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.

Tips for Writing for the Web

Text Formatting

Short Paragraphs :> A 100-word paragraph looks pretty long on a Web page. Long paragraphs send a

signal to the reader: This will require effort. The writer expected you to have a lot of spare time. Sit down

and read awhile. Short paragraphs send a different message: I'm easy! This won't take long at all! Read

me!

Headings > The heading at the top of the page should make absolutely clear what the page contains or

concerns. The text under the heading must not repeat the heading information (see redundancy, below

right).

Subheadings > If the page text exceeds 300 words, subheadings will help the reader scan the page

efficiently and happily.

Boldface > Depending on the content, words or phrases in boldface can help readers find what they want.

Combining boldface and subheadings could lead to visual noise, so do not overdo it. Combining links and

boldface text in the same paragraph could have the same unsightly result.

Lists > Numbered, bulleted or other indented lists help the reader make sense of the information on the

page. In many print contexts, lists would look ugly and thus are not used. On Web pages, lists work well

in almost all contexts. Like paragraphs, lists appeal more to the reader when they are short.

Text Content

Brevity > Write tight. Omit all unnecessary words.\*

Sentence Structure > be straightforward. While a meandering introductory clause may seem like a good

idea to you, the reader might stop reading -- before she gets to the heart of your sentence.

Active Verbs > It is easy to write with passive verbs (am, is, are, has, have). Using active verbs makes

the writer work harder -- but the reader benefits. The writer also benefits, because the reader stays

interested. Passive verbs bore readers. Bored readers leave. Say What You Mean > Try saying it out loud before you write it. We tend to speak more directly than

we write. We get to the point more quickly, too, when we can see the listener's eyes glazing over.

Redundancy > Reading the same information twice wastes a person's time

Links

What They Say > Link text should not break any of the rules given for text (at left). A link must give the

reader a reasonable expectation of what she will get when she clicks. Linked phrases such as "click here"

or "Web page" do not provide helpful information.

What They Do > A link that does not open something or take the user to a new Web page seems to be a

broken link. When the link will take the user to a different place on the same page, or open a media

player, give the user a cue.

How They Look > A long phrase (more than about five words) can be hard to read, or just ugly, when

underlined and/or in a highlight color. Links that are not underlined and do not appear in a different color

from the surrounding text are almost impossible for the users to see.

Introduction

Cyberspace belongs to readers, not writers. The journalist who carefully crafts a story with a lead, middle

and ending is at the mercy of World Wide Web users who resemble TV couch potatoes with a mouse for

a remote control. With a world at their fingertips, readers can link to another Web site in an instant before

they even access the story. That doesn't differ from print readers who scan headlines. But news stories on

the Web offer more diversions and problems. With a multitude of links to others sites and technology that

causes poor readability and slow download time, getting and keeping readers' attention is more difficult

online than in print.

How then should we write news for the Web?

Should we write inverted pyramid stories, with the most important information at the top of the story?

Should we write in narrative form like a fiction story with a plot that unfolds from beginning to end?

Should we organize stories in chunks for readers to click on or in continuous screens they can scroll?

Or should we create new forms of storytelling for the Web?

This study will explore several forms of writing online news. It features interviews with media leaders,

research from studies, models for news, and resources for writing on the Web.

Nonlinear Form

Linear and nonlinear defined

The distinguishing characteristic of the World Wide Web is hypertext, clickable links to other information

on the same or other Web pages. Hypermedia adds audio, visual and video. The result is nonlinear

information, a format that allows users to read and access information in any order they choose. In

contrast, linear information is presented in a set order from beginning to end like a straight line. If readers

want to understand the story, they must read it in the order it is presented.

Useful links needed

George Landow, a Brown University professor and scholar of hypermedia, says hyperlinks must be

useful, coherent and purposeful. "When users follow links and encounter materials that do not appear to

possess a significant relation to the document from which the link pathway originated, they feel confused

and resentful," he writes in Hypermedia and Literary Studies.

Reader/writer relationship changing

Using these principles, an online news story becomes more like a Sunday package with related sidebars

than a simple news story. Whether the story contains links to other Web pages or links to topics within

the same page, nonlinear structure changes the writer- reader relationship. The writer relinquishes control

over the information to the reader. Sven Birkerts, author of The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading

in an Electronic Age, says hypertext "changes the entire system of power upon which the literary

experience has been predicated.” Once a reader is enabled to collaborate, participate or in any way engage

the text as an empowered player who has some say in the outcome of the game, the core assumptions of

reading are called into question," Birkerts writes. "The imagination is liberated from the constraints of

being guided at every step by the author." But giving the reader freedom of choice in paths to follow can

disrupt comprehension. Birkerts describes his experience of reading a hypertext fiction story created in

chunks and links to different sections as a constant interruption: "The reading surface was fractured,

rendered collage-like by the appearance of starred keywords and suddenly materialized menu boxes."

Shovel ware persists

Birkerts would have less trouble reading online news sites. The majority of them still feature the same

linear stories that were published in print. That "repurposing" of material from print to the Web is

called"shovelware." The term carries a negative connotation. Elizabeth Osder, former content

development editor for the online New York Times, says readers of The New York Times want the

newspaper's content online. "I don't think there is anything wrong with a Web site that is straight shovel

ware.”A good site should be useful to people and should serve its audience," Osder said at a journalism

educators’ conference.

Original content increasing

But original content developed for newspaper Web sites is increasing. A study, "Media I in Cyberspace,"

by Steven Ross, an associate professor at Columbia University, and Don Middleberg, chairman and CEO

of Middleberg + Associates, conducted in 1997, says that 20 percent of newspapers with Web sites report

that at least half of the content on their sites is original material designed for the Web compared to only 7

percent the previous year.

Medium is evolving

Andy Beers, executive producer of MSNBC news, says online news sites will continue to develop more

content just for the Web. "I think if I were going to pick the biggest mistake we made, we spent too

much time trying to reinvent the newspaper online," Beers says. "What you are starting to see more is the

evolution of the medium as a unique way of telling a story. There is a unique way of allowing people to

control information." Beers cites a recent election as an example of how the Web empowered people to

get the information they wanted when they wanted it. People could log into the Web site and search for

election results they wanted instead of waiting for the newspaper to print them

or listening to a broadcast until specific elections were mentioned. Beers says online stories must be

constructed in layers that offer readers different levels of information. Some readers want briefs, while

others want full stories, multimedia, or in-depth information, he says.

Significance for journalists

"This new media has some really exciting and useful capabilities for people," Beers says. "What does this

all mean for journalists? I think that all of us carry around a lot of baggage based on a kind of entitlement

that we decide what people need. I think the Internet is going to break through that concept and force us

to examine what journalism is. "People feel much empowered by the Web," he says. "We have to learn to

use those capabilities that can change the way they get information. We're involving the audience and

allowing them to be in control. That's a very powerful thing."

Interactivity

Interactivity is what sets the Web apart from print news. Like hypertext, it is another way to empower

readers. Polls, quizzes, and feedback questions are a few ways to involve readers. They have become an

integral part of online news writing. Searchable databases are another form of interactivity ideally suited

to Web stories. The combined online Web site of the Philadelphia Inquirer and Philadelphia Daily News

provides readers with a database of more than 10,000 physicians and other health topics that they can

search. Other databases such as education packages allow readers to search for test scores and statistical

information in their own school districts. Howard Witt, associate managing editor for interactive news at

the Chicago Tribune, says Web readers want information that is relative to them and they want to interact

with it. Witt referred to a package of homