Writing for the Web

Creating Accessible Content

e-Learning Transcript

# Introduction

Welcome to *Writing for the Web*. This course introduces you to strategies and tools that will help you both write *and* organize your web content to effectively communicate your website message to *all* visitors.

The way we consume information has drastically changed thanks to email, websites, social media, and chatbots. What do these communication mediums share in common? Writing!

But in state government, we don’t always adapt our writing to new technologies. No matter how important your content is, the reality is that nobody reads every single word. People are busy, in a hurry, and have other things competing for their attention.

The Nielsen Norman Group found that 79% of people constantly scan any new page they come across. Only 16% of people read every word on a page.

Scanning is an efficient strategy to filter information and avoid information overload. Your website visitors want information quickly without working through difficult jargon to find it. This is true for all visitors, especially those who rely on assistive technologies to navigate the digital world.

# Lesson 1: Write for your Audience

## Identify your Audience

The key to good web content is to first understand who your visitors are, what they need, and why they’re visiting your website. With this understanding, you can write directly to your visitors in a way that makes sense to them. You’re a subject-matter expert in your agency, but your duty is to serve the average citizen. Structure your writing for someone who isn’t familiar with government-speak.

### Tool: Personas

A persona is a tool to help you think about your audience and their needs. It is a fictional character who represents a group of real site visitors. The “thing” the persona is coming to your site to do is a “top task.” Understanding top tasks helps you create content that is useful.

There are four parts to a persona:

* Demographics: Who does the website or specific webpage serve? Think about age, profession, education level and similar details.
* Situation and Needs: What brought them to your website? What are they looking for?
* Top Tasks: What *do* they need to do while they’re on your website? The answer can usually be found in terms of verbs like learn, apply or ensure.
* Pain Points: What does this particular type of user dislike about this site or page?

Example

This is an example of a persona for the State Board of Elections. Meet Millie.

Demographics:

* Age 65
* High school diploma
* No computer: uses her phone to navigate the web
* Prides herself on being independent

Situation and Needs:

* In the voting booth during the last election, the ballot was long and confusing.
* Millie doesn’t want to be surprised in the voting booth again.
* She thinks there is a “statewide” ballot.

Pain Points:

* Does not see a link to download a copy of the ballot.
* The closest thing she can find is the “provisional ballot,” but that requires a login.

Top Task(s):

* Find the “state” ballot for the upcoming election.

## Acknowledge the Audience

More than likely, the people visiting your website aren’t trying to understand what your agency does. Starting a page with “The mission of this agency is to …” might sound logical to *internal* users, but it isn’t helpful to many site visitors. This is not to say that this information doesn’t belong anywhere on your website, just that it shouldn't be front-and-center.

Most people visit your website because they’re trying to complete a task; they need to do something. Help the visitor decide in the first 10 seconds whether they should stay or go elsewhere for the information they seek. Do this by acknowledging the audience at the top of the page.

In this example from the N.C. Department of Insurance website, the content is written for the visitor. It talks to them, not about them.

Example

“As a consumer, you are strongly encouraged to shop around. Get quotes from multiple companies before purchasing a new policy or renewing your coverage.

If you’re turned down by an insurance company, don’t be discouraged.”

## Address the Audience: Use “you” and “I”

After identifying and acknowledging your audience, write directly to them. Address the website visitor as “you.” Using “you” avoids a stilted third-person view which brings up awkward writing problems, such as referring to people as “he or she,” which can quickly become repetitive. Writing “you” is automatically inclusive and can be either direct or implied. Then you can easily provide steps for the visitors to follow.

Example

* Implied: “Use this form to report an issue.” This is a command; the “you” is implied.
* Direct: “If you need a response…”

When writing headings or Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), flip the script. These should be written from the visitor’s point of view.

Example

Q. How do I…?

A. Start by filling out Form XYZ.

## Embrace the Audience

From Murphy to Manteo, North Carolina is home to a diverse array of people with wide-ranging abilities. Whether you serve citizens or cater to guests, be mindful to craft your language in such a way that your website sends a welcoming message.

### Avoid Assumptions and Ableist Language

When you spend much of your workday in front of a desktop computer, it’s easy to assume that your visitors access the content in the same that way you create it.

For example, you may often write instructions that include “click” and “mouse.” But when you stop to consider the high number of mobile users, these visitors aren’t clicking, they’re tapping and swiping. Furthermore, a visitor might be using assistive technology, such as a sip and puff switch or screen reader, to access your website content.

Idioms are colorful aspects of writing, but a person’s first language and culture of origin impact the way your content is understood. You may know that the idiom “raining cats and dogs” refers to a heavy rainfall, but someone from another frame of reference might not.

