

# How to Write Website Content that Engages Users and Makes Search Engines Happy

Best Practices, Resources and Links

*prepared by:* [Laura Puente](#)



Writing for the Web today begins with an understanding of how search engines and humans interpret your brand site, as effective SEO and designing a quality user experience are no longer at odds.

Positioning a page to rank in Google while supporting your website's fundamental user and business goals is a complex process that could require several different strategies. The purpose of this guide is to help you write and organize your website content so that it fulfills on-page optimization best practices, pleasing both search engines and users.

## TENETS OF EFFECTIVE WEB CONTENT

Internet marketing expert and Portent, Inc. Chairman Ian Lurie [writes](#), "content drives every exchange you have with a potential customer." A good rule of thumb for creating effective content that turns those potential business relationships into established ones is to remember that digital content should always be informational, concise and compelling.

### Informational:

- Content on every page needs to inform the user of something specific. Define a messaging goal for each page, and if the page becomes too overwhelming, you might need to break down your message further. On the other hand, you might need to combine your page with another if your messaging goal is too specific and can't fill an entire page.
- Your messaging goal could be to inform users on your fundamental brand position, how to solve a particular problem, why your top-selling product is better than your competitors', or even how to contact you.
- Content should include the correct keywords that will match exact and related search queries so that users quickly and easily find the answer to their questions. Simply put, your page content needs to be consistent with the queries you rank for. Keywords should be used as naturally as possible and in variations that make sense in the sentence and according to recognized industry jargon. Overuse of keywords appears manipulative to search engines and clutters your message for human users.

### Concise:

- Use direct, descriptive, easy-to-understand language. You should have a minimum of 350 words per page to avoid "[thin content](#)" issues, but avoid long-winded sentences and redundancy. If you can't write 350 words for a particular topic, reconsider your plan to dedicate an entire page to it — it might belong somewhere else.
- Get to the point as quickly as possible and avoid extraneous sentences. Consider the [inverted pyramid style](#) but know that it's [not always the right fit](#)!
- Content should be optimized for the typical Web reader, who appreciates scannable, meaningful text. Use proper formatting techniques like short paragraphs and descriptive titles, headings and subheadings to break up text and make your content more inviting. This structure also helps search engines make correct conclusions about the page's topic and content hierarchy.

**Compelling:**

- Titles, headings and body text should be informative and descriptive, but they should also account for what inspires humans to act. For blogs and consumer-focused content, words and phrases might be exciting, thrilling, or even controversial, while B2B websites should communicate trust, integrity, authority and value. Above all, H1 headings should be clear and contain some literal message about what primary topic is addressed on the page.
- Use calls-to-action (CTAs) that contain verbs within the first half of the sentence or title. After someone reads your content, they should feel compelled to do something, whether that's to keep reading more articles on your site, contact a sales rep, fill out a form or share your page with another user.
- Tell a story whenever possible by providing context, examples and/or support for your overall brand's image. Listing features and functions is appropriate in some situations, but all of your content should tie back to the bigger brand story and/or your users' fundamental needs.

**Tell a story whenever possible  
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your overall brand's image.**

**WEB CONTENT BEST PRACTICES:****Voice, Tone and Brand Message:**

Your website is an important branding tool, and depending on your business model, could even be the primary point of contact between your company and your customers. Understanding how to write according to your brand position and promise while accounting for different situations and subject matters is critical to effective digital communications.

*First, remember that:*

- Voice refers to your brand's primary message. You have only one voice. Read any page on the

Apple website — or any Apple ad or app or instruction manual for that matter — and you will notice that all of their content has the same voice, from the same source.

- Tone can change depending on your user or the situation and refers to how you interact with your audience. You might, for example, use a more casual tone when engaging with users on Twitter and a more formal tone on your website.

*Voice, Tone and Brand Message Best Practices:*

- Be true to your brand. If you provide sophisticated technologies or feature intellectual property, your voice should probably sound smart, exuding expertise, authority and leadership. If you're raising funds for a nonprofit devoted to curing cancer, you likely want to express empathy where appropriate, and appeal to the emotional side of your target audience.
- Be consistent, and sound consistent. Again, you have only one voice. Your services page might have significantly different content than your history page, culture page or FAQ page, but readers should feel like they are hearing from the same voice, the same company, the same brand.
- Avoid clichés. This is not just a web content issue; it's an English language issue. It doesn't matter what your brand is or what your company does, clichés are content Kryptonite. Read and reread your content, and kill all the clichés.
- Avoid the obvious, the given, the table stakes content. Don't waste valuable page real estate telling people "we are committed to adding value to our customers," and "we're dedicated to serving our clients," and "we are focused on ethics." At best, this suggests you don't have anything specific to say about what you actually do. Don't leave the reader with that impression.

