Digital Communications

Writing for the web

Introduction

Writing for the web is different from writing for other mediums of communication as people read differently on a screen compared to for example print materials.

Every constituent part of the website (e.g. sub-sites within your site, individual pages, sections within pages, down to paragraphs) should have a clear purpose and a clear message to communicate:

- **Specific**: address a particular challenge or issue, and audience
- **Clear/simple and concise**: to the point, avoiding jargon and acronyms
- **Short**: one brief, memorable sentence
- **Positive**: talk about what can be done, not what can't be done

1. Providing a service to your audience

People visiting a webpage are looking to quickly find the information they are looking for:
- Look for answers to questions
- Expect to find a logic structure of information with informative headings and sub-headings.

The type of information your audience expect to find, and the speed with which they want this, influences their reading behaviour:
- Scan pages rather than read word-for-word.
- Expect to find the important information in the first two paragraphs on a webpage.
- Read out of sequence.
- Notice information that is out of date.

2. Easy access to information and using keywords for SEO

Writing for the web means helping your readers quickly find the information they are looking for. In order to provide this service, you should bear the following in mind:
- Aim for small, bite-sized 'chunks' of copy on navigational pages. These should be self-explanatory and easy to read at a glance.
- It's important to consider "keywords" when writing for the web for search engaging optimisation (SEO) purposes (so that your webpage can be found by search engines such as

Google). That said, the current Google algorithm is built to find authentic content only, leaving webpages using "keyword spamming" techniques in the dark.

- Use up to date facts and examples (i.e. evidence) when relevant to substantiate claims made in your text making your copy appear credible.

Content

The content should be in relation to the topic in question only. If there is a need to branch out to related areas, then use links to other parts of the website where this information can be found. Using this method will help avoid duplication on the website.

Brand messages

An organisation usually has a few high level key messages that it wants to communicate; these are what it wants to be known for.

Content maintenance

In order to assure that content is correct and kept up to date, each webpage has dedicated ownership by a member /team of staff who reviews the page regularly.

3.   Tone of voice

Tone of voice refers to how we express what we write and say.
- Choose a tone of voice that engages readers and focuses on the reader, ie addressing "you" in your text. As for example use *You must send us...* rather than *Applicants must send us...*
- Think of your web pages as a conversation between you (as representing the School) and your reader – use 'we' and 'you' to refer to the School and the reader whenever appropriate.
- Be friendly (i.e. inclusive, welcoming, supportive and unpretentious) while remaining professional and authoritative.
- Use the active voice most of the time: e.g. *A technician has investigated the incident.* (Active) rather than *The incident has been investigated by a technician.*
- Try to include testimonials/comments from internal experts and also customers.

4.   Writing style

Clarity and simplicity

Writing simple and clear means writing in a way that removes all potential causes of confusion and misunderstanding in the reader.

- Write simple sentences: i.e. one main idea, avoid subordinate clauses – but do vary the

length of your sentences for 'pace'

- Use simple everyday words (i.e. Plain English) whenever possible: e.g. write *end* instead of *terminate*; *try* not *endeavour*.
- Avoid wordy expressions such as in view of the fact that... (use *as* or *because* instead) and impersonal constructions such as *It is generally believed that...* often found in academic writing.
- Write instructions in the imperative form and keep them as short as possible: e.g. *Fill in this form to apply*. rather than *If you wish to apply for the position, you are requested to complete this form*.
- Avoid clichés, buzzwords and metaphors as they can be misunderstood: e.g. *bone of contention*; *blue sky research*; *bring to the table*; *proven track record*.
- Avoid jargon as it can confound people unfamiliar with it. Examples of jargon include *stakeholder*, *firewall*, *ballpark*, *marginal-cost pricing*, etc.
- Avoid using foreign words: e.g. use *dead end* instead of *cul-de-sac*
- Avoid nominalisations (i.e. turning verbs into nouns): e.g. use *to engage staff* instead of *to ensure the engagement of staff*
- Provide the full name of acronyms and abbreviations with the acronym or abbreviation in brackets the first time you use them.

5. How to structure content for the web

- Use the inverted pyramid method (also known as front-loading) when structuring the content:
  o First, write the key points of your message that readers must read for your communication to be successful.
  o Second, write any supporting information that is helpful but not crucial.
  o Third, write any background information that it would be nice if they had it, but definitely not essential.
  Comment: This technique originates from news reporting and is commonly used by journalists. You can read more about this method on this link: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inverted_pyramid.
- Headings and sub-headings: Think of these as signposts to groups of information. In addition they are crucial to gaining greater visibility in search engines.
- Use bullet points whenever possible.
- Use bold intelligently and sparingly.
- Avoid italics as they reduce readability.

6. Imagery
- Make your pages visually interesting by support your messages with imagery
- Try capture your message with an image instead of writing long paragraphs to describe something
- Don't use too many images though, again bear in mind to always keep your pages clean and clear.

7. Accessibility

Accessibility means making it possible for people (particularly the disabled) to access and use something (e.g. a public building, a website).

Visual impairments
Visual impairments cover a wide range of disabilities including blindness, low vision and colour blindness.

Blindness
Blind web readers access the content of websites through screen reader software, a type of software that reads aloud the textual content of web pages and provides text alternative to visual content (e.g. images). Also, they will be using their keyboard rather than a mouse to navigate around the site.

Low vision
Depending on the severity of their condition, people with low vision may rely on screen magnification software (either the one supplied with their operating system or a commercial product) to help them read the content of web pages. Those with less severe conditions (including age related vision loss) may simply require the ability to control text size through their browser.

Colour blindness
The most common form of colour blindness is the incapacity to distinguish between red and green. However there are many other forms such as blue/yellow deficiency.

Information about the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) can be found here:
http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/the-disability-discrimination-act-dda