Some metaphors can come across as ableist, such as “blind to the facts” or “paralyzed by indecision.” Ableist language implies that having a disability makes a person “less than” someone who doesn’t have a disability. You may unintentionally speak down to someone in your audience with these kinds of phrases. Fortunately, some small changes can make your language both precise and inclusive.

Examples of Precise and Inclusive Language Swaps

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Instead of this: | Try this: |
| Click to open the registration form | Open the registration form |
| Type your name and click Submit | Submit your name |
| View the photo gallery | Open the photo gallery |
| Fell on deaf ears | Did not engage |
| Wheelchair-bound | Wheelchair-user |

## Use Plain and Direct Language

Government web content is not the appropriate place to showcase your linguistic prowess. Text can intimidate or overwhelm visitors if written at too high of a reading level or filled with insider government jargon. Consider the vocabulary that your visitor persona would use. What words would they use to describe the task they need to complete on your website? This should guide your writing.

Plain language is:

* approachable, not intimidating.
* simple, concise, and efficient.
* understood immediately.
* written at an appropriate reading level.
* written in active voice or command tense.

Examples of Plain and Direct Language Word Swaps

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ****Instead of this:**** | ****Try this:**** |
| At the present time | Now |
| Determine | Find out |
| Facilitate | Help, ease |
| Utilize | Use |
| Regarding | About |
| Due to the fact that | Because |

Using plain language also means being mindful of acronyms. Only use them when they are universally known by your persona audience, or you can define them near the top of the page. Avoid acronyms that may have more than one meaning and use them only when necessary.

Example of Government Jargon Translated to Layman’s Terms

These two text examples convey the same information, but one uses plain and direct language, fewer words, and fewer acronyms.

Hard-to-Read Text

The Magical Transportation Plan (MTP) contains revenue projections and proposed funding allocations (PFAs) across all modes of transportation (magical aviation, broom and portkey, flue network, and rail) for Construction and Engineering, Maintenance, Operations and Administration for the year 2024 through 2034. Over this 10-year period, Ministry of Magic’s Transportation Division anticipates roughly $45 billion in transportation funding will be available. Nearly 60 percent of this amount is allocated for construction and engineering and approximately 30 percent is allocated for maintenance. The remainder will be split between operating the transportation network and Muggle Easement functions. The MMTD uses a data-driven strategic prioritization process (STI) to help identify the need and inclusion of projects in the 10-Year STIP. These candidate projects are scored and ranked through a process that takes place every two years. MMTD is currently preparing for its next round of prioritization. Click here for more information.

 Plain and Direct Text

The 2024-2034 Magical Transportation Plan details projected revenue and budgets for all modes of transportation in these programs:

* Construction and Engineering
* Maintenance
* Operations
* Muggle Easement

MMTD expects approximately $45 billion in available funding over the course of the plan.

* Construction and Engineering will receive almost 60% of the funding.
* Maintenance will receive approximately 30%.
* Operations and Muggle Easement will split the rest.

MMTD determines projects using a specialized bi-annual prioritization process.

### Tool: Hemingway App

The Hemingway App is a free, online tool to help you write concisely. Yellow highlighting indicates text that is hard to read, and pink is very hard to read. It points out adverbs and passive voice and provides a readability score. <https://hemingwayapp.com/>

Remember that your writing is meant to communicate. Be human. Talk to your site visitors, not “at them” or about them. When your customers can easily find accessible information on their own, you not only provide them with better service, but you also benefit by fielding fewer calls and emails.

## Emphasis

Imagine if a student highlighted every line on their study guide for a test. When everything is emphasized, nothing stands out. It defeats the point. Use emphasis sparingly.

Emphasis is most effective when integrated in your writing, such as choosing words like “must” or stating a submission deadline. You can further stress details like due dates or numbers by formatting text bold or italic. Avoid using all caps for emphasis; it implies that you’re yelling. Colored text looks inconsistent and may be inaccessible for someone with color blindness. Lastly, exclamation marks are rarely suitable in a government environment; try to limit their use to content like a truly exciting blog post.

Bad Example

“The form *MUST* be submitted **by the end of the month**!!!”

Good Example

“The form must be submitted **by the end of the month**.”

The good example just states the facts with a little bit of emphasis.

Remember that all the strategies and tools in this course work together to improve your written communication. Chunking content that’s written in plain language under good headers and into smart lists strips away distractions and provides better emphasis than simply bolding text.

# Lesson 2: Be Brief, but Specific

## Editing is Worth the Effort

Southern writer and humorist, Mark Twain, was once quoted as saying:

I didn’t have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead.