*Resources:*

- [MailChimp Style Guide](#), MailChimp: A great example for defining and explaining voice, and understanding the difference between voice and tone.
- [Style, Diction, Tone and Voice](#), Wheaton College: Definitions and exercises.

*Further Reading:*

- [Don't Poke the Bear: Creating Content for Sensitive Situations](#), A List Apart

- [Finding Your Brand's Voice: How to Shape a Tone of Voice](#), Distilled
- [Honing Your Brand Voice on Social](#), Contently

## FORMAT AND LAYOUT

Large blocks of text with little-to-no breaks in paragraphs are often difficult to read and should be avoided. A well-structured page supports SEO value and human reader value through clearly defined sections and messages.

### Primary Headings

For the purposes of this guide, we'll refer to the primary label of your page (including blog posts) as the heading, not to be confused with the page title, or title tag (see below in metadata). Your heading and subheadings may carry some branded language, but they should immediately communicate the key messages of a page through literal messaging as well. Targeted keywords used in headings serve:

- Search engines crawling the site
- Human users clicking through the site
- Human users scanning multiple entries in search engine results

While headings should be descriptive and catchy, [they shouldn't oversell](#) just for the sake of clicks. Readers won't stick around or share content if they're disappointed in what your content actually presents.

*Headings should also be succinct. Headings and blog titles that are too long:*

- Can be confusing
- Can interfere with the design of the page by spilling onto second or third lines
- Result in long, awkward URLs, which can be interpreted as spammy and aren't as shareable

### Primary Headings Best Practices:

- Use only one H1 heading, the primary heading of the page. H1s are one of the primary topic cues for search engines and are also one of the first places users will look to get an immediate understanding of the page.

- Use clear, precise language that communicates the page's key message and value. Don't oversell.
- Naturally include targeted keywords.
- Be succinct.
- Consider the site's design, including fonts, headline sizes, etc. What will look attractive on the page? Your content shouldn't be dependent on design, but the two elements must complement each other.

Subheadings give structure and flow to content, and also help search engines identify the primary value and associated topics of a given page. Good headings and subheadings will encourage scanners to stay on the page longer and actually read your content.

**Readers won't stick around or share content if they're disappointed in what your content actually presents.**

Like primary headings, subheadings should quickly communicate the value — or benefit — of the forthcoming content. Overly clever or "flowery" language might distract or confuse your readers, especially if they're scanning the page.

### Subheadings Best Practices:

- Be succinct — headings should be between 5-8 words.
- Be clear and simple when communicating the value of the forthcoming content. Don't get caught up in clever or overly branded language.
- Use active voice when appropriate.

### Paragraphs and Sentence Structure

Paragraphs written for the Web don't always follow traditional "best practices" for length or even organization, but that doesn't mean writing's core tenets have to be sacrificed. A good rule of thumb is to tackle only one thought per sentence, and one theme per paragraph.

Paragraphs can even be a single sentence, especially if you want to offset a major point that would otherwise get lost in a bigger chunk of text.

*As with more traditional writing, “Web sentences” should achieve:*

- Variety
- Brevity
- Clarity
- Authority

Experimenting with dynamic paragraph and sentence structure will make it easier for Web readers to follow your content, and for your content to be as persuasive as possible.

*Paragraphs and Sentence Structure Best Practices:*

- Write for the reader who scans.
- Get to the point quickly — at the beginning of the page, within each section and even within each paragraph and sentence.
- Use concrete examples to efficiently illustrate your point and move along the story.
- Use bullets or numbers to pull out specific examples or features of a service, product or other list. If it makes sense, you can bold the main phrase (or list item) and give a short explanation of it within the offset list.
- Don't be afraid to add new paragraphs — even if they're just 1-2 sentences — when you want to underscore a main point or actively progress the page's story.
- Vary sentence length between 8-20 words. Experiment with sentence style, but don't compromise clarity.
- Consider the design of the page: What images, fonts, heading sizes and other elements will affect your content's structure?

