

Words for the Web
Neal Kane, Libretto
MIT WebPub Lunch
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Who we are

What we've done for you lately

- [School of Engineering](#)
- [MIT Medical](#)
- [Chemical Engineering](#)
- [CSAIL](#)
- [Campus Dining](#)
- [The Human Factor](#)

Why You're Here



Web 2.0.101

N42

CRE, PSB, CSAIL, SOE, ChemE, MechE

NFK ROE

Rules of engagement:

- 1. Nobody reads**
- 2. Nothing clever**
- 3. The search is on**
- 4. Know your audience**
- 5. Less is a must**
- 6. Tell people what to do**
- 7. Be remarkable**

A few mantras

Rule #1: Nobody reads

Site visitors aren't readers – they're hunters. Most people use the Web to find important information (hours of operation, directions, the schedule for online *Jeopardy!* auditions) and resources (hotels, plumbing supplies, Bananagrams). They **scan** Web copy looking for relevant terms and information that indicate they've come to the right place.

Rule #1: What this means for Web content

Keep your writing clear, concise, and on topic. People typically scan the first line or two of a paragraph to get the gist and then move on. The most important information should appear at the beginning of a paragraph or section.

Consider using:

- Bulleted lists
- Headlines and subheads
- Callouts to lead people through the content

Rule #2: Nothing clever

There's a time and place for cute and clever. The Web isn't it. No one has any time – and it's not a real place. Web content should be less about wit and more about wisdom. Navigation nomenclature (button names) should be unambiguous; headlines should be clear and direct.

Rule #2: What this means for Web content

Be objective. Avoid marketing-speak, superlatives, and clichés like the plague. Limit adjectives and opinions. This kind of language is distracting, adds length, and invites skepticism.

Write for your mother – and your worst enemy.

Anyone with a browser – from your old English teacher to your biggest competitor – will have immediate access to the content you create.

Rule #2:

What this means for Web content [cont.]

Show, don't tell. Surface salient characteristics, essential elements, telling details, and big ideas. You can tell folks that you're different, smart, and clever, but they won't believe it until they see it or experience it firsthand.

Keep it simple. Complex ideas should be broken down using short, simple sentences. Paragraphs should be limited to one or two main ideas.

Rule #3: The search is on

People aren't going to read your stellar content if they can't find it. Typically more than half of site visitors come through search (perhaps less in the MIT world).

Rule #3: What this means for Web content

Think like a user

Put yourself in your visitor's shoes and think about the search terms people might use who are interested in your organization and/or offering. While Libretto prides itself on our "strategic messaging," we recognize that people will likely be looking for "Web content" and "copywriting."

Rule #3:

What this means for Web content [cont.]

Be keyword-oriented

Use keywords so that readers can determine relevancy and appropriateness, and search engines can index you. When it comes to keywords, here's what matters:

Prominence – where the keyword appears on the page (in navigation title is best, or in metadata, headlines, or subheads).

Density – the number of times a keyword appears on the page.

Rule #3:

What this means for Web content [cont.]

Get linked

External links are important for search. The more links pointing to you, the higher your ranking.

Internal links to other information assets are also important because search engines pay more attention to the underlined “anchor” text. Instead of saying, “click here,” work a keyword into that text, e.g., “read our engineering solutions white paper.”

Rule #4: Know your audience

Anticipate the information needs of prospective visitors – and address those needs. Who will be reading this content? What do they want to know? What are they trying to do? While people sometimes go to a website just to explore, more often they're looking for specific information.

Rule #4: What this means for Web content

Be a taskmaster

Create different user scenarios to help you generalize the information and functional needs of different audience members. Once you've determined what the most common use-scenarios are, create content that makes it quick and easy to accomplish those tasks. Web content and design should be evaluated to determine whether they help or hinder the accomplishment of that task.

Rule #5: Less is a must

According to a Nielsen study, readers have time to read an average of 20-28% of a Web page's content. Visitors will spend an extra 4.4 seconds for every 100 words of content that appear on the page.*

*Harold Weinreich, Hartmut Obendorf, Eelco Herder, and Matthias Mayer: "Not Quite the Average: An Empirical Study of Web Use," in the *ACM Transactions on the Web*, vol. 2, no. 1 (February 2008), article #5.

Rule #5: What this means for Web content

Keep it down

A typical content area on a second-level Web page (assuming an 800 x 600 pixel screen size and a 400 x 500 pixel content area) can accommodate between 200 and 300 words of content. While readers can scroll to view subsequent content, the most important information should appear “above the fold” on the initial Web page.

Break up content that is longer than 250 words with subheads that preview the coming content and encourage readers to scroll through the rest of the information.

Rule #6: Tell people what to do

What is the desired outcome or action from reading your content? Contact you? Buy the book? Register for the class? Go to another area of the site? Create language that encourages appropriate responses and guides the reader to their next step.

Rule #7: Be remarkable

Forge a connection

You're doing a website because you have something of value to communicate. Content isn't the only thing that fosters a connection with the reader. Multimedia assets, for example, can provide a richer sense of your offering. (Can you show the project instead of describing it?) Focus on what's different, exciting, and engaging about you. Whom are you trying to connect with? What moves them and helps you bond with them?

A few mantras

- ***Build a strong foundation***
- ***Divide and conquer***
- ***Create a personality and a pulse***

Questions?