Writing is the easy part. It’s easy to write like you think, but we don’t always think in the most concise, organized way. Being thoughtful is harder. Editing takes time and effort. Write, edit, then edit again and again until you maximize efficiency for your visitors without sacrificing the crucial details. Remember that your visitors are busy, distracted, and don’t want to work to understand your content. Prioritize your customers’ time over your own; they’re paying your salary, after all.

Sometimes state government content can be complicated. It can be difficult and time-consuming to work through content to make it user-friendly and focused on the visitor’s needs, especially when you’re juggling other tasks. But it’s possible, and you can succeed if you go into writing and editing with a positive mindset.

By all means, dedicate time to write and edit again and again. But also note that your text doesn’t have to be perfect right away; just aim to make it better than what it was. Often, you benefit by coming back to your content later, once your mind has had a chance to rest. You might have even learned a little more about the topic, which can help you to continue to simplify it.

### A Second Opinion

You might be such an expert in your content area that your idea about what is or isn’t common knowledge could be skewed. It never hurts to get another opinion on the clarity of your writing. Consider asking:

* A coworker who can peer review the content. They likely know the point you’re trying to get across and can check that what you’re saying is accurate.
* Your agency’s Office of Communications; that’s what it’s there for, after all! The office’s objective is to communicate your agency’s services and functions to the general public. The staff are skilled at taking your breadth of knowledge and making it friendly for the average person.
* Someone totally unfamiliar with your content. A friend, neighbor, or family member can really help you understand where your message may fall short or have gaps that leave someone confused.

## Webpage Titles and Metadata

When someone uses a search engine like Google to find information, the search results provide your webpage titles out of context. The visitor hasn’t seen the content of the page or your site structure yet, so a page titled “Contacts” is vague and ineffective. Whether consciously or subconsciously, the visitor wants to know what they’re getting before they invest the energy in following the link.

Examples

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ****Vague Page Titles**** | ****Better Page Titles**** |
| Contacts | Contact the Division of Juvenile Justice |
| Certificates | Order a Birth Certificate |
| Policies | Employee Benefit Policies |
| Calendar | Upcoming Events at the N.C. Zoo |

Many web content management systems, including the Digital Commons platform, allow the addition of metadata. You can provide a brief summary of the page content that appears in the search results beneath the webpage title. Providing an effective description helps visitors decide which result to explore.

## Meaningful Links

Links truly make the web what it is by interconnecting information worldwide. As visitors scan your content, links naturally draw their attention, so taking time to craft effective link titles is worthwhile. Like webpage titles, link titles should use clear, concise, and descriptive text. Use meaningful text within your sentences to create links. Links that are self-explanatory, even out of context, are effective because visitors understand where they’ll end up next if they follow the link. Notice the hyperlinks in this example.

Example

If you are registering a business under your own name, then the state considers you a sole proprietor.

Minimum state requirements are to [pay sales and income taxes](https://www.ncdor.gov/file-pay). You should also [register as a sole proprietor with your city and county](https://www.ncdor.gov/taxes-forms/register-business).

### Don’t “Click Here”

Never use “click here.” In the same vein, avoid the word "link" and other vague phrases, such as "learn more." It’s tempting, but this is a bad practice for several reasons:

1. **Link text is given a higher weight in Google’s algorithm.** Use words in your link titles that site visitors would use for a search. Remember your audience.
2. **It undermines the effort you put into writing clean, clear content.** It leaves the visitor wondering, “Click here for what? Where will I end up? Will it be a waste of my time?” Your writing, including link text, should answer user questions, not make them ask more.
3. **It’s inaccessible for individuals relying on assistive technologies to navigate the web.** Consider a visually impaired citizen who relies on a screen reader. Screen readers can help the visitor skim content by jumping to headings and links. A never-ending list of links all reading “Click here” or “Read more” without context makes it impossible to determine where the user needs to go.

Screen Reader Demo: A screen reader browser plugin reads aloud link list items on a webpage about working in North Carolina and applying for unemployment benefits. On-screen text explains that:

* + Screen readers read web page content aloud.
	+ Visitors navigate web pages using keystrokes.

