



A guide to web content for Heriot-Watt University websites

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Introduction

Writing and editing for the web are not the same as for print. Online you need to apply different skills and techniques to attract and retain your readers, get your message across effectively and achieve your business objectives.

This guide will help you to:

- plan your web content more effectively
- approach online writing with more confidence
- improve the readability of your online text
- work to our agreed editorial standards for web content

Why is writing for the web different?

Reading from computer screens is about 25% slower than reading from paper and usually say that they find reading online text unpleasant. Studies have shown that people are less likely to read long pieces of text on a web page than in printed format.

So, how do people read websites? The answer is: they don't.

Instead, they:

- skim, scan, and select
- browse before foraging
- take quick glances and occasional very brief stops
- read a little at a time, mostly in short burst
- grab what they need and get on towards the goal

For these reasons, it is rarely appropriate to cut and paste from a printed document to produce an identical web version.

What will this guide teach me?

This guide is designed to help you approach your web content in a better, more structured and objective way. It covers three main areas:

- Planning your web content: before you begin writing, you'll need to plan out the content you need and think about its purpose and objectives
- Writing your web content: advice and examples for how to write specifically for a web audience
- Measuring your web content: once you've published your content, you'll want to make sure it's working for you in the way you've hoped

In the appendices, you'll find:

- Web style guide: rules and regulations for web content
- Plain English guide: tips on how to make sure your writing is clear and concise

Planning your web content

Generally speaking, your web content is useless unless it does one or both of the following:

- supports a key business objective (eg promotes the university; encourages students to apply)
- supports a user in completing a task (eg provides the user with the information they were looking for; helps a student to apply)

So, how do you make sure that all your content is useful? Before you start writing, you need to:

- prepare to create less content
- define your content structure

Prepare to create less content

Online, when it comes to informational, marketing or promotional content, less is always more because:

- less content is easier to manage
- less content is more user-friendly
- less content costs less to create

Less content is easier to manage

When we talk about publishing content online, we often refer to it “going live”. There are countless ways for web content to die: dead blogs, outdated descriptions, broken links, and irrelevant search engine results. It’s one thing to change brand voice in print and forget to do it online; it’s another to neglect content that might mislead users or even expose us to legal action. By publishing less content you’ll have less content to manage.

Less content is more user-friendly

Users want information quickly. If they can’t find what they’re looking for, they’ll feel frustrated and resentful, and they’ll leave. Too much content means information is harder to find. And that makes it harder for users to complete their task.

Less content costs less to create

By prioritising useful and relevant content over “just in case” content, you’ll free up time and money for things like planning and measurement. Scale back on content by making sure that your website content maps back to key business objectives and user goals.

Define your objectives

Creating new web pages and filling them with text and images is, technically speaking, really easy. But, just because you can, doesn’t mean you should.

Creating useful, usable content requires research, strategic planning, meaningful metadata, web writing skills, and editorial oversight. Done well, content can build your brand, improve retention and win loyalty. Done poorly, it will cause you to lose your audience’s attention and trust.

Analysing your objectives is the first step in creating web content. You must establish:

- What exactly do you need to achieve? Do you simply want to inform your users, or do you want to persuade, reassure or motivate them too?
- What outcome do you need? Do you just want your users to “be informed”, or do you want them to take a particular course of action?

For every new page you plan to create, you need ask yourself:

- Why am I creating this page?
- What do I want to say?
- Does the user need it?
- Will they want to read it?
- What do I want the user to do after reading it?

If you can't answer these questions easily, you need to rethink the objectives of your content.

Writing your web content

This writing for the web guide will help you to write clear, concise, web-friendly pages that users will find useful and easy to read and which can be more easily retrieved by search engines.

The five main guidelines for writing for the web are to make your content:

- succinct
- scannable
- personable
- actionable
- searchable

Succinct

Text that is poorly written or long-winded will deter readers and could create a bad impression of the University. Try to write in plain English that is accurate, consistent and concise.

Front-load your content

“Front-loading” your content means putting the conclusion first, followed by the what, how, where, when and why. This allows users to:

- quickly scan through the opening sentence
- instantly understand what the paragraph is about
- decide if they want to read the rest of the paragraph or not

The opening paragraph on every page should focus on answering two questions:

- What? (What will users find on this page? What is its function?)
- Why? (Why should they care? What’s in it for them?)

Newspaper articles are good examples of front-loaded content; the opening paragraph is always the conclusion of the article.

