

BigBad White Paper 201:

BigBad's Guide to Great Content Development

Executive Summary

The **truth**: Web users **don't read content**.

"What?" you gasp as you stare at your screen. **"I'm reading right now."**

But you're **not**. You're **scanning**. Your eye travels across the "page" and pauses at the pictures. Then it lands **here**, on the words, because of *the **clean format** of this paragraph*.

The sentences are **brief**. The writing is **concise** and **clear**.

To write efficiently for your Web audience:

- Start with the conclusion
- Highlight keywords
- Chunk ideas into short paragraphs
- Employ meaningful subheadings
- Use bulleted lists

Most importantly, **halve the amount of content**. Use fewer, more precise words to make your message **stick**.

Your Web presence should be **valuable** to users. Offer the information they want in a format that's **easy** to understand, and...

...they'll come back.

BigBad's Guide to Great Content Development

The most important fact to understand about Web use is this:

People don't read Web pages.

People **scan** Web pages. A study backs up this common-sense idea: Usability gurus John Morkes and Jakob Nielsen found that 79% of test users always **scanned** any new page they came across, while only 16% read word-by-word. Web users seek specific information, or they browse in the hope of finding items of interest. They don't read every word on the page; they scan the page, searching for words that pique their interest.

It's difficult enough to get people to your Web site. Don't convince them to leave right away by presenting huge blocks of brochure-like text that they'll have to wade through just to determine if your site is valuable. Make it valuable from the start. Make them **want** to stay. Demonstrate that your site is chock-full of the information they seek by putting it right up front with easy-to-read, easy-to-absorb writing and formatting.

To write efficiently for your Web audience:

- Start with the conclusion
- Keep sentences brief
- Use clear, concise prose
- Highlight **keywords**
- Chunk ideas into short paragraphs
- Employ meaningful subheadings
- Use bulleted lists

Most importantly, **halve the amount of content.**

Use fewer, more precise words to make your message stick.

Your content must be optimized for the way people navigate the Web. If it isn't, **they won't read it.** Maybe they'll print it out to read later, but then...they won't read it. You might as well send them a brochure. They're more likely to keep a brochure than a seven-page printout.

The writing style is the narrative "**voice**" of the written content. It must be written for the target audience with a tone that expresses what that audience **needs**. For example, if you are writing content for a law firm's Web site, the voice expresses expertise and confidence as well as collaboration, service, and functionality while maintaining clarity and ease of communication. The style must convey this while remaining consistent and straightforward.

Here's a direct quote from Jakob Nielsen:

“[Test] Users detested “**marketese**,” the promotional writing style with boastful subjective claims (“hottest ever”) that currently is prevalent on the Web. Web users are busy: they want to get the **straight facts**. Also, **credibility suffers** when users clearly see that the site exaggerates.”

One might also suggest, perhaps, that one may, in certain circumstances, avoid terminology that may be construed to be, if one doesn't mind one's saying so, a little too **passive**. Be direct.

While you're at it, keep it simple. **Avoid complex ways of saying things**. Don't say, “In terms of the direction the initiatives will take from this juncture forward, it is more advantageous relative to corporate goals to be striving for consistency with established resource apportionment than to allow high-impact milestones to slide for reasons difficult to endorse when reviewing cost-of-goods sold versus P&L statements.” **Instead, say, “Don't miss the deadline.”**

Your Web presence must be **valuable** to users. Offer the information they want in a format that's easy to understand.

The most difficult thing to do with good Web content is to make sure each **chunk** (usually a page, but sometimes even a smaller section) is **understandable** to a reader who has arrived from any one of several possible pages. A user may have entered your site and traveled down its hierarchy to the page in question, or s/he may have found the page in a search engine, or perhaps s/he's found the page from a contextual link in another page on your site. At the same time, **balance this** with the goal of making the content short, pithy, and to the point.

Remember that your user may print any page to read later as a reference, and s/he must be able to look at it without the context of your Web presence and **still understand your message**.

Clear, usable content can make the difference between acquiring a new customer and lamenting a lost opportunity.

Remember, valuable content can make your site an indispensable reference for users who may not need your product or service now, but may in the future. When they do have a need, they'll call you.

See It Work: A Comparison

The following figures show the difference to the eye between lengthy, paragraph-structured copy and content that has been “Webified:” optimized for online scanability and maximum immediate comprehension.

Figure 1: Simulated text from a client brochure

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Figure 2: Revised text, edited and optimized for the Web

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