WRITING FOR THE WEB

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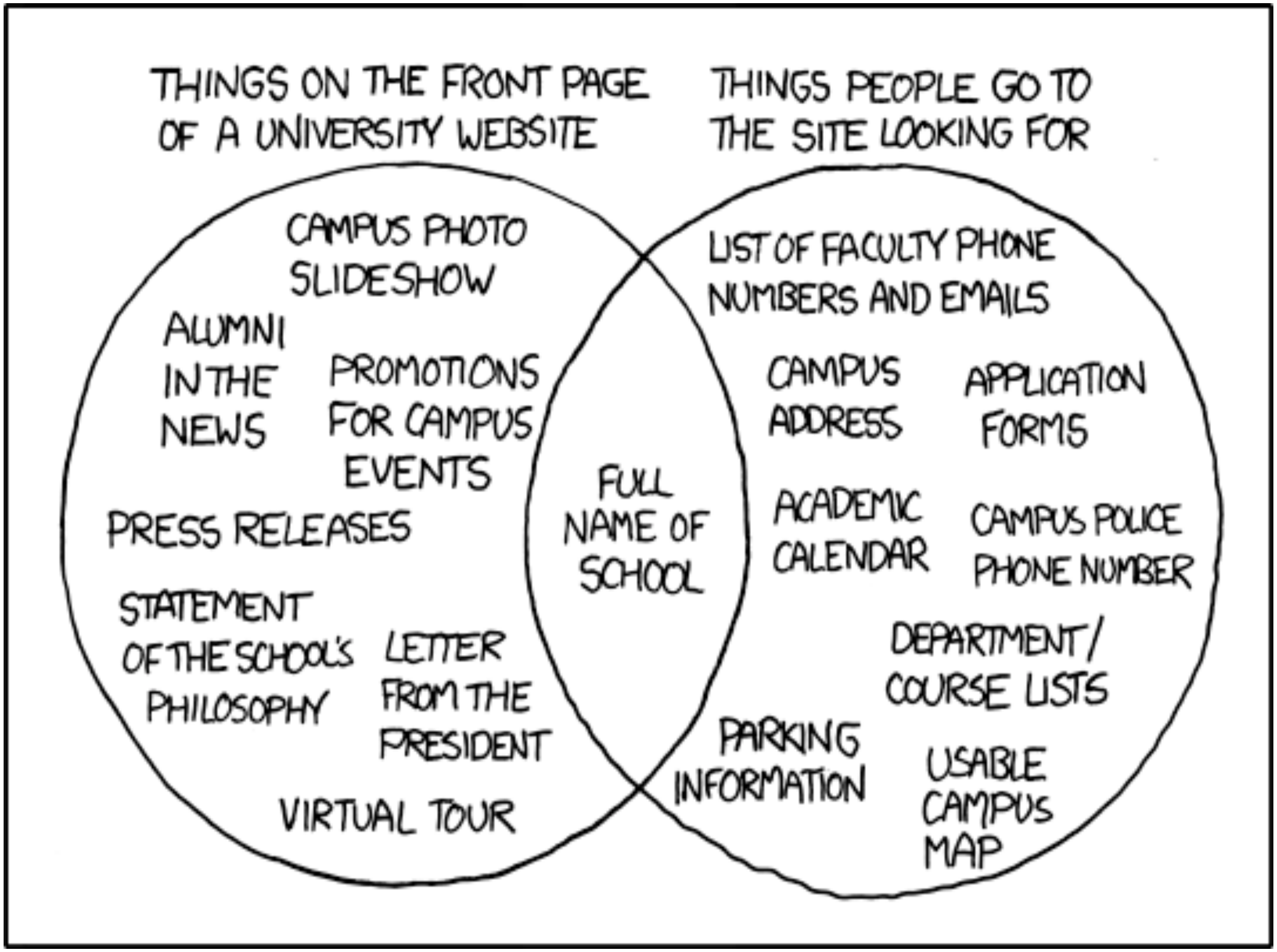
PUT YOUR AUDIENCE AT THE CENTER



PUT YOUR AUDIENCE AT THE CENTER

Core questions that should drive your content:

- **Do audiences need this content?**

  If not, chuck it. The more necessary the content, the easier it should be to find.

- **Will they understand it?**

  If not, rewrite it.

BUT WHO *IS* YOUR AUDIENCE?

Some characteristics vary from section to section:

- Students or faculty/staff?
- University insiders or newcomers?
- Technically savvy or inexperienced?