Your primary information (the main piece of information or message that you are trying to convey to your user) should be the first thing the user sees. Everything else is secondary information and should follow later.

Examples



Set within Heriot-Watt University’s Edinburgh campus [secondary], the Centre for Sport and Exercise offers top quality facilities for a wide range of sports at a number of different levels [primary].



The Centre for Sport and Exercise offers top quality facilities for a wide range of sports at a number of different levels [primary]. It is set within the University’s Edinburgh Campus [secondary].

Long and detailed background information can be relegated to the end of the page or moved on to child pages. Similarly, information of interest to a minority of users can be made available through a link without penalizing those readers who don't want it.

Limit each page to one topic

Don't make users click through unnecessary pages when they don't need to. If you genuinely have a lot of content that is too long or unwieldy on one page, you should split it up over several pages *in a way that makes sense*.

New pages shouldn't be created just to segment a long linear story into multiple pages; having to flick through several pages can be confusing to the reader, slows down reading and makes printing more difficult.

Good web content should be split into coherent chunks that each focus on a certain topic. The guiding principle should be to allow readers to select those topics they care about and only read those pages. Use your homepage or landing page to summarise the main points and put supporting information onto secondary pages, avoiding repetition and duplication of content on different pages.

Myth-busting

Myth: "All web pages should be short."

Reality: Pages should contain no more information that a user can absorb at once. This doesn't necessarily mean that you should chop your content off after a set number of words so that it fits on the page without having to scroll. As long as your content is correctly structured, you should be able to split it up into meaningful chunks and create separate pages for themes and topics, rather than word counts.

Don't state the obvious but do explain

Phrases like "Welcome to the Heriot-Watt University's School of XXX website" (when the user has more than likely searched for or followed a link to that website) or "These pages have been designed to make your first few weeks of work with the University easier" (on induction pages aimed at new staff) don't tell the user anything they didn't already know.

Similarly, it is not necessary to instruct your readers how to navigate a web page such as "click here for further details", "on this website you will find" or "the links on the left will take you to further information".

Many users will arrive at your web pages by way of a search engine and they may enter the site at any point, bypassing your homepage and landing pages in the process. They probably won't have read all your content in sequence, so each page must be self explanatory. Link to background or explanatory information to help users, but don't overdo it; it's not necessary to link to all pages in the same section if this is already apparent from the navigation, for example.

Don't repeat what someone else has said (better) elsewhere

Keep your pages short and concise by linking out to secondary information rather than reproducing it on your pages. This is especially true when explaining processes run out with the University (eg UCAS application processes, immigration rules etc).

Linking to the owner of the information means that you won't have to keep monitoring it in order to keep your content up to date.

Scannable

Skimming instead of reading is a fact of the web and has been confirmed by countless usability studies. Users are often impatient and don't want to read long continuous blocks of text. They will scan text and pick out keywords, sentences, and paragraphs of interest while skipping over those parts of the text they care less about.

Structure your content with headings & subheadings

Edit long passages of text into shorter paragraphs and introduce helpful sub-headings to give users an accurate at-a-glance impression of the page's content. If you're adapting a printed document or publication, these sub-headings may not have been present in the original form but this kind of signposting will be helpful to a web audience trying to find information in a hurry.

Structure your content using two or even three levels of headings (a general page heading plus subheads and sub-subheads when appropriate). Nested headings also allow better access for users with screenreaders. [See also: [Appendix 1 > headings](#)]

Use lists

Break up long lists in sentence or paragraph form and present them as bullet points. This will make them easier to read and scan.

Lists are preferable to long paragraphs because they:

- allow users to read the information vertically rather than horizontally
- are easier to scan
- are less intimidating
- are usually more succinct

Personable

Stodgy paragraphs written in third person are no longer in fashion. The internet has developed into a more personal communication tool. People use the internet to explore in a relaxed nature, not to feel like they are reading from an encyclopaedia. We want the website to be somewhere people come to explore without pressure.





Being personal means revealing your personality to the visitor in a subtle way. This doesn't mean putting your photo on the "About us" page; it means writing web content that conveys our personality.

Use you and we

You should refer to the University or your School or service in full in the first instance, but you should refer to "we" or "us" in subsequent sentences.

Try to use the language you would use if the reader was sitting across the desk from you.



Examples

-  Applicants will be informed when applications have been processed.
-  We will let you know when your application has been processed.
-  Advice is available from Student Services.
-  You can get more advice from our Student Services office.

