

Title:

Writing well for the Web - How to write well for the NHS Lothian intranet and internet websites

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1.0 Writing well for the Web

People read differently on the web than they do on paper. This means that the best approach when writing for the web is different from writing for print.

1.1 Meet the user need

Do not publish everything you can online. Publish only what someone needs to know so they can complete their task. Nothing more.

People do not usually read text unless they want information. When you write for the web, start with the same question every time: what does the user want to know?

Meeting that need means being:

- Specific
- informative
- clear and to the point

1.2 Finding information on the web

An individual's process of finding and absorbing information on the web should follow these steps.

- 1 I have a question
- 2 I can find the page with the answer easily – I can see it's the right page from the search results listing
- 3 I have understood the information I have my answer
- 4 I trust the information
- 5 I know what to do next/my fears are allayed/I do not need anything else

A website only works if people can find what they need quickly, complete their task and leave without having to think about it too much.

1.3 Good content is easy to read

Good online content is easy to read and understand. It uses:

- short sentences
- sub-headed sections simple vocabulary. This helps people find what they need quickly and absorb it effortlessly

The main purpose of NHS Lothian sites is to provide information - there's no excuse for putting unnecessarily complicated writing in the way of people's understanding.

2.0 Writing well for specialists

Subject matter experts often say that because they're writing technical or complex content for a specialist audience, they do not need to use plain English. This is wrong.

Research shows that higher literacy people prefer plain English because it allows them to understand the information as quickly as possible.

For example, research into use of specialist legal language in legal documents found:

80% of people preferred sentences written in clear English - and the more complex the issue, the greater that preference (e.g. 97% preferred 'among other things' over the Latin 'inter alia')

The more educated the person and the more specialist their knowledge, the greater their preference for plain English

People understand complex specialist language, but do not want to read it if there's an alternative. This is because people with the highest literacy levels and the greatest expertise tend to have the most to read. They do not have time to pore through reams of dry, complicated prose.

2.1 Technical terms

Where you need to use technical terms, you can. They're not jargon. You just need to explain what they mean the first time you use them.

2.2 Footnotes

Do not use footnotes on documents. They're designed for reference in print, not web pages. Always consider the user need first. If the information in the footnotes is important, include it in the body text. If it's not, leave it out.

3.0 Know your audience

Your writing will be most effective if you understand who you're writing for. To understand your audience you should know:

- how they behave, what they're interested in or worried about - so your writing will catch their attention and answer their questions
- their vocabulary - so that you can use the same terms and phrases they'll use to search for content

When you have more than one audience, make your writing as easy to read as possible so it's accessible to everyone.

3.1 The NHS Lothian audience

The NHS Lothian audience is potentially anyone living in the UK who needs information about their healthcare, or people abroad who want to do business in or travel to the UK. This means NHS Lothian must communicate in a way that most people understand.

The best way to do this is by using common words and working with natural reading behaviour. If you're writing for a specialist audience, you still need to make sure everyone can understand what the content is about.

4.0 How people read

Knowing how people read means you'll write in a way they can understand easily and quickly - so you do not waste their time.

All of this guidance is based on the learning skills of an average person in the UK, who speaks English as their first language. This guidance also applies when you're writing for specialists.

4.1 Common words

By the time a child is 5 or 6 years old, they'll use 2,500 to 5,000 common words. Adults still find these words easier to recognise and understand than words they've learned since.

By age 9, you're building up your 'common words' vocabulary. Your primary set is around 5,000 words; your secondary set is around 10,000 words. You use these words every day.

Use short words instead of long words

When you use a longer word (8 or 9 letters), users are more likely to skip shorter words (3, 4 or 5 letters) that follow it. So if you use longer, more complicated words, readers will skip more. Keep it simple.

For example:

"The recently implemented categorical standardisation procedure on waste oil should not be applied before 1 January 2015."

The 'not' is far more obvious in this:

"Do not use the new waste oil standards before 1 January 2015."

