Introduction

When producing or maintaining a website you need to know that producing engaging web pages is a different skill to writing for paper. The difference is:

- in the structure of the information and design of the page,
- in the labelling of information and
- in the wording.

This short presentation aims to help you with these three aspects.

Evidence about web page use

How people read web pages

While reading from a book is essentially a linear journey, reading a web page bears more relation to scanning through a magazine. Researchers have studied eye movements of people reading web pages and have concluded that the following pattern (known as the F or E pattern) is very common (http://www.surl.org/usabilitynews/101/column.asp):
From this evidence you can deduce several things:

- Readers scan the content rather than read it word-for-word.
- You must put important information at the top and left of the page and make it noticeable, as readers pay more attention to the top and left.

**Where people expect to find things on web pages**

In another study ([http://www.surl.org/usabilitynews/81/webobjects.asp](http://www.surl.org/usabilitynews/81/webobjects.asp)), which was first undertaken in 2001 and repeated in 2006, researchers looked where on the page people expected to find common elements. The study confirmed that people expect:

- to find a link for ‘home’ in the top left
- to find internal links or navigation on the left side, with some expectation of finding it at the top of the page
- to find ‘search’ at the top, most likely on the right
- to find ‘about us’ at the bottom in the centre

More recent evidence

In 2010, Jakob Nielsen did some studies on scrolling and attention, both for vertical and horizontal scrolling (http://www.useit.com/alertbox/scrolling-attention.html and http://www.useit.com/alertbox/horizontal-attention.html). The results support the earlier results reported above.

Structure of the information and the design and look of the page

Now think about

- what information you want to present
- who the information is for
- how it fits in with other information you already have in your site or want to set alongside it

If you need to produce a template, position the elements you want to use on the page, producing a wireframe or grid. An example is shown below - the first is a basic framework, and then the second has functionality added to it. You won’t need to use all of the items shown in this example, but it’s a good cue for items you might want. This can later be translated into a finished template.

- The top of a page needs to be branded but don't waste space
- The content needs to be introduced as near to the top as possible
The main impact of your web page is in the section a user sees first. As we can see from the previous section, people concentrate on the top section and look less as they progress down the screen. On smaller screens, especially laptops, the size of the window will be quite small and people may either resist or not notice the fact they have to scroll (on mobile devices people expect to scroll). While you need to include as much content as you can, don’t overcrowd pages with text - images and white space will make the page more interesting and easier to read.

Readers of European languages will find it easier to read from the straight left margin and with regular spacing between the words, so

- do left-align all your text (including headings)
- don’t centre your text or ‘justify’ it so it always fills the line to the right margin.
- do add a little space between lines but make sure there is more space between paragraphs
- do make sure space before a heading exceeds the space between the heading and the following text.
- don’t use capitals, italics or underlines
- don’t use colour for text, except for headings (maybe)

Most visitors will join your site at pages other than the home page. Clear and consistent navigation is needed both within the current section and to access the home page and other sections between the current location and the home page. There are a number of tried and tested methods to provide this:

- global navigation to home, search and help information to appear on every page
- breadcrumb navigation on every page to step you up the tree of information towards the home page

Writing for the web

• tabbed navigation if your site or section is clearly separated into sub-sections, with visual cue to show which section you are in
• left hand navigation to work through the parts of the current information, with visual cue to show which section you are in. Child navigation (a sub list) will work well, but more than one level of sub-lists in the left hand navigation is confusing. Don’t put same-page links into the left hand navigation.
• table of contents list at the top of the content area of a page (same-page links) to navigate through a long page (may have ‘back to top’ links within the text. ’Pill’ navigation that only exposes some of the content of the page can be used in a similar way.

Type size and typeface

In your web design, you should specify a selection of similar typefaces that are easy to read - headings can be in a different typeface from the text to make one more compact and one easier to read. (The reason you need to specify a selection is that if a computer doesn’t have the first, it will select the next, until one is found. If you don’t specify any, the browser will use its default.) On any page, do not use any more than two closely related typefaces or your pages will look messy. For instance, in the University screen and print templates the headings are specified as `{font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif;}` and the text as `{font-family: Verdana, Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif;}`. Verdana is a screen version of Arial - it is wider and bulkier and some of the potentially confusing letters (like capital I) have been tweaked, as shown by this example:

Arial 12pt: Example of text (sans serif face) - Look at the cap I
Verdana 12pt: Example of text (sans serif face) - Look at the cap I
Trebuchet MS 12pt: Example of text (humanist sans serif face) - Look at the cap I

Type faces are either serif or sans serif, which amounts to them being decorated and made of strokes of varying thicknesses, or not. Sans serif typefaces are easier to read on screen but may not be so easy on paper - Trebuchet is a very good print typeface (of a type known as sans serif humanist) that is easy to read both on paper and on screen. It has some adornment and differences of thickness to help the eye follow words. There are other humanist typefaces, such as Gill sans and Myriad, which are equally successful.

When choosing the size of type, bear in mind that Windows OS shows fonts larger than Mac or Linux OS. Base your type sizes on em sizes as scaling within browsers will then always work.