Active verbs

Adopt an active tone when writing; it sounds more direct and professional and helps to build trust with users by reassuring them that we're taking ownership of what we've written.





Examples

-  Applications from mature students are welcomed.
-  We welcome applications from mature students.

Talk about benefits, not just features

Your web content should emphasise the benefits and not just the features of Heriot-Watt's proposition.





Examples

-  Heriot-Watt offers courses in a range of subjects.
-  Studying at Heriot-Watt will enable you to develop skills and experience to help you achieve you career ambitions.
-  At Heriot-Watt you will be based on our picturesque campus.
-  At Heriot-Watt you will be part of a supportive community of like-minded people who share your interests and ambitions.

Focus on the positives

Always try to emphasise the positive side of things.





Examples

-  You can't enrol if you don't send copies of your qualifications.
-  Please send copies of your qualifications so that you can enrol.
-  Most rooms in halls of residence do not have en suite bathrooms.
-  Some rooms in halls of residence have en suite bathrooms.

Be welcoming and friendly

When communicating with students, it is important to communicate the supportive, community feel of Heriot-Watt, without being too informal.

Examples

-  Each student on the course has a personal tutor. You can go to him or her for advice and help whether it is about work or personal matters.
-  Our academic staff are world-class teaching professionals, but they are also a key part of our student support system. On the day of your arrival, you'll be introduced to your "mentor", who will be on hand to support you throughout your studies.
-  Any student wishing to transfer to another institute should complete the application and return it to the appropriate School or Institute Office for processing.
-  Once you have started a course at the University we hope you'll want to stay with us to finish it. However, if you have a good academic or personal reason, we will help you to transfer since other institutions will usually consider taking you if we give you our formal support.

Actionable

A call to action answers the unspoken question: "That's interesting. Now what?"

Your user will have a set of tasks in mind and you should also have these in mind when you are creating content. Does the content of your page allow the user to achieve what they set out to achieve quickly and easily?

If you want your user to do something, tell them what you want them to do and make it as easy as possible for them to do it. If you want them to fill out a form, tell them where to find it (provide a link); explain what details they'll need to provide and who they'll need to send it to (give contact details).


Use parallelisms

People like patterns:

- We grasp the information more quickly if we can anticipate the pattern.
- We try to see patterns in information even when there are none.
- When we have to switch patterns, we use extra mental energy.

This is a useful technique for landing pages, or situations where users have a choice of action to perform on the page and you are trying to make sure they make the right choice.

Example

-  Students interested in borrowing library materials not held by the Edinburgh Campus Library should contact the Interlibrary Borrowing Service.

Document Services lends original materials to other universities. It also provides photocopies, including copies of dissertations and theses.

✔ If you are a student interested in borrowing materials from other Heriot-Watt campuses, use our [Interlibrary Borrowing Service](#).

If you are not Heriot-Watt student or staff and wish to borrow our materials, see our [Document Services Department](#).

Use descriptive link text

In the same way that bold text stands out to screen-scanning web users, so does link text. Link text such as “click here” won’t make any sense out of context, so is useless to site visitors scanning web pages. Instead, you should use a title that describes where the person will be taken.

For links that appear in the body of the text, you should integrate links with your content, making it part of a sentence, preferably with a clear call to action. [See also: [Appendix 1 > links](#)]

Examples

- ✘ [www.news.bbc.co.uk](#)
- ✔ [BBC News](#)
- ✘ [More information](#)
- ✔ You can find out more on the [BBC News](#) website.
- ✘ [Scholarships](#)
- ✔ Find out if you are eligible for a [scholarship](#).

Searchable

Writing text with the intention of improving its chances of retrieval by search engines is the single biggest difference between writing for print and the web. There are a number of techniques you can use to improve your pages’ ranking with search engines.

See [Vaughns – Google ranking factors SEO checklist](#) for a full list of ranking factors.

Title and headlines

Each page should have a different title that is meaningful and accurately describes the information on the page. Choose words that are repeated in the body text of the page and place the most important keywords at the start of the title.

Examples



- ✘ Applying
- ✔ How to apply for postgraduate programmes

Headings & subheadings

Increased weight is given to words in your text that are emphasised by being headings so choose your headings carefully. However, do not use headings inappropriately or too frequently. The objective is that your text should be readable as well as retrievable.

