World Wide Web has introduced journalists to new writing forms

1. Know Your Audience

Write and edit with online readers' needs and habits in mind. Web usability studies show that readers tend

to skim over sites rather than read them intently. They also tend to be more proactive than print readers or

TV viewers, hunting for information rather than passively taking in what you present to them. Think

about your target audience. Because your readers are getting their news online, chances are they are more

interested in Internet-related stories than TV viewers or newspaper readers, so it may make sense to put

greater emphasis on such stories. Also, your site potentially has a global reach, so consider whether you

want to make it understandable to local, national or international audience, and write and edit with that in

mind.

2. Think First — And Think Different

Before you start reporting and writing a story, think about what the best ways are to tell the story, whether

through audio, video, clickable graphics, text, links, etc. – or some combination. Collaborate with audio,

video and interactive producers. Develop a plan and let that guide you throughout the news gathering and

production process, rather than just reporting a story and then adding various elements later as an

afterthought. Also, look for stories that lend themselves to the Web -- stories that you can tell differently

from or better than in any other medium.

3. Tailor Your News Gathering

Just as print and TV reporters interview differently because they are looking for different things, so must

online journalists tailor their interviewing and information gathering specifically to their needs. Print

reporters tend to look for information. TV reporters look for emotion on camera, sound bites and pictures

to go with words. Online journalists must constantly think in terms of different elements and how they

complement and supplement each other: Look for words to go with images, audio and video to go with

words, data that will lend itself to interactive, etc… Remember that photos look better online when shot

or cropped narrowly, and streaming video is easier to watch when backgrounds are plain and zooming

minimal. Tape interviews whenever possible in case someone says that would make a powerful clip. Look

for personalities who could be interesting chat guests. And always keep an eye out for information that

can be conveyed more effectively using interactive tools.

4. Write Lively And Tight

Writing for the Web should be a cross between broadcast and print -- tighter and punchier than print, but

more literate and detailed than broadcast writing. Write actively, not passively. Good broadcast writing

uses primarily tight, simple declarative sentences and sticks to one idea per sentence. It avoids the long

clauses and passive writing of print. Every expressed idea flows logically into the next. Using these

concepts in online writing makes the writing easier to understand and better holds readers attention. Strive

for lively prose, leaning on strong verbs and sharp nouns. Inject your writing with a distinctive voice to

help differentiate it from the multitude of content on the web. Use humor. Try writing in a breezy style or

with attitude. Conversational styles work particularly well on the Web. Online audiences are more

accepting of unconventional writing styles. At the same time, don’t forget that the traditional rules of

writing apply online. Unfortunately, writing quality is inconsistent throughout most online news sites.

Stories suffer from passive verbs, run-on sentences, mixed metaphors and clichés. This is a result of fastpaced new gathering, short staffing and inexperienced journalists. This is also a big mistake. Readers

notice sloppy writing and they don’t forgive. They’ll stop reading a story and they won’t come back for

more. Unlike local newspaper readers, online readers have options.

5. Explain

Don't let yourself get caught up in the 24/7 wire-service mentality and think all that matters in that you

have the latest news as fast as possible. Readers rarely notice, or care who was first. People want to know

not just what happened, but why it matters. And with all the information sources out there now, in the end

it will be the sites that explain the news the best that succeed. Write and edit all your stories with this in

mind.

6. Never Bury The Lead

You can't afford to bury the lead online because if you do, few readers will get to it. When writing online,

it's essential to tell the reader quickly what the story is about and why they should keep reading -- or else

they won't. One solution is to use a "Model T" story structure. In this model, a story's lead – the

horizontal line of the T -- summarizes the story and, ideally, tells why it matters. The lead doesn't need to

give away the ending, just give someone a reason to read on. Then the rest of the story -- the vertical line

of the T --can take the form of just about any structure: the writer can tell the story narratively; provide an

anecdote and then follow with the rest of the story; jump from one to another, in a "stack of blocks” form;

or simply continue into an inverted pyramid. This enables the writer to quickly telegraph the most

important information -- and a reason to keep reading -- and yet still retain the freedom to write the story

in the way he or she wants to.