4.2 Reading skills

Children quickly learn to read common words (the 5000 words they use most). They then stop reading these words and start recognising their shape. This allows people to read much faster. Children already read like this by the time they're 9 years old.

People also do not read one word at a time. They bounce around - especially online. They anticipate words and fill them in.

Your brain can drop up to 30% of the text and still understand. Your vocabulary will grow but this reading skill stays with you as an adult. You do not need to read every word to understand what is written.

This is why we tell people to write on NHS Lothian sites for a 9 year old reading age.

4.3 Explaining the unusual

We explain all unusual terms on NHS Lothian sites. This is because you can understand 6-letter words as easily as 2-letter words – if they're in context. If the context is right, you can read a short word faster than a single letter.

By giving full information and using common words, we're helping people speed up their reading and understand information in the fastest possible way.

4.4 Short sentences

People with some learning disabilities read letter for letter - they do not bounce around like other users. They also cannot fully understand a sentence if it's too long.

People with moderate learning disabilities can understand sentences of 5 to 8 words without difficulty. By using common words we can help all users understand sentences of around 25 words.

4.5 Capital letters are harder to read

When you learn to read, you start with a mix of upper and lower case but you do not start understanding uppercase until you're around 6 years old.

At first, you may sound out letters, merge sounds, merge letters and so learn the word.

Then you stop reading it.

At that point, you recognise the shape of the word. This speeds up comprehension and speed of reading.

As writers, we do not want people to read. We want people to recognise the 'shape' of the word and understand. It's a lot faster.

Capital letters are reputed to be 13 to 18% harder for users to read. So we try to avoid them.

Block capitals indicate shouting in common online usage. We should not be shouting.

4.6 Ampersands can be hard to understand

Ampersands are allowed in logos – the pictorial logo at the top of an organisation page – but not in body copy.

The reason is that 'and' is easier to read and easier to skim. Some people with lower literacy levels also find ampersands harder to understand. As a healthcare provider, we cannot exclude users in any way.

4.7 How users read web pages

Users read very differently online than on paper. They do not necessarily read top to bottom or even from word to word.

Instead, users only read about 20 to 28% of a web page. Where users just want to complete their task as quickly as possible, they skim even more.

Web-user eye-tracking studies show that people tend to 'read' a webpage in an 'F' shape pattern. They look across the top, then down the side, reading further across when they find what they need.

What this means is: put the most important information first. So we talk a lot about ‘front-loading’ sub-headings, titles and bullet points.

For example, say ‘Canteen menu’, not ‘What’s on the menu at the canteen today?’

Good example: At the activity centre you can: swim play run

Bad example: At the activity centre: you can swim, you can play, and you can run

5.0 Titles

Most people who use NHS Lothian sites start with a search engine. Use the same vocabulary as your audience so they can find your content. This begins with your page title and summary.

If people cannot find your page or understand the content, they will not be able to act on it or know it’s for them.

When writing a title consider if it makes sense:

By itself – for example ‘Policies’ does not say much, but ‘Human resources policies’ does in search results in collections

Titles do not have to reflect the official publication title. Make them user focused, clear and descriptive so that users can distinguish if it’s the right content for them.

Example

Good title example: Bereavement Allowance (previously widow’s pension)

Good summary example: Bereavement Allowance (previously widow’s pension) is a weekly benefit for widows, widowers or surviving civil partners - rates, eligibility, claim form.

5.1 Title length

Your title should be 65 characters or less (including spaces).

You can use more than 65 characters if it’s essential for making the title clear or unique, but do not do this routinely because:

Google cuts off the rest of the title after 65 characters longer titles are harder to understand

5.2 Make your titles clear and descriptive

The title should provide full context so that users can easily see if they’ve found what they’re looking for.

By being general about a topic, you leave the user asking ‘what is this in relation to?’