Body text

Try to use the same terms and phrases in your content as your readers use when they talk or write about the subject matter in question. This will make your pages easier to understand for the user and have a higher chance of being picked up in searches.

	
degree ceremony	graduation
programmes of study	courses

Hyperlinks

Hyperlinked text is given added weight by search engine spiders so try to avoid the “click here” convention referred to earlier. Always hyperlink the relevant words even if that means you need to re-word your sentence to accommodate those keywords.

Keywords and page description

Think of the main keywords within your page. Try to use the words a user would enter when searching. Avoid obscure terms, oblique or ambiguous expressions, and puns. Keep it simple.

Include your most important keywords in your opening sentence, repeating or using variants, if possible. However, do not write something that is unclear or avoidably cumbersome. For search engine success there is no substitute for relevant content.

Measuring your web content

Now that you’ve planned out your content, written it and published it to the website, the next step is to monitor it to make sure it’s achieving the goals you set out in the first stage.

Measuring your web content is done in several ways:

- reviews and updates
- accepting feedback
- analysing web statistics
- user testing

Reviews & updates

Forthcoming events, latest news, statistics and examples must be refreshed regularly. If users see out-of-date information they will lose trust in the site and become suspicious of the rest of the content.

Build it into your workflow to regularly monitor your site for out of date content. Remove anything that is redundant and update anything that is timely.

Check that any new content added still makes sense and meets your objectives.

Accepting feedback

There is a “Suggest an improvement to this page” link at the bottom of every page. When clicked, this takes the user to a simple form where they can explain what improvements they’d like to see on that page (eg “contact information”).

Analysing web statistics

We use Google Analytics to monitor visits to the website. The Web Team can generate regular reports for you and offer advice on how to read the report and act on the results. Please contact webeditor@hw.ac.uk to discuss your ideas.

User testing

User testing can be done in several ways to make sure that users are finding the information they need. You might want to hold user testing sessions by giving a group of users a set of

The Web Team will work with you to carry out user testing. Please contact webeditor@hw.ac.uk to discuss your ideas.

References & further reading

Websites

- [Birmingham University Web Team \(webteam.bham.ac.uk\)](http://webteam.bham.ac.uk)
- [Edinburgh Napier University Web Team \(staff.napier.ac.uk\)](http://staff.napier.ac.uk)
- [Leeds University Web Team \(leeds.ac.uk/comms\)](http://leeds.ac.uk/comms)
- [MIT - Web Guide \(libstaff.mit.edu\)](http://libstaff.mit.edu)
- [Plain English \(plainenglish.co.uk\)](http://plainenglish.co.uk)
- [Usable Information Technology \(useit.com\)](http://useit.com)
- [Vaughns – Google ranking factors SEO checklist](#)
- [Web Design Glossary \(motive.co.nz\)](http://motive.co.nz)
- [Webcredible - resources \(webcredible.co.uk\)](http://webcredible.co.uk)
- [Yahoo! Style Guide \(styleguide.yahoo.com\)](http://styleguide.yahoo.com)

Books

- [Letting go of the Words](#), Ginny Redish
- [Content Strategy for the Web](#), Kristina Halvorson

Appendix 1: Web style guide

The Web Style Guide sets out how we should phrase, punctuate, spell and capitalise words and phrases on the website.

Find the most up-to-date version of the [Web style guide](#) on the intranet.

This guide supplements the University's [House Style Guidelines](#), addressing web-specific issues that aren't covered in the House Style Guide.

Appendix 2: Plain English Guide



Writing should follow basic Plain English guidelines so that our readers understand what we're trying to say.

The main advantages of plain English are:

- it is faster to write
- it is faster to read
- you get your message across more often, more easily and in a friendlier way

Plain English tips

- Use short words, short sentences, short paragraphs
- One sentence should cover only one idea. If you've used the word "which", it may mean the sentence can be divided.
- Don't use a long word when a short word will do.

	
obtain	get
prior to	before
purchase	buy
request	ask for
subsequent	next
terminate	end
utilise	use

A full guide can be found on the [Plain English](#) website.

- If it is possible to cut a word out, cut it out.
- Avoid jargon and technical terms.
- Replace pompous or unnecessarily complex words with their shorter equivalents.
- Cut out superfluous words and phrases that only serve to hinder the reader's understanding.
- Avoid "apple pie" phrases that have no real substance. Sentences shouldn't simply state the obvious, but they should tell the reader something relevant.
- Write in an active rather than passive voice. "We are doing this thing" rather than "This thing is being done". "We will do it" rather than "it will be done."
- Imagine you are talking directly to your reader. Write sincerely, personally, in a style that is suitable and with the right tone of voice.