### Best Practices

* Provide clear, concise, and meaningful links that describe their purpose.
* Don’t use the URL for the link title. It clutters the page for sighted visitors and screen readers will read the full URL path for visually impaired visitors [creating confusing audio for the visually impaired]. Here’s an example: <https://www.nj.gov/labor/career-services/apprenticeship/foreducators.shtml>
* Be honest and accurate. If you state that a link is going to specific information, don’t link to a general topic. For instance, if you are linking to information about sales and income taxes, don’t simply link to the homepage of the Department of Revenue.
* Do not use all capital letters. A screen reader reads capitalized text letter by letter.
* If you must link to a document, notify visitors before it downloads. For example: "2021 Annual Report (PDF)."
* Never underline text that is not part of a link. Underlining is a standard indicator of a hyperlink on the internet.
* Be mindful when using images as links. Give the image alt text telling screen readers where the link will take users. Pages should not have links next to each other that go to the same place.

# Lesson 3: Organizing Content

## Chunking Content

Chunking is a psychological trick that has been around for a long time. While it’s more about organization and not so much about writing content, the two go hand-in-hand. How you organize content might depend on how it’s written, or vice versa. Decisions you make when organizing your content can actually simplify your writing and editing process.

Like a knife cuts steak into bite-sized pieces, chunking makes information easier to digest. Consider phone numbers, for example. They use chunking to help us more easily remember a long string of digits. Phone numbers are broken into three parts: the area code, the exchange, and the extension.

Newspapers and magazines chunk information into columns and webpages have followed suit. It’s far less intimidating to read three small paragraphs than it is to read one giant paragraph with the same content.

Chunking helps you:

* Keep sentences and paragraphs shorter.
* Assign meaningful content headings.
* Break information into bulleted or numbered lists.
* Select meaningful images to make a point.
* Make it easier for visitors to scan.

### Sensory Characteristics

As you begin to organize content into digestible chunks, keep in mind the five senses that you experience the world with. Whether or not you stopped to think about it before, online content has sensory characteristics:

* Shape
* Sound
* Positioning
* Orientation
* Color
* Size

Instructions are the most frequent offender when it comes to meeting this web accessibility guideline. While an instruction to “click the green button on the right” seems helpful at first, it may not be universally helpful to all website visitors. Some might not be able to see the color green, comprehend the direction “right,” or, if viewed on a mobile device, the position of the button might change.

Be sure that your users are not forced to rely on only one specific sensory characteristic to understand or interact with your content. If a sensory characteristic draws attention to content, always provide multiple ways to understand it, including a text equivalent.

## Headings

Headings show the relationships between different sections on a page. Maintaining the correct hierarchy of heading levels helps readers navigate and understand content better, especially those who rely on screen readers to scan webpage content by headings. Headings and subheadings act like a table of contents for assistive devices and organize a page's structure, guiding all visitors through page content in a logical order.

Headings also improve search engine optimization (SEO) for your webpages. Headings are ranked in order of importance, from Heading 1 to Heading 6. Heading 1 is typically reserved for the title of a page. When a search engine crawls a webpage it favors headings, so it's good practice to include keywords in headings.

### Beware Fake Headings

Bolded text might *seem* like a heading, but it really isn’t because it won't show up in the outline. This means users who rely on screen readers can't recognize its importance or jump to its content. It essentially prevents them from being able to scan the page. Use real headings to ensure that everyone, including those using screen readers, can find and understand content easily.

### Best Practices

* Keep headings brief and clear.
* Format headings using the tools in the text editor.
* Don’t skip heading levels. Start with H1 and drill down in numerical order. Don’t skip over H2 to go to H3 in the hierarchy.
* Don’t use headings decoratively or to make text a preferred size.
* Don’t use bold text to create fake headings.

## Lists

Lists offer variety to a reader, allowing content to stand out. They also help organize complex information, which can make writing concise paragraphs easier for you. An ideal list contains about 5 items so that they stay easy to absorb. Longer lists can be reorganized, broken into multiple lists, or used as menu items.

Lists can be organized alphabetically, logically, or numerically. Alphabetized lists are immediately recognizable and help visitors scan content. Logical ordering is specific to your content. Save numbered lists for times when sequence or timing is important, for instance, in ordering the steps of the process. If there is no particular order, don’t imply that there is one by using numbers; use bullets instead.

You can improve inclusive design with bulleting or numbering. When screen readers find a properly marked list, they tell the user that there is a list and how many items are in it.

Screen Reader Demo: A screen reader browser plugin announces a main section article list with 9 items.

It’s very important to properly mark your lists. Use the list button in the text editor. Don't create a fake list by using only visual styling, such as a dash (-), asterisk (\*), or hard return to force text to the next line.

Screen Reader Demo: A screen reader browser plugin reads the content of a fake list styled with plus signs (+) instead of proper bullets.

### Best Practices

* Format text as a bullet or numbered list using the list button in the text editor.
* Don’t use dashes, symbols, or graphics to make content appear like a list.
* Create structure by nesting list items using indent.