Organising and labeling information

The most straightforward way of organising a set of pages into a structure is to start with a flow diagram, outline on a flow chart or a mindmap. Software is available for doing this (for instance http://www.lucidchart.com/pages/examples/sitemap_creator) but isn’t really needed. Use the opportunities for navigation to subdivide your information, for instance, if the content falls into four or five clear sections, use these for a tabbed navigation. After this you can use the left hand or other clear navigation (or a combination) for subdividing information within each section - see the National Trust for an example (http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/) and the John Lewis for another (http://www.johnlewis.com/).

On your individual web pages, the content you write sits within a nest of headings that give it a context - the reader of the page could arrive there from a search engine rather than through your website front door, so needs to know how the page relates to other content. When starting a new page or set of pages, create an outline of the information with the headings, and try to make headings explanatory and with a clear meaning.
The finished page must have some of the following (essentials marked as *) and may have all of them:

- a title* (in html terms - the words that sit in the top of the window in the web page)
- a section heading - use a section title to tie similar content together
- h1 heading* (what the user sees as the page title) for the content - if the page has left hand navigation, use the same heading there
- a summary of what the section or page contains or maybe a table of contents list to give a synopsis for a long page etc.
- h2, h3 headings* (subtitles, possibly at several levels) as part of the content to break up long content.

Using paragraphs, lists and tables

For the content of your page use the inverted pyramid - put the important content in the first sentence so it will be seen by everyone:

Always chunk your information by using paragraphs (with one point per paragraph) and lists. Make your point and then explain it. If you have a paragraph with more than one point, it should instead be a list. In this way you will make it easy for readers to grasp the salient points you are making.

- Use bulleted lists for general information that doesn’t need to be done in sequence.
- Use a styled bullet if your page design would benefit.
- Use numbered list for steps in a procedure and not otherwise (except for a cross-referenced document)
- Keep entries short and use strong/bold type to highlight key words.
- If entries are longer, adjust the spacing between list items to ensure they are easy to read.

Don’t use:
The Service Desk is open from 09:00-17:00 from Mondays to Fridays, except Wednesdays 10:00-17:00 and Fridays 09:00-16:30.

Do use:
The Service Desk is open:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>09:00-17:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>09:00-17:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>10:00-17:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>09:00-17:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>09:00-16:30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tables

If you need to present information in tables,

- Keep a consistent appearance
- Keep them a straightforward as possible.
• Put a tint background behind alternate rows as it helps people to track along lines when reading.
• Don’t centre text or add rules (lines) unless it is a complex data table.

Example table:
• http://www.cam.ac.uk/univ/termdates.html

Choosing words
As we have seen, people reading web pages do not thoroughly read them. When they scan a page, they pay attention only to information at the top and to words that catch their eye, so the words you use need to work hard for their places.

Language
• Use plain language whenever possible, with strong nouns and verbs, and keep sentences short.

Use: To start the engine, turn the key.
Not: When starting the engine of the car, insert the ignition key and rotate it.

• Check your pages for spelling and grammar
  • If you are writing specialist text for a generalist audience, include a glossary for specialized vocabulary, e.g., medical or legal terminology, and provide definitions in simpler language

Active voice
• Write with an active voice as much as you can and be consistent in the voice you use.

Use: ‘Insert the stick in the USB port.’
Not: ‘The stick is inserted in the USB port.’

Links
• Ensure your link text is effective - don’t use ‘click here’ as it gives no clues what the reader will find
• Make sure all your links work (check them with a link checker or by hand if you only have a few)
• Group external links in a separate section, at the bottom or the side rather than spread through the text

Arrangement
• Put important information first
• Use strong/bold for key words that you want to stand out.
• At the entry points to your web pages choose words carefully to communicate to a range of audiences
• Add a ‘last reviewed’ or ‘last updated’ date to your pages

Pages for specialist audiences
• Provide an abstract or executive summary if a page is long or complex (or both)
• Avoid unnecessary acronyms, which can increase the user’s cognitive load
• Within information for specific audiences use more complex language but keep it clearly structured
• Provide long or complex articles as pdfs, so people can download and print them. Do this as well as offering an html version that has been broken into sections. Always indicate when a link is to a pdf.
Read it from a users point of view

When you have a first draft of your page or set of pages, test it out. It’s preferable to find someone who will look at it for you, or put yourself in a reader’s place, then go through the following questions:

- Who’s providing this page?
- What’s the page about and why would I want to use it?
- Does it provide what I need to know?
- Can I understand it?
- Where do I find out more?

Helping your page be found

When a search engine spider looks at a web page it classifies some of the words as being more important than others. The most important words are:

- in the title (keep succinct - 60-70 characters at most)
- in a metadata description or keywords These occur in the ‘head’ part of a web page, as shown below:
  `<meta name="description" content="Official site with links to, and information about, the departments, faculties, colleges, people, and organizations that make up the University of Cambridge." />
  `<meta name="keywords" content="Cambridge, Cam, Cantab" />
- in the h1 heading
- in the url - use whole words
- in “alt” tags

Words that occur in these places are weighted (given more importance) by up to 10 times, compared with a word in the text of the page. In addition, the title is what will by default appear when people make a bookmark to the page. When you are writing titles and headings, spend a little more time getting them right.

Reading

Books:


Websites:

A List apart - really useful articles about writing for the web, see http://www.alistapart.com/topics/content/writing/


Typetester - for comparing font families next to each other: http://www.typetester.org/

Creating a Google friendly site: http://support.google.com/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=40349