

## Writing for the Web vs Writing for Print Media

When I first learned that my department was going to create its own Website, I was curious but intimidated. Were my years of editing going to become about as marketable as those of the well-known buggy-whip maker? Now, after 3 years, I find myself continuing to be excited about this challenge to my craft. So on the anniversary of our Web debut, here are some conclusions.

Most conventional writing considerations can be applied to electronic communication: the anticipated reader; dedication to truth, accuracy, and clarity of the message; and considerations of language, syntax, and organization. Perhaps the differences are more interesting:

*Attention span.* Viewers typically have a shorter attention span than readers. For this reason, the text should be grouped frequently and labeled. Prose that might be considered choppy in print may be appropriate for the Internet.

*Production cycle.* The Web has no mandated galley, page proofs, or publishers' representatives, so the process can be a seamless continuum of write, code, and publish—which offers a wonderful opportunity to reach the audience speedily. In contrast, the phases of conventional publishing have traditionally imposed a modicum of quality control. The technical process of putting information on the Web does not mandate such quality control.

*Quality control.* The internal processes dictated by each Website determine the quality control. Some criteria for quality Websites can be gained from Websites that evaluate other Websites. This includes the Physicians Choice and others (1-3), which publish their criteria.

*Updating.* The Web's unique capability for continuous updating carries the responsibility for keeping a site up-to-date with corrections, additions, and elaborations. This facility for update means the Web has little permanence. Before creating a final reference list, a Web writer should always recheck each site to be sure it is still in the same place with more or less the same content as it had last time. Then include in the citation the date

accessed along with the URL and title, because the only certainty is that this is what the site presented at the noted time.

*Audience.* The Web is read worldwide by peoples of all backgrounds, ages, educational levels, native languages, and religions. In practice, this underscores the importance of policies that writers already have about minimizing abbreviations, spelling out acronyms the 1st time they are used, and keeping in mind cultural and religious sensitivities. In addition, readers appreciate the site that specifies the target audience early in the piece to help viewers choose whether to continue.

*Graphics.* The Internet has more relaxed image-quality requirements than almost any other medium. A resolution of 72 dpi is adequate for most continuous-tone Web images, whereas paper printing requires at least 300 dpi and usually more.

*Links.* While printed information may contain some referrals to other areas of the document or even other documents, electronic links, the Web counterpart to a "See also" notation, are far more numerous. Such links must be tested initially to assure that each goes to the intended site. Subsequently the links need to be rechecked at intervals to be sure each linked site is still operational.

*HTML coding.* There really is no counterpart for this in print because even word processors keep their coding invisible.

*Variety of output formats* (DOS, Windows, Macintosh, UNIX, small screen, large screen, color, black and white). The form in which print media are reviewed is determined by the publisher. The Web publisher has far less control, and each format has its own presentation characteristics.

Daniel Will-Harris has more information on these issues in his article for one of the best new desktop-publishing magazines, *Dynamic Graphics* (4).

### Citation of Electronic Resources

To revisit an earlier topic, the style I used below for citation of electronic resources is the closest I could come to a standard. It is approved by the ACW (Alliance for Computers and Writing). I modified the author

arrangement to be more like other medical references, but otherwise the style is the same. The 1st date is the version date (when there is one) and the 2nd date is the access date. What do you think? Let's chat. sedwards@ulna.bwh.harvard.edu

### References

1. Physicians' Choice. <http://www.mdchoice.com> (14 April 1997).
2. Evaluating Web sites: criteria and tools. Cornell University. 23 October 1996. <http://www.library.cornell.edu/okuref/research/webeval.html> (14 April 1997).
3. Staines GM. Evaluating information found on the Internet. Mankato State University. <http://www.lme.mankato.msus.edu/class/629/Cred.HTML> (14 April 1997).
4. Will-Harris D. World.Wide.Web. Word.Processing. *Dynamic Graphics* 1996;1:68-70.

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