## Tables

Tables organize data with a logical relationship into grids. Sighted visitors can quickly scan a table, grasp its purpose and note which rows or columns have headers describing the data in the table. However, visitors who cannot see a table don’t benefit from these visual cues.

A table needs few specific HTML tags, so screen readers are able to identify the relationships between its contents. Without these tags, users who cannot see a table might find it very difficult or even impossible to understand the relationships between the headers and cells in the table.

### Best Practices

* Write column- and row- headers to add words that help users understand a table's structure.
* Add a summary of a table's content and purpose. Screen readers, used by non-sighted users, will read the purpose aloud.
* Don’t use tables only for layout purposes; it creates a confusing experience for non-sighted users.

## Collapsible Content

Many web content management systems have features that allow you to make a text-heavy section more compact. For instance, instead of having four webpages brimming with text, such an element would allow you to create a single page for the related content that can be collapsed or expanded by the user as desired. On the NC Digital Commons platform, it is called the Tab/Accordion, but other platforms might call it something different.

Regardless of the platform you use or what the feature is called, collapsible content helps visitors scan topics quickly without being overwhelmed because they can control the amount of content displayed at any time. It is especially useful in organizing related topics such as Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).

## Managing Frequently Asked Question (FAQs)

Frequently Asked Questions, or FAQs, are a great way to chunk and organize written web content, especially when the topic is complex. They are often presented to visitors in a collapsible format, but not always.

FAQs should be just that- answers to questions that people ask you often. Order your FAQs so that the questions you get asked the most often are near the top and the least-asked questions towards the bottom. Doing so pushes relevant content to where it is easily accessible to the visitor and, in turn, reduces the likelihood that you’ll have to answer this question in an email or phone call.

When writing FAQs, remember your audience. Flip the script so that questions are written from the visitor’s point of view and answers are written as the agency’s reply.

Example

Q. Who is eligible to apply for the Agency Initiative?

A. Eligible individuals include…

Limit your FAQs list to about ten or so questions and answers. If you have much more than that, you probably need more pages to cover the content. However, if it still makes sense to use FAQs, and you still have a lot of them, chunk them into sets of similar questions that address particular aspects of your process or agency.

### FAQ Cautions

* FAQs are not a catch-all substitute for properly organizing your content.
* Don’t put obscure information in FAQs; people will miss it.
* Don’t turn your content into a game of Twenty Questions.

# Conclusion

Making government content accessible to the public can seem daunting at first, but with the right mindset and the right tools, you can succeed.

# Resources

## Articles

[Article: People Don’t Read Online. They Scan. This Is How to Write for Them](https://uxplanet.org/people-dont-read-online-they-scan-this-is-how-to-write-for-them-80a75069c14e)

## Digital Accessibility Information

* [Digital Accessibility Guidelines for State Content Creators](https://www.nc.gov/working/state-employees-departments/digital-accessibility)
* [N.C. Digital Accessibility Community of Practice](https://it.nc.gov/support/training-user-resources/user-groups-communities-practice/digital-accessibility-community-practice)
* [W3C Web Accessibility Initiative](https://www.w3.org/WAI/)

## Federal Law, Rules and Regulations

### Plain Writing Act of 2010

The [Plain Writing Act of 2010](https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ274/content-detail.html) was signed on October 13, 2010. The law requires that federal agencies use clear government communication that the public can understand and use. Compliance guidelines and resources are available at [PlainLanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov/).

### 2024 Department of Justice Ruling on Accessibility of Web Information and Services of State and Local Government Entities

The [Department of Justice issued its final rule regarding Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)](https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/04/24/2024-07758/nondiscrimination-on-the-basis-of-disability-accessibility-of-web-information-and-services-of-state) to establish specific requirements about how to ensure that web content and mobile applications (apps) are accessible to people with disabilities. [A Fact Sheet detailing technical requirements and compliance deadlines](https://www.ada.gov/resources/2024-03-08-web-rule/) is available on the [ADA website](https://www.ada.gov/).

## Tools

* Digital Commons Web Content Management System
	+ [About the Digital Commons Platform](https://digitalcommons.nc.gov/about-digital-commons)
	+ [User Support Website](https://digitalcommons.nc.gov/)
* [Editoria11y Accessibility Checker](https://digitalcommons.nc.gov/accessibility/automatic-accessibility-checker)
* [Hemingway Application](https://hemingwayapp.com/)
* [Monsido](https://digitalcommons.nc.gov/guide/monitor-your-website-monsido)
* [Personas](https://digitalcommons.nc.gov/guide/personas-ncgov)