

Web Writing 101

WHY EFFECTIVE WEB WRITING MATTERS

Web users read differently on the web. They rarely read entire pages, word for word. Instead, users:

- Scan pages
- Pick out key words and phrases
- Read in quick, short bursts
- Are action oriented
- Click and forage in search of bits of information that lead them toward a goal

Users will read longer pages if the content provides details related to the user's goal. Keep in mind that for some long content, users may be more likely to print it out and read it.

MISTAKES TO AVOID

Do NOT:

Welcome people to your department or office or explain how to use your website.

Please do not include "Welcome to the Southern Illinois School of Medicine web pages. We encourage you to browse through our site and find out why previous medical students have chosen us for the next phase of their medical career." A website is a collection of information; no need to tell your readers that.

Put every piece of printed content you have on your website.

Consider your audiences and remind yourself that just because you have it, doesn't mean your website visitors need to see it. Large volumes of content ≠ good websites. If your visitors don't need and you can't maintain it, don't put it on your site.

Post a PDF version of a document unless necessary.

Unless the format and integrity of the original printed document must be maintained, such as a printable form or brochure, do not use PDFs for the web. PDFs, word documents or any other printed document type are not intended for the web and pose issues with search-ability, access and readability. Chances are, if the content was written for print, it's not properly formatted for the website.

WRITING STYLE

Inverted Pyramid style

Though traditional academic writing follows a pyramid style – that is, you lay the foundation using many sources and supportive research to build to a logical conclusion, writing for the web is best accomplished using an *inverted pyramid style*.

Like news stories, effective web writing should present the most important information first, with additional supporting detail to follow. By putting the main idea at the forefront, readers can decide whether the content is relevant to their goals and interests and avoid reading on only to find out it's not what they're looking for.

When writing for the web

- Catch your readers' attention in the first few words
- Start with the conclusion, follow with details
- Remember: who, what, where, when, why and how
- Convey only one idea per paragraph
- Use half the word count of traditional writing

Write to be found in a search

Use words that your target audience use when searching. The Office of Public Relations and Communication can help identify what words to use based on previous searchers. You can also:

- Ask your target users through conversation, focus groups or surveys
- Use a service, like Google Ad Words, to help you determine keywords appropriate to your content

For example, we often call our employee directory the “jiffy,” but visitors will likely search for the “employee directory.”

Your keywords should be used both in the body of the page as well as in the headers.

Keep it short and to the point

Use active voice

Using active voice, the subject of your sentence is doing the action.

- ✓ Example of active voice: The **Department** of Internal Medicine **provides** additional training opportunities.

Using passive voice, the subject receives the action. Often, the word “by” can signal if you are using passive voice.

- ✗ Example of passive voice: Additional training opportunities are **provided by** the **Department** of Internal Medicine. (INCORRECT)

✓ *Cut wordy phrases*

- ✓ Make your sentences as concise and to the point as possible. Eliminate unnecessary words.

- ✗ Example of wordy, passive phrase: In the event that it snows heavily, SIU School of Medicine's Facebook page should be checked before coming to campus. (INCORRECT).

Example of concise, active phrase: If it snows, check SIU School of Medicine's Facebook page before coming to campus. (CORRECT)

Use simple words

Instead of . . .	Use . . .
Obtain	Get
Prior to	Before
Purchase	Buy
Request	Ask for
Subsequent	Next
Terminate	End

Utilize	Use
Facilitate	Help

Tip: It's okay to be less formal. When writing, think about how you might say the same thing to someone over the telephone.

Use longer, more descriptive links

Your readers should know what to expect when clicking a link. When linking to content, provide 7-11 words describing the link.

You may also choose to provide brief descriptions with a shorter link to inform your audiences.



Example of a vague link: [Directory](#)



Example of a descriptive link: [Find a person in the employee directory](#) or [Employee directory](#)

Introduction text: good or bad?

Most readers skip the introductory text on web pages and jump directly to information easier to scan. Users have found that:

- Intro text is usually meaningless
- Intro text is usually too long

Although many readers skip the intro text, it can be useful if it's kept to 1-2 sentences.

Using metadata

Metadata is information about information. That information helps describe and categorize your content to optimize searching, sorting and presenting your content in a website.

Keywords are one form of metadata. Metadata also includes headings, summaries, author info, publication date, ratings and tags.