Some characteristics are shared by most web users:

- Multitaskers who scan pages instead of reading every word.
- Google-users who may enter your site from any page.
- Mobile device-users who increasingly view your site on a smaller screen.

WEB-WRITING STRATEGIES THAT PUT YOUR AUDIENCE FIRST

1. Writing for non-readers
2. Strategies to combat information overload
3. Writing for mobile users
4. Best practices: working with links
5. Writing for non-linear web travelers
6. Strategies to ground and guide disoriented readers
7. Best practices: writing for search engines
8. Best practices: working with policies
9. Using the appropriate voice and tone
10. Maintaining your site

WRITING FOR NON-READERS

The problem: information overload

- Readers are faced lengthy or dense passages that they quickly skim or ignore. (This is particularly an issue on smaller, mobile screens)
- Readers are forced to make sense of institutional language, jargon and marketing speak.

WRITING FOR NON-READERS: STRATEGIES

1. Make the page's topic immediately clear

- Use a clear title
- Put key information at the top of the page (use the inverted pyramid)

2. Break content into smaller chunks of text

- Keep paragraphs short
- Use subheadings to organize text into easily scanned segments
- Use bulleted and numbered lists

3. Use fewer words

- Content is lean, written in simple sentences with active verbs

WRITING FOR NON-READERS: PRACTICE

Fine & Fee Statements, Fall Quarter 2008

On Friday, November 20th, 2008, various NU Library locations will be sending out Statements of Fines and Fees to all patrons with unpaid balances on their Library accounts. These notices will be sent automatically by email to all patrons with an active email address listed in their Library record. Patrons without an active email address will receive paper notices through the mail. The deadline for payment of outstanding fines and fees is Friday, December 5th, 2008. Students who leave balances unpaid after this date may have their total sent to Student Financial Services, along with an additional $10 reporting fee. Students whose unpaid Library account balance have been sent to SFS will have a hold placed on their registration and/or transcript records. For more information, see our FAQ about these quarterly Fine and Fee Statements, or contact the owning Library of the item(s) listed on your statement.

WRITING FOR NON-READERS: PRACTICE (AFTER)

Fall Quarter deadline for fines and fees

Fines and fees are due Friday, December 5th, 2008

- Students with unpaid balances after this date may have their total sent to Student Financial Services, along with an additional $10 reporting fee. SFS will place a hold on the registration and/or transcript records of these students.
- See our FAQs or contact the Library for more information on how to pay balances.

Fee statements

- On November 20th, 2008, we will e-mail fee statements to all patrons with unpaid balances.
- We will mail paper notices to patrons without an active e-mail address listed.

WRITING FOR MOBILE USERS

Problem: mobile is the primary platform for many web users, but not all sites serve them.

- Among younger and low income Americans, usage is particularly high. (50% of users 14-18 and 50% of users 19-27 said all or almost all of their internet access is via their mobile devices.)
- Mobile is no longer a back-up platform for for “on-the-go” situations.

Strategies:

- The mobile site and desktop site should feature the same content. (Your responsive site is already doing this!)
- Page length is particularly critical on smaller screens. Content must be lean and mean.

BEST PRACTICES: WORKING WITH LINKS

Make targets clear and predictable

- Links should be visually differentiated from regular words.
- Text should set expectations for links destination. (Never Click here.)
- Indicate PDFs and external links.

Limit links and place them strategically to limit information overload

- Readers of hyperlinked text read more slowly, with more confusion. Comprehension drops as the number of links increase (even if none are clicked on)
- Limit links when comprehension is vital.
- Quarantine links and multimedia items to reduce distraction

WRITING FOR NON-LINEAR WEB TRAVELERS

The problem: Unclear orientation (Where am I?)

- Readers enter the site through a subpage that is not a home or landing page. They lack the context they need to orient themselves. (Example from the old site)
- Sites intentionally or inadvertently hide answers to key questions by prioritizing organizational goals over user needs. (Example: Tuition information on most university sites.)

Visitors expect to have basic questions answered (What is this page about? How does this page fit into the site as a whole?
Where is the thing I am looking for?) in 15 seconds.

WRITING FOR WEB TRAVELERS: STRATEGIES

1. Provide appropriate context for your subject matter

- Introduce your page content before diving in, particularly before potentially unclear content, such as lists of links or tabular data.
- Avoid or immediately explain lingo and internal jargon.
- When working with processes or procedures, use lists to clarify steps and impose the appropriate order on sequences.

2. Treat every page as a "home" page

- Avoid dead-ends. Provide exit points to related content and always predict possible next steps…and "first" steps they may have missed. (A good before and after.)
- Use web design conventions to orient users.