7. Don't Pile On

Another story structure that has evolved online, mostly by accident, is what I call The Pile-On. A

common problem with online writing occurs in breaking news stories. In an effort to seem as current as

possible, sites will often put the latest development in a story at the top -- no matter how incremental the

development. Then, they'll pile the next development on the top, and the next -- creating an ugly mishmash of a story that makes sense only to someone who has been following the story closely all day.

Unfortunately, the only people who are usually doing so are the journalists. Few readers visit a site more

than once a day. Remember this when updating stories, and always keep the most important news in the

lead.

8. Short But Sweet

Most stories online are too long for a Web audience, and I imagine few readers finish them. Roy Peter

Clark has written a wonderful essay arguing that any story can be told in 800 words -- a good guideline

for online writing. But let that be a guideline, not a rule. Readers will stick with longer stories online if

there is a compelling reason for a story to be that long -- and if it continues to captivate their attention.

Making readers scroll to get to the rest of a story is generally preferable to making them click. Online

news users do scroll. If someone has clicked to get to a page, it¹s generally because they want to read the

story, and thus chances are high that they will. The Poynter eyetrack study showed that about 75 percent

of article text was read online -- far more than in print, where 20 to 25 percent of an article's text gets

read, on average. Print readers have less vested in any given story, because they haven¹t done anything

proactive to get the article.

9. Break It Up

Larger blocks of text make reading on screens difficult, and you're more likely to lose readers. Using

more subheads and bullets to separate text and ideas helps. Writing should be snappy and fast to read.

Keep paragraphs and sentences short. Like this. Try reading sentences out loud to see if they're too long.

You should be able to read an entire sentence without pausing for a breath. It also helps to extract

information into charts, tables, bulleted lists and interactive graphics. Even a simple box with a definition

or summary can help break up text and convey information in an easy-to-read format.

10. Eliminate The Guesswork

People often don't know what they're going to get when they click on stuff. And people are not going to

click on something unless they know what they're getting. When they click on something that's not worth

it, they lose trust in you as a source and are less likely to come back and click on things in the future. So

make sure you tell people what they are going to get. Studies show online news user’s preferred

straightforward headlines to funny or cut ones. Cute headlines didn't do as good a job of quickly

explaining what a story is about and thus discouraged online users from clicking through.

11. Do Not Fear The Link

Don't be afraid to link. Many sites have a paranoid fear that if they include links to other sites, readers

will surf away and never return. Not true! People prefer to go to sites that do a good job of compiling

click-worthy links -- witness Yahoo’s success. If people know they can trust your site, they will come

back for more. At the same time, journalists have a responsibility to apply news judgment and editorial

standards to the links they choose. Avoid linking to sites with blatantly false information or offensive

content. Select links that enhance the value of the story by helping readers get additional information

from the people behind the news. And of course, link to related stories on your site, past and present.

This is truly one of the advantages of the Web. By linking to other stories to provide context and

background, writers have more freedom to focus on the news of the day without bogging stories down

with old information.

12. Take risks...but remember the basics

Online journalism is a new and evolving industry and we are writing the rules as we go along. Challenge

yourself and your colleagues to question the way things are being done and to stretch the boundaries of

what can be done. There are no rules, only ideas. Take risks. Try something different.

But don't forget the fundamentals of journalism. Facts still have to be double- and triple-checked; writing

still needs to be sharp, lively and to the point; stories should include context; and ethical practices must be

followed. Don't let the 24/7 speed trap and the new tools distract you from these basics. With so many

alternative news sources now at everyone's fingertips thanks to the Web, it is now more important than

ever that we stick to the fundamentals of journalism to produce news people can trust, because in the end

that's what will keep people coming back for more.