*Resources:*

- [How to Use Heading Tags for SEO](#), Woorank:  
An intro to heading tags, plus more best practices for headings and subheadings.
- [Think You Know How to Write a Sentence?](#), NPR:  
Advice from Stanley Fish and an excerpt from his book, *How to Write a Sentence, And How to Read One*.

*Further Reading:*

- [Introducing Your Content: Page Titles and Headings](#), Meet Content
- [How to Write Exquisite Subheads](#), Copyblogger
- [7 Readability Tips for Designing Engaging Content](#), Content Marketing Institute
- [8 Incredibly Simple Ways to Get More People to Read Your Content](#), Copyblogger
- [7 Best Practices for Improving Your Website's Usability](#), Mashable
- [Chunkify! A practice in writing short, reader-friendly web pages](#), BrightOrangeThread.com
- [5 Ways to Write a Good Sentence](#), Copyblogger

## METADATA

### Title Tags

Page titles, or title tags, are crawled by search engines and serve as key signals to communicating the most important topic of a page. Title tags also appear prominently in the search engine results pages (SERPs) as the title of the page, even if the page's actual heading is different.

Google places a limit on the number of characters from your title tag that it pulls into the SERPs, so use succinct phrases with strategically placed keywords.

Note: Depending on your content management system, title tags may be auto-generated, but you should review any default title tags to ensure proper optimization. If no title tags are generated through your CMS, Google will choose its own title from the content on your page, which may or may not be the message you want.

*Title Tags Best Practices:*

- Write for humans and search engines.
- Use the most important keyword or keyword phrase in the first half of the title. There is still some debate as to whether keywords in the first part of the title tag carry more weight in terms of ranking potential, but at the very least, this strategic placement ensures Google doesn't cut off important words if your title tag is too long.

- Be literal and descriptive about what's on the page...
- ...but be persuasive when appropriate. What words will make users want to click through to the page? If appropriate, think about using components like:
  - Dates to prove freshness and that your content is updated, especially if the content refers to reports, awards, rankings or date-sensitive policies.
  - CTAs with commands like Find, Search, Discover, Apply, Learn, etc.
  - Important adjectives or qualifiers that set your content, products, services and/or brand apart, like Custom, Trusted, etc. Be purposeful with these terms — cheesy or cliché adjectives can work against you.
- Write within the character limit of 50-57 characters (including spaces between words). Anything beyond this point is still crawled by search engines, but will get cut off in the SERPs and not seen by the user.

### Meta Descriptions

Meta descriptions have less importance for search engines, but they can be a powerful element that inspires users to visit your page. They are also displayed in the SERPs, just under the title tag. Like title tags, when left as a default, the search engine will usually pull a bit of text from somewhere within the content on your page, which may or may not be the most relevant to your intended message.

#### *Meta Description Best Practices:*

- Write for humans, but use keywords when appropriate.
- Find sentences in your content that best express the main point of the page, and then tweak to make them more active, intentional and direct and to fit the character limit.
- Use compelling language, like a CTA or language that encourages people to keep reading and click through to the page
- Respect the character limit: 150-160 characters (including spaces between words).

### Image Alt Text

Search engines can't see images on your pages; instead, they rely on image alt text to understand the image's topic or meaning. They then take that information into consideration when presenting image search results. If you aren't in charge of uploading images to your site, work with your development team to ensure correct image alt text is always added.

#### *Image Alt Text Best Practices:*

- Alt text should be simple and indicative of what the image shows.
- Consider your page's keywords in the image alt text. If your page is optimized for "medical laboratory technology," don't use "clinical laboratory technology" as the image alt text.
- Keep image alt text simple and literal. That's how users typically search for photos.

#### *Resources:*

- [Metalength.com](http://metalength.com): Character count for title tags and meta descriptions.
- [Title tag preview tool \(2014 Edition\)](#): Moz's tool shows you how character count, pixel size, all caps and other factors impact how your title tag is displayed in search.
- [Image SEO Tool: Alt Text Checker](#): FeedtheBot.com's easy-to-use tool checks for image alt text and evaluates alt text according to Google's best practices.

#### *Further Reading:*

- [Title Tag](#), Moz
- [How to Write Meta Descriptions for Maximum Clicks](#), Raven Blog
- [6 Ways to Craft Better Meta Descriptions that Rock the SERPs](#), Weidert.com
- [The Importance of Alt Attributes aka Alt Tags of Alt Text](#), 9clouds.com

## KEYWORD USAGE

Although optimization tactics have evolved, keywords remain a critical component in your overall content and SEO strategies. An effective keyword strategy requires in-depth research into user behavior, site performance, national and/or global search trends, competitor rankings and your own website goals. It should also take into consideration longer phrases and more conversational language, branded terms and related search queries, as well as your desired “head” terms.