3. Honestly answer questions and help users complete their tasks

- Take control of the narrative *after* providing sought-after content. (A good example.)

WRITING FOR WEB TRAVELERS: PRACTICE

Marriage

- To insure your spouse, you must complete and submit the Benefits Change Form to the Benefits Division **within 31 days of the marriage**. A marriage certificate or other proof is not required.
- You may enroll your spouse in life insurance with coverage up to your total basic and supplemental life insurance, not to exceed $500,000 in $10,000 increments. Underwriting is required for amounts over $30,000; elect $30,000 on the Benfits Change Form and complete the Evidence of Insurability form to apply for additional coverage. The benefit amount will automatically be updated once the Benefits Division receives an approval notice from ING.
- The Evidence of Insurability form is required if you are enrolling in or increasing your basic or supplemental life insurance.
- You **cannot** change the health or dental plan in which your family is enrolled.
- Insurance **premiums are not prorated**. Regardless of the date of your marriage, you are financially responsible for the entire month of insurance premiums. These may be retroactively deducted on future paychecks.
- Please allow the Benefits Division five business days to process your paperwork before changing your life insurance beneficiaries through Self Service. If your spouse is incorrectly listed as "friend" or does not appear, please contact the Benefits Division before making any changes.
- Don't forget to update your home address in Self Service if you have moved.
- You can change your name with Northwestern University by submitting a Personal Data Form and providing your new social security card to the Payroll Office.

WRITING FOR WEB TRAVELERS: PRACTICE (AFTER)

Changing Benefits after Marriage

After getting married, you may need to update or change the following information.

Add your spouse to your health insurance plan:

- Complete and submit the Benefits Change Form to the Benefits Division **within 31 days of the marriage.** A marriage certificate or other proof is not required.
- You cannot change the health or dental plan in which your family is enrolled.
- Insurance premiums are not prorated. Regardless of the marriage date, you are financially responsible for the entire month of insurance premiums. These may be retroactively deducted on future paychecks.

Enroll your spouse in life insurance:

- You may enroll in spouse life insurance with coverage up to your total basic and supplemental life insurance, not to exceed $500,000, in $10,000 increments. The benefit amount will automatically be updated once the Benefits Division receives an approval notice from ING.
- Complete the Evidence of Insurability form to enroll in or increase your basic or supplemental life insurance.
- Underwriting is required for amounts over $30,000; elect $30,000 on the Benefits Change Form and complete the Evidence of Insurability form to apply for additional coverage.
- Allow us five business days to process your paperwork before changing your life insurance beneficiaries through Self Service . If your spouse is incorrectly listed as “friend” or does not appear, please contact the Benefits Division before making any changes.

Change your personal information:

- Don't forget to update your home address in Self Service if you have moved.
- Change your name with Northwestern University by submitting a Personal Data Form and providing your new social security card to the payroll office.

BEST PRACTICES: WRITING FOR SEARCH ENGINES

To give your page a good ranking, include relevant (searched) terms in the content. Word choice is critical.

1. **Define jargon for users who might be using more generic key words**

   Ex: WildCARD vs. Identification Card

2. **Write out acronyms (but provide both versions)**

   Ex: School of Education and Social Policy vs. SESP

3. **Consider the words used by your audience.**

   Ex: Blackboard vs. Course Management System

BEST PRACTICES: WORKING WITH POLICIES

Problem: Not all words can simply be cut.
Policy statements are dense necessities that contain official language and detailed explanations.

Strategies:

1. **Determine what content can be written in plain language.**

   Write as much as possible in clean language, including supporting information and procedural steps. You may even be able to summarize difficult-to-understand official documentation.

2. **Incorporate best practices for scannability**

   Formatting changes, such as incorporating subheadings and breaking items into bulleted and numbered lists, may be particularly helpful.

BEST PRACTICES FOR POLICIES: PRACTICE

Disability Grievances

It is recommended but not required that students, staff, faculty, applicants, and student applicants first express their concerns to their supervisor, department chair, dean, or program coordinator. As a result of these discussions, including the development of strategies for empowering the individual to deal with the situation him/herself or having the person who has received the grievance take it under review, a satisfactory resolution may be readily found.

Union employees initiate a disability grievance with the director of labor relations.

Individuals covered

Employees and applicants for employment

Policy

Northwestern University ensures that no qualified employee or applicant for employment is denied the benefits of employment on account of disability if the individual can perform the essential functions of the position with reasonable accommodation.

