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Writing for the Web

When I wrote the original version of "Writing for Multimedia" in 1994, the World Wide Web was new. Now the Web is ubiquitous, and has largely supplanted the CD-ROM as the preferred vehicle for multimedia presentations and tutorials. Almost all of the concepts covered in the sections of this guide also apply to the Web.

The first part of this section covers [writing](#) for the Web, and how to make your copy stand out. The second part looks at specific [HTML](#) tips and tricks that will give you control over formatting characters.

Writing

- **Keep your copy simple.** Web pages are similar to TV commercials: you have a limited amount of time to get your message across. Whenever possible, keep it brief and easy to read.
- **Write conversationally.** Think of your readers as individual people, not a mass. Try to communicate *with* them, not *to* them. A conversational style makes that connection. Test your copy by reading it out loud.
- **Present information in digestible chunks.** Respect the time a visitor is invested in your page (because there are plenty of other sites to visit). Whenever possible, summarize; more importantly, try to keep your paragraphs short, snappy, and to the point. The bottom line? Don't overwhelm the reader; pace your information.
- **Don't bury your key information.** Since a visitor may only spend a few seconds on your site, ask yourself the following question: what single concept or fact do you want a person to learn before he or she leaves? Make sure that the most crucial information is obvious and easy to find.

Let's use this page as an example: if someone spends only 15 seconds here, I want to make my two most important points, keeping copy simple and writing conversationally.

- **Check your spelling.** Despite desperate assertions by bad spellers that spelling doesn't matter, spelling and grammatical mistakes can mar the credibility of a professional Web site. At a minimum, such errors can make you or your business look like you don't care about details. It doesn't matter whether you can spell or not; it matters that you use the correct tools.

As Casey Stengel once asked about his hapless Mets, "Can't anybody here spell?" I recently ran a search on *recieve*, a common misspelling of *receive*. It received 235,620 hits. OK, not everyone is a walking dictionary, but we all have one. Even if you're not a perfect speller, you probably know which words to double-check. And don't even get me started on the misuse of *its* and *it's*.

- **Proof your Web pages more than once.** Even for good spellers, catching mistakes is sometimes difficult. I find it helpful to print out and proofread a hard copy of my pages.
- **Make your links obvious and easy to follow.** Highlight the most appropriate group of words that best lets the user know where he or she is heading next:

There are many baseball sites that cover the history of the [New York Mets](#).

That [New York Mets](#) link looks a lot better than

There are many [baseball sites](#) that cover the history of the New York Mets.

By the way, some Web designers feel you should never make a conscious effort to format your links, such as:

Click [here](#) to learn more about the Mets.

Since this style mimics passive construction, it's generally a good idea to avoid it. If I've learned anything, it's that writing instructional text will force you to break

one time or another. In such cases, do what works best for you.

- **Make button and text link titles clear and informative.** How many buttons made you silently ask “What the heck does that mean?” Spend a little time on button titles, because without good ones, all your well-thought out site navigation is for naught.

Let's say you want visitors to learn more about your company. “Who We Are” is more precise than “Overview.” Again, give users a clear sense of where they're going.

- **Avoid use of underlining.** While there's technically nothing wrong with underlining text, it does often make the user think a [link](#) is present. (See?)

HTML

HTML is the code that lets you take control of your Web pages. While other programming languages are often difficult to learn, HTML is relatively simple: you mostly just turn on/off commands. There are scores of other sites that can teach you how to write HTML. This page is concerned with tips that will help augment your writing.

- **How do you get “curly quotes” and all those other neat-o symbols?** Use the handy [ISO characters chart](#).
- **To scroll, or not to scroll?** Some designers feel you should break your text into multiple pages so the user never ever has to scroll down. Others (myself included), find it annoying to wait for each new page to load, or to have to click the “Back” button to go back a row when you're done with an article. Don't worry about what either side thinks; use your own style, and do what works best for you.
- **If you add graphics to a site, use the HEIGHT and WIDTH commands.** This is a writing-related tip, but it does affect how quickly your text is displayed. Ever wonder why text on some graphic-heavy sites takes forever to load? The HEIGHT and WIDTH commands allow your browser to calculate the correct amount of space to reserve for a graphic and then move on. Without these commands, the browser must wait for the graphic to load before moving on to the next command. The HEIGHT and WIDTH commands are placed in the IMAGE tag:

```
<IMG SRC="images/x.gif" HEIGHT=10 WIDTH=10>
```

- **Want to open a site in a separate window?** Add **TARGET=** at the end of the link tag.
- **Finally, don't **ever** use the BLINK tag.** It's damned annoying.

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