.

Top of the page

Remember most people scan a web page in an F shape. So what goes at the top of the page is vital. It therefore follows that you must;

Put **important information** at the top of the page.

Use **clear not clever headlines**. These aid scanning. Puns and intriguing headlines

Essentials

Use the active tense. "It was decided" is less engaging and inspires less confidence than, "General Synod decided…"

Bulleted lists. Improve scanability and breaks up text.

Hyperlink text. Links to other pages stand out on the page, allow the visitor to decide if that page is likely to answer his/her enquiry and breaks up text

Pull quotes (see above) draw attention to text. There will be a style in our new style guide that allows you to highlight key text or quotes like this on your page.

Avoid text blocks. Break them up. They are difficult to read and simply off-putting for most visitors.

Avoid scrolling. With the exception of experienced web users, scrolling up and down a long page is off putting and difficult. If you need to present a long passage of material, break it up with sub headings. List these at the top of the page with links/anchors to the appropriate paragraph.

Avoid Church jargon. You know what a Triennium is or how many years there are between a quinquennial survey or that Canon Laws are promulged. But the average visitor to the Church of England website won't. Try and use every day words or explain the jargon, *"The General Synod, the Church's parliament, voted…."*

Include context. Ensure that every web page can be understood out of context. A search engine enquiry

"Pull quotes draw the eye to the page"

may mean that visitors may land on any page in a website. They need to know why the engine has taken them there. So the top of every page must include context.

Ensure each page carries enough information to let the user know where they are and what the topic is.

Don't be worried about repeating yourself from one page to another. Never assume the reader has seen other pages on the site. If they have, they will scan on.

All useful web content drives an action and should end with a call to action. After reading a good piece of web content the reader should either know something they didn't know before, or be able to do something they couldn't do before. (Phone number, Email address, fill out a form, order the service, download the PDF.)

Pictures are worth a 1,000 words and the Church is in the people business. But they should be used sparingly, especially on higher level pages. Photos increase page download time. Many of our visitors live in rural areas, where broadband speeds are significantly lower than those of us living in metropolitan areas. Web surfers quick click away if pages take too long to load. So the equation is value vs download time. However, images should always illustrate your text.

Sparing or Never
Bolds and italics.
Never underline or use CAPITALS in text.
Underlines equals hyperlink/link

draw readers on the printed page not the web page.

Clear sub headings down the page are useful. Again they are another useful guide for scanning visitors

Use **inverse pyramid writing**. Basically, put it all in the first sentence. *"Consider giving time this Christmas to those in need," says the Bishop in his 2009 Christmas message.*

Actionable content. If the answer to the question is not on the page the second recourse for web surfers is to ask for an answer. So actionable content (links, phone numbers or Email addresses.) are useful to consider. No one wants the phone ringing off the hook with members of the public making silly enquiries. So a well written page should have the information that most surfers require. But better the phone ring than someone goes elsewhere for an answer or worse still leaves the Church site .

Audience

Given the nature of the work we do and the church members we serve, in some locations on the website, there will need to be detailed and lengthy pages of text. The preceding advice suggests ways to break this up and make it more accessible/ scannable. But our website will have a hierarchy of pages. This allows us to write sparingly and succinctly for a general (non-churched) audience in higher level pages and in depth for a more churched audience, deeper in the site. In the 21st century, the Church of England website is one of the best mission tools we posses. If we can get that balance right, we may extend an invitation to many to receive Christ into their lives for the first time, or re-open a door to let him back in.

Contacts

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Happy writing.