Example:

Bad title example: **Hazardous waste - new process**

Give the user context around the topic and what this content will tell them: Good title example:
How to dispose of hazardous waste in your area

5.3 Avoid saying the same thing twice (tautologies)

Repeating yourself in the title uses up valuable characters that could be used to give more information.

Example:

Bad title example: **Using and submitting your business expenses**

Good title example: **Submitting your business expenses**

5.4 Using 'ing' in titles

Use the active verb ('Submit') if you use the page to do the thing. Good form title example: Submit your business expenses

Use the present participle ('Submitting') if the page is about doing the thing, but you do it elsewhere.

Good guidance title example: Submitting your business expenses

5.4 Using 'ing' in titles

Put the year in the title if the page is part of a series that has the same title. For example, a list of annual reports:

Title: Annual report 2018

Title: Annual report 2017

Title: Annual report 2016

6.0 Summaries

Along with the title, the summary is usually what users see in search results so it should give them a clear indication of what the content is about. Make sure people can see quickly whether the page will have the information they need.

Keep all summaries to 160 characters (including spaces) as Google usually only shows the first 160 characters in search results. If your summary is longer, make sure you cover the main point of the page in the first 160 characters.

Summaries should end with a full stop. It can help people who use assistive technology like screen readers.

6.1 Answer the user's question in the summary

People will easily find well-optimised content. If you have a simple answer to a question, put it in the summary. This means users do not need to leave Google (or whatever search engine they choose to use) to get their information.

Example:

Most people want to know the cost of parking before they arrive. We've put the price in the page summary so it appears in search results.

Title: Parking fees

Summary: Parking at the hospital costs £1.50 per hour. You can pay for a full day pass for £7.50. You cannot get a refund if you leave your parking space early.

Title: Report a stuffed toy accident

Summary: Call the STA reporting line on 0123 456 7890 and then fill in the accident report form.

6.2 Use plain English to avoid confusion

Use plain English and write like you're talking to your user one-on-one, but with the authority of someone who can actively help.

Example:

Bad summary example: **Implementing the government's strengthened approach to budget support: technical note**

If you use plain English, you make the purpose of the content clearer. Good summary example: **How the government is making budget support more effective in countries supported by the UK**

For more examples of words not to use in summaries, read the words to avoid list.

6.3 Avoid redundant introductory words

These do not tend to give the user any more information than what they would already assume.

Examples:

This consultation is about... The purpose of this document... A form to...

Remove as much as you can without losing critical information. Include keywords – especially ones you have not included in the page title.

Keep summaries active and include a verb. You can use words like 'How...', 'What...' and 'When...' to introduce active words, for example 'When applying for a...'

Example:

Bad summary example: **Please complete the attached form to apply to gain a licence to sail on the river.**

It's better to get straight to the point of what a user can do with this content.

Good summary example: **Get a licence to sail your pleasure boat on the river.**

6.4 Do not repeat the title in the summary

Use the summary to give more information on what the content is about.

Example:

Title example: **Training materials for flu pandemic: contingency planning and response**

Bad summary example: **Training materials for flu pandemic, contingency planning and response course.**

Good summary example: **Get the supporting materials for the 'flu pandemic contingency planning and response' course, and an overview of what to do to comply with the National Flu Contingency Plan.**

7.0 Structuring your content

7.1 Page length

There is no minimum or maximum page length for NHS Lothian sites. However:

- people only read 20 to 28% of text on a web page anyway
- remember that the pressure on the brain to understand increases for every 100 words you put on a page

This means that the quicker you get to the point, the greater the chance your target audience will see the information you want them to.

It's most important that you write well. If you write only a single paragraph but it's full of caveats, jargon and things users do not need to know (but you want to say) then it's still too much.

7.2 Writing body copy

Keep your body copy as focused as possible.

Remember that you're likely to be battling outside factors for people's attention, not least their mood and situation. They might be looking on a mobile on a train, trying to complete their task online in the middle of a stressful family event or any combination of multiple unknowns. If you want their attention, do not waste their time.