### Keyword Best Practices:

Below are best practices for basic on-page keyword optimization, assuming you have already built a strategy around the use cases, goals and trends mentioned above. These techniques are not meant to guarantee rankings.

*Use keywords strategically:*

- In title tags
- In primary headings
- In the page URL
- Within body copy when it makes sense
- In image alt text when it makes sense

Also use keywords in meta descriptions and subheadings if and when appropriate.

Make a list of keyword variations and synonyms to use within body copy to support your primary keyword. Associating your page with these other terms makes it clearer to Google how you fit in with the greater conversation around your topic. Focusing only on explicit keyword matches is an outdated strategy and greatly limits your ranking potential and the value you can provide to your users.

**Focusing only on explicit keyword matches is an outdated strategy and greatly limits your ranking potential and the value you can provide to your users.**

Note: Keywords should not be forced or “stuffed” into copy or overused on the page. Search engines view this practice as manipulative, and it contributes to a poor experience for users.

*Resources:*

- [A Visual Guide to Keyword Targeting and On-Page SEO](#), Moz: Thorough guide including multiple charts on on-page optimization.

*Further Reading:*

- [How to Do Keyword Research, the Beginners Guide](#), Moz
- [Secondary Keywords: How to Target Two Phrases on One Page](#), Bruce Clay, Inc.

## CALLS TO ACTION (CTAS):

CTAs direct users through your site, often to points of conversion. Or, they can drive conversions themselves. CTAs may be placed within body text or featured separately as buttons, in sidebars and other strategic locations on your pages.

### CTA Best Practices:

- Messaging should be clear and easy to understand and follow
- Use active verbs and persuasive language.
- Address the user’s needs and goals and include an incentive (value proposition) in your CTA.
- Create a sense of urgency for users. Example: “Only 6 spots left” or “Sign up today.”
- Personalize your message whenever possible, at least according to different user groups.
- In addition to a common CTA, craft unique CTAs according to specific pages, use cases and goals. Messaging should speak to the content of the page they’re on and the specific action you want them to take.
- Links should direct to the correct pages. If you want users to follow CTAs all the way to a conversion or other site goal, lead them along a logical path.
- Make sure CTAs are placed strategically and obviously on the page.

- Work with designers, developers and analysts to build — and test! — a smart CTA strategy.
- Test, test, test: Tweak the design, copy and placement of your CTAs to discover the most effective formula for your customers.

## Work with designers, developers and analysts to build — and test! — a smart CTA strategy.

### Resources:

- [Goodui.org](#): An entire website devoted to conversion best practices, including CTAs.
- [10 Call-to-Action Case Studies](#), Contentverve.com: Case studies with takeaways for each.

### Further Reading:

- [The 8 Types of CTAs You Need to Have on Your Website](#), Hubspot
- [21 Call to Action Examples and 3 Rules for Effective CTAs](#), Crazy Egg
- [10 Best Practices to Optimize the Language of Your Calls to Action](#), Hubspot

## INTERNAL LINKING

A smart internal linking strategy helps search engines find your pages, understand topical relevancy, follow your intended page hierarchy and calculate page authority. Internal linking can also give you more control over the path users take on your site.

### Internal Linking Best Practices:

- Internal links placed within body text still most likely pass the strongest authority and relevancy signals to Google. The first link placed in body text may still be the best way to pass these signals from page to page, and internal links in text “above the fold” are also counted more strongly.
- Be careful with anchor text: Think of your users first. What terms will compel them to click through to another page and be clear enough to communicate what they’ll find on the next page? Use variations in your targeted anchor text when it makes sense, and don’t link too many words in your sentence: This tactic looks sloppy.
- Don’t fill up your page with links: You’ll confuse users by giving them too much choice, and it could appear manipulative to search engines.

### Resources:

- [Matt Cutts on Linking Guidelines: How Many Links on a Page?](#), SearchEngineWatch.com: A December 2013 Q&A video with Google’s Head of Webspam Matt Cutts, on internal linking best practices.

### Further Reading:

- [Internal Links](#), Moz
- [Internal Links: 9 Best Practices for SEO and Internal Links](#), Orbit Media