Page descriptions

You should carefully consider the metadata for each webpage you create. Most importantly, consider the page title, description and keywords, which are included in the HTML code for each page. The unique title of the page should describe the exact content on that page. The description, usually 15-25 words, is often displayed in the search results. Titles and descriptions should be brief and very descriptive.

Structured metadata & folksonomy

Ask Todd: Does our CMS allow us to structure metadata and control the vocabulary used by your content contributors to promote consistency across the website? Do we allow visitors to tag content themselves?

Formatting

Use headlines and headings

The headline at the top of the page should identify the content of the page immediately. Also use subheadings throughout your pages to break content up and make it easier to scan.

Headings should provide visual cues

Headlines and section headings, or subheadings, should be high contrast and attract the eye, while acting as a bullet-point summary of the page. The Office of Public Relations and Communication is developing a style guide to assist you in your decision making and to assure a consistent look throughout the SIU School of Medicine website.

Headings should be useful

Headings should inform the content that appears below them. Be clear and concise. Cutesy headings don't help your reader.

Consider a number of ways to write headings that will appeal to your target audiences:

- **Questions** make effective headings for user guides, procedures and policies. Be sure your questions reflect how actual users would phrase them.
- **Phrases and sentences** are effective when creating subheadings within a long page of content.
- **Nouns as headings** are most effective when the noun clearly identifies something the user is looking for. They are, however, less action-oriented than the other heading types.

Examples:

Question: How do I apply to SIU School of Medicine?

Verb Phrase: Applying for admission to SIU School of Medicine

Imperative: Apply for admission to SIU School of Medicine

Sentence: You can apply to SIU School of Medicine in three easy steps.

Noun: Application for admission

Highlight keywords in your text

Use forms of highlighting, which include bold, italics, color, font and links, sparingly – once or twice in each paragraph at the most.

Choosing colors and styles that do not fit the website's style and color palette will only lessen the integrity of your site and turn readers off to your content.

Use bulleted or numbered lists

Lists create chunks of content that make scanning easier. Consider using a list for:

- Options
- Steps
- Items

For steps in a process, use numbered lists and action-oriented imperatives ("open this" or "click on").

Example:

1. Register for a username.
2. Log-in to the portal.

3. Download the application.

Use numerals

When writing numbers, particularly as they represent facts, use numerals instead of words (i.e. 5 instead of five).

Word count rules of thumbs

- Headings: 8-10 words
- Sentences: 15-20 words
- Paragraphs: 40-70 words
- Pages: 500 words or less

Faculty Bios: Writing Guidelines

When adding a faculty member, you will be asked to fill in various blanks. **Only type the requested information.**

For example, do not add titles or degrees in the name blank. A separate box will allow you to add this type of information later on.



Jane Doe, PhD

Name:

When asked for **academic titles**, capitalize the first letter of each word. For example, type Assistant Professor, not assistant professor.

Try to limit the **about** section to 1-2 paragraphs. Consider adding:

- Biographical information, such as when the faculty member joined SIU Medicine, what courses he/she teaches or previous employment
- The faculty member's research interests

Example:

John Doe, MD, PhD, is the chief of the Division of Cardiology and a professor of medicine.

Before joining SIU Medicine, Doe worked as the director of Springfield Hospital. He also previously served as a professor of medicine at Another School of Medicine in City. He earned his medical degree at XYZ University (1989). Doe completed a cardiology fellowship at the University of State in City (1998) and an internal medicine residency at the University of State in 1996.

Doe has authored more than 200 peer-reviewed publications. His research interests include atrial fibrillation and population health.

Remember:

- Do NOT put periods in degrees. Type PhD or MD, not Ph.D. or M.D.
- Write in the third person (he, she, her, his), not first person (I, my, we, our)
- Do NOT double space at the end of a sentence
- It's okay to leave areas blank. For example, if a faculty member has no patents, leave that area blank. That category will not appear in the final version of the page.

When asked for the faculty member's school, residency and fellowship info, list only the name of the institution, not the year he/she graduated, his/her major or focus, or the degree achieved.

List grants, patents, awards, citations, etc. in the appropriate boxes. Faculty members also have the option to upload a curriculum vitae as a PDF.

Once you have completed the faculty member's bio, select "publish to SIU School of Medicine" and choose the relevant audience(s). This faculty profile will exist separately from SIU Medicine, which is designed for patients. Change your draft's moderation state to needs to review to send your draft to the appropriate moderator.