



Writing for the web (plus bonus)

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Your website needs to grab and keep attention, and communicate your message clearly and concisely to all your audiences. So here is our handy guide to writing the copy for your website.

1. Your audiences

First up, who will be visiting your website? You may have several target audiences, eg a charity website may target both the users of its services *and* potential donors.

Now how will you capture their interest and make them want to read further?

If your website visitors cannot easily find what they are looking for, they will go somewhere else. We all tend to:

- scan websites and pages for information
- have a specific objective in mind
- expect results in a few seconds

Visitors might find out about you and access your website directly, but will as likely arrive via search engines. So the copy also needs to be written to increase the chances of appearing in search engine results.

2. Keywords

One of the ways in which you can improve your search engine results is to include keywords in your copy. The keywords need to reflect your organisation, its services and activities, and your website goals.

First, brainstorm the terms you and your audiences might use to search for your website.

Then you can use a keyword research tool to discover related keywords and combinations, and how many people are actually using them in searches. **Google AdWords** includes a free tool.

By the way, if at this stage you don't know who your audience is or what your website goals are, you may like to start with our guide "A website brief in 8.5 chapters"! It's available to download on the **Websites Ahoy! website**.

3. General principles for writing copy

Don't forget that search engines could lead visitors directly to almost any page, so the page must make sense out of context.

When accessing a new page, people's eyes tend to follow an 'F' pattern, scanning the first two paragraphs, then travelling down the left of the page. So...

The first one or two paragraphs should be a **summary** of the nature and scope of the page content to help the visitor decide early on whether the information that will follow is relevant to them.

Each page might have slightly different **keywords**. Try and include those in your summary or near the left-hand edge – use bullet points. On longer pages you could repeat them a few times, but not again and again and again or your copy will be unreadable.

Your **writing style** should use Plain English, the active (not passive) voice, short sentences, and short paragraphs of one idea and a maximum five sentences. Engage your audience by addressing them directly. Be concise, punchy, interesting, and easily digestible on a mobile device. The **Hemingway App** is a helpful tool for checking readability.

Make sure the **content** is up-to-date and relevant to your audience. Be objective. Include stories and examples if appropriate. Avoid or at least explain jargon, even if your readers are from your subject area. Avoid time-sensitive content and duplication, and check your facts. If necessary, include a disclaimer, copyright information, and date stamp.

Search engines like **links** within websites, so try and include some. Check any links to external websites. Use descriptive links: wording that tells the visitor where they are being taken. Try not to use web addresses for links, e.g. **thisisawebsite.co.uk**, unless you expect the content to be printed. *Never* use 'click here' text for links, as this is ambiguous to accessibility screen readers.

Avoid excessive **text styling** such as italics (difficult to read on-screen), underlining (users may think it is a link), upper case (slower to read and signifies 'shouting'), colours (issues for colour blind people).

4. Top-level pages

These pages include your Home page, and often the next level down on larger websites.

They are signposts to information, so keep text short. Use regular headings, sub-headings, and bulleted lists. Start these with information-carrying words to make the pages easy to scan, and help the visitor to pick out information and choices at a glance.

5. Lower-level pages

These are your visitors' eventual destinations, so they will be longer pages providing detailed information. Think explanatory headline; a summary in the first one or two paragraphs; regular explanatory headings and sub-headings; and all the general principles in section 3 above.

It is also good to break up text with relevant images, quotes or excerpts that can also help to tell a story.

For more technical writing, provide a glossary if necessary. Reference any sources cited. Think about other resources available on the web, and include these as links for reference or further reading.

6. Check check check

Ask a fresh pair of eyes to check your content for clarity, readability, grammar and typos. See what we did there?!

Bonus: Images and videos

You must ensure that you have the right to use any images, audio or video. We recommend including a © copyright statement, and if appropriate details in a separate page, to cover all your own copy, images and AV.

How will the image or AV be used? It could be as a feature grabbing attention, a means of providing information or telling a story, or a way of breaking up the text and styling the page.

Image filenames should be self-explanatory, as they are read by search engines. If an image conveys information, provide 'alt text' for accessibility screen readers, but don't if the image is for decoration only.

Add a transcript or subtitles to make your audio and video accessible. Host it on Soundcloud, YouTube or their equivalents, and let them take the strain of providing storage and bandwidth. You can easily embed AV on your website, so visitors will not disappear elsewhere.

Please call on **Websites Ahoy!** if you need any advice.

1 Miller Close, Exeter EX2 5NE • 07794 505707
websitesahoy.co.uk • ahoy@websitesahoy.co.uk
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