Formal procedures

An employee or applicant who wishes to file a formal grievance may do so in writing to the director of the Office of Equal Opportunity and Access. If the subject of the grievance is the director of the Office of Equal Opportunity and Access, or any office he or she supervises or manages, the grievances will be investigated by an impartial University official. All other grievances will be investigated and reviewed by the director of the Office of Equal Opportunity and Access.

The purpose of the review is to determine whether University policy and applicable federal and local laws have been followed and, if not, to address the consequences and take corrective action. Information relevant to the matter may be requested from the involved parties. The director of the Office of Equal Opportunity and Access promptly undertakes an investigation and may use conflict resolution as a strategy. The director provides a response to the employee or applicant upon completion of the review. An employee or applicant who makes use of the grievance procedure must not be retaliated against for doing so. An employee may choose another faculty/staff person to accompany him or her through the steps of the procedure.

An employee or applicant who feels that a review has not resolved a grievance to his or her satisfaction may appeal the outcome to the associate vice president for human resources. The appeal should be in writing and signed. The associate vice president for human resources will make a determination on the appeal and promptly inform the employee in writing of it. An employee or applicant who feels that the grievance has still not been resolved to his or her satisfaction may then appeal the outcome to the senior vice president for business and finance, whose decision is final for the University.

BEST PRACTICES FOR POLICIES: PRACTICE (AFTER)

Disability Grievances

Disability Policy

- Northwestern University ensures that no qualified employee or applicant for employment is denied the benefits of employment on account of disability if the individual can perform the essential functions of the position with reasonable accommodation.
- Individuals covered by this policy: Employees and applicants for employment

File a formal grievance

1. **Attempt to resolve the situation informally if possible**
   Before filing a formal grievance, we recommend that you discuss your concerns with your supervisor, department chair, dean, or program coordinator. Through such discussions, you may be able to develop strategies for dealing with and resolving the situation.

2. **Put your formal grievance into writing.**
   File written grievances with the director of the Office of Equal Opportunity and Access. Union employees initiate a disability grievance with the director of labor relations.

3. **Your grievance will be investigated and reviewed.**
   If the subject of the grievance is the director of the Office of Equal Opportunity and Access, or any office he or she supervises or manages, an impartial University official will investigate the grievances. All other grievances will be investigated and reviewed by the director of the Office of Equal Opportunity and Access.

   The review will determine whether the University policy and applicable federal and local laws have been followed and, if not, to address the consequences and take corrective action. The reviewer may use conflict resolution as a strategy and request relevant information from the involved parties. An employee may choose another faculty/staff person to accompany him or her through the steps of the procedure.

4. **The director provides a response to the employee or applicant upon completion of the review.**
   An employee or applicant using the grievance procedure must not be retaliated against.

Appeal a grievance review

- An employee or applicant who feels that a review has not resolved a grievance to his or her satisfaction may appeal the outcome to the associate vice president for human resources. The appeal should be in writing and signed.
- The associate vice president for human resources will make a determination on the appeal and promptly inform the employee in writing of it.
- An employee or applicant who feels that the grievance has still not been resolved to his or her satisfaction may then appeal the outcome to the senior vice president for business and finance, whose decision is final for the University.

USING THE APPROPRIATE VOICE AND TONE

Successful online communication is a *relationship* between the site's author and its readers

- On each page, you should consider: What could my reader be feeling?
- Your tone should relate to the feelings of the user.

Strategy:

- Create and share voice and tone guidelines for the site
- Inspiration: www.voiceandtone.com/

Example: Communication with parents of a Northwestern student

Feelings of parent	Our tone
Proud	Positive
Skeptical/evaluating	Reassuring
Disconnected	Open book (can't tell too much)
Curious	Informative
Nervous	Transparent

SITE MAINTENANCE: REMOVE ROT

Police your site for unnecessary content.

- **Redundant content**

  Look out for: information that is repeated in multiple formats or repeated across multiple sections rather than linked

- **Outdated content**

  Look out for: outdated forms, archived news, past events

- **Trivial content**

  Look out for: pages with limited information

SITE MAINTENACE: TEST YOUR ASSUMPTIONS & GAUGE YOUR SUCCESS

1. Review traffic through your analytics

Identifying top content items, entry points, and bounce rate can be particularly helpful in gauging the success of key pages and site hierarchy.

2. Solicit customer feedback

Run periodic surveys, talk to front-line staff, and listen to what users have to say.

3. Determine what success looks like

Fewer questions? Smarter questions? A better first-impression? Remember that your site is always a work-in-progress.

QUESTIONS?

Now, or later:

Anastasia Masurat

Email aym@northwestern.edu or call 847-467-1063