- Do not repeat the summary in the first paragraph.
- Use the 'inverted pyramid' approach with the most important information at the top tapering down to lesser detail.
- Break up text with descriptive subheadings. The text should still make sense with the subheadings removed.
- Paragraphs should have no more than 5 sentences each.

- Includes keywords to boost natural search rankings.

7.3 Sub-headings

Make sure your sub-headings are front-loaded with search terms and make them active.

Do not use:

- present participles, for example 'Apply for a licence' not 'Applying for a licence'
- questions
- technical terms unless you've already explained them
- 'introduction' as your first section – users do not want an introduction, just give the most important information

7.4 Do not use FAQs

FAQs are strongly discouraged on NHS Lothian sites. If you write content by starting with user needs, you will not need to use FAQs.

FAQs are discouraged because they:

- duplicate other content on the site
- cannot be front-loaded (putting the most important words people will search for), which makes usability difficult
- are usually not frequently asked questions by the public, but important information dumped by the content editor
- mean that content is not where people expect to find it; it needs to be in context
- can add to search results with duplicate, competing text

8.0 Writing to NHS Lothian style

To keep content understandable, concise and relevant, it should be: specific

- informative
- clear and concise brisk but not terse
- incisive (friendliness can lead to a lack of precision and unnecessary words) – but remain human (not a faceless machine)
- serious but not pompous
- emotionless – adjectives can be subjective and make the text sound more emotive and like spin

You should:

- use contractions like you'll (but avoid negative contractions like can't)

- not let caveats dictate unwieldy grammar – e.g. say ‘You can’ rather than ‘You may be able to’
- use the language people are using – use Google Trends to check for terms people search for
- not use long sentences – check any sentences with more than 25 words to see if you can split them to make them clearer

(Note: words ending in ‘-ion’ and ‘-ment’ tend to make sentences longer and more complicated than they need to be.)

8.1 Active voice

Use the active rather than passive voice. This will help us write concise, clear content.

8.2 Addressing the user

Address the user as ‘you’ where possible. Content on the site often makes a direct appeal to citizens and businesses to get involved or take action, e.g. ‘You can contact HMRC by phone and email’ or ‘Pay your car tax’.

8.3 Capitalisation

Do not use block capitals for large amounts of text. It is more difficult to read.

8.4 Contractions

Use contractions like you’ll and we’ll.

Avoid negative contractions like can’t and don’t - research shows that many users find them harder to read, or misread them as the opposite of what they say.

8.5 Date ranges

Use ‘to’ instead of a dash or slash in date ranges. ‘To’ is quicker to read than a dash, and it’s easier for screen readers.

Always explain what your date range represents, e.g. ‘tax year 2013 to 2014’ or ‘September 2013 to July 2014’. Date ranges can be the academic year, calendar year or tax year. This is why date ranges must be very, very clear.

If you’re comparing statistics from 2 different tax or financial years, use ‘Comparing the financial year ending 2011 with that ending 2012, there was a 9% decrease’.

NHS Lothian gets thousands of visits a month. There is no guarantee that only your intended audience will find your content, or that everyone will understand what you mean.

But we can make sure we get as close to accessible for everyone as we possibly can, simply by being very, very clear.

8.6 Gender-neutral text

Make sure text is gender neutral where appropriate. Use 'them', 'their', 'they' etc.

8.7 Links

Front-load your link text with the relevant terms and make them active and specific. Always link to online services first. Offer offline alternatives afterwards (where possible).

8.8 Plain English

Plain English is mandatory for all of NHS Lothian sites.

Do not use formal or long words when easy or short ones will do. Use 'buy' instead of 'purchase', 'help' instead of 'assist', and 'about' instead of 'approximately'.

Write conversationally – picture your audience and write as if you were talking to them one-to-one but with the authority of someone who can actively help.

9.0 After publication

Check your content is working for your users

You should regularly confirm that your content works for your users.