WRITING FOR THE WEB: MAKING IT SIMPLE AND PERSONAL

The launch of the new website update is the perfect opportunity for the university and individual units to take control of their image and present themselves in a new, effective way. This short guide is meant to help you make appropriate choices for creating or reworking web content for your organization or unit's web pages.

Below are some quick points to help you get started writing, as well as understand how people read online content differently compared to printed materials. If you have any questions about this document or your content, please feel free to call Ian Clark, content manager, at 608.342.1194 or email at clarki@uwplatt.edu.

UNDERSTAND VOICE AND TONE
Voice expresses an author or organization's basic personality. Tone expresses the mood or feeling of the voice. The voice of UW-Platteville’s entire website should be authoritative, practical, informative, and scholarly.

Individual sites should exhibit all of these voice attributes, but can have their own tone. Individual pages, while maintaining the general brand described above, can be inviting or exclusive, friendly or formal, conversational, enthusiastic... the list goes on. Be thoughtful in how each page is presented and remember to be consistent. The whole department should have the same tone. Differences between related pages can be very distracting.

The Internet reaches a large, inclusive audience outside of our standard audience (our campus community, prospective students and families, alumni, etc.). At any point on any page, whatever visitors find becomes representative of the entire university. This accessibility makes how we choose to present ourselves extremely important.

WRITE FOR YOUR ENTIRE AUDIENCE
Remove bias, write gender-neutral copy, and use simple sentences and words when possible. While we may be positioning the university and it's various departments to reach specific audiences, anyone with Internet access can view any page. By writing for the entire audience – intended or otherwise – we can improve our general brand in the public's perception and even convert unintended audience members.

MAKE TEXT EASY TO SCAN
Putting the important stuff first is called frontloading. Frontload your content, and keep it short and simple. By frontloading content and keeping ideas or topics separated, you position the most important information first and make it easiest to find. Scanning a webpage for keywords is fast becoming the primary way people find what they want. You’ve got about 5 seconds before the modern searcher abandons your page.

Use meaningful headlines and subheadings, and bulleted lists; build every paragraph with one idea or topic in mind, and keep it 2-3 sentences long. Also, hyperlinking important information will make it stand out and offer users something actionable, helping them accomplish their goals quickly.

(For those who would rather read than scan web pages, frontloaded and simplified content will also improve readability.)

WRITE TIMELESSLY
If you want to reference when something began or leaders of an organization or unit, do so in a way that won’t require regular updates. **You don’t want to have to go back every year to edit content.**

For example, instead of saying, “The Office of New Things on Campus was established a year ago”, try something like, “The Office of New Things on Campus was established in 2010”.

Or, if you want to reference a contact, instead of, “For more information, contact Jim Jimerson, director of the Office of New Things on Campus, at 555-5555”, try something like, “For more information, contact the director of the Office of New Things on Campus at 555-5555.”

In some instances, you’ll want to directly name a dean, professor, staff member, etc., and that’s okay. But remember, **current content is the goal.**

**TAKE ADVANTAGE OF SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION**

Some people may think that search engine optimization (SEO) is something that only web developers should be concerned about. In fact, **SEO is everyone’s business**, from the web guys all the way to the people writing copy.

By seeding copy with keywords or key phrases that both describe your content and correspond with phrases that people use to perform searches, copywriters can help bump up a site’s search results ranking.

Keywords or phrases can be as simple as “bee”, but **consider how common your word or phrase is**; “bee” (353 million results via Google in 0.2 seconds) is incredibly common and will not help you in bumping up your search rankings. A more descriptive phrase like “African honey bee” (3.27 million results) or even “African honey bee invasive species” (39,000 results) will yield more specific search results (and provide searchers more relevant information). Reaching a wide audience is good, but reaching specific, targeted audience members that are more likely to become customers is more important.

Take some time and think about how you can help people find your information.

**Embed keywords** where they matter most:

- Copy
- Page title
- Headings
- Links
- Metadata (ask Web Development how you can do this)
- Video and image tags

Remember: **optimize your site for people first by using clear and concise writing**. If your content is clear, relevant and sprinkled with selective keywords or phrases, search engines will find you, making it easier for people to do the same.

**COPY TREATMENT**

Shorter copy blocks help keep users engaged in page content and allow them to find specific information they need quickly and with ease. Limit copy blocks to promote interaction and exploration.

Section and subsection landing page content should be kept short - no more than two
paragraphs of copy for each topic on the page (see the Academics page template as an example).

Copy on content detail pages will be more extensive, as these pages are meant to house more detailed content. However, consider your readers; reorganizing content may be helpful if the information intended for a certain page exceeds seven paragraphs.

**Long Copy**
Long copy includes any copy blocks that exceed two to three paragraphs. Many of the UWPlatt.edu pages require long copy, but there are a few ways to help make the content easier for users to digest:
- Divide distinct ideas/topics into separate paragraphs
- Use helpful headings and sub-headings to help readers find specific info easily
- When writing headings, use natural language for clarity
- Put key sentences at the beginning of paragraphs to help facilitate skimming
- Use bulleted lists to present related information when possible

**Lists**
In combination with headings and sub-headings, lists help make large copy blocks easier to read. Lists draw the eye and help readers scan the page for relevant information. Keep information lists concise and to the point. Evaluate long sentences or paragraphs for content that can be reformatted into lists.

Best practices for list creation include:
- Have no more than nine items in a single list
- Use numbered lists when the order of steps/entries is important
- Keep lists to a maximum of two levels
- Introduce each list with at least one line of copy, to provide context
- Keep text for each list item short - no more than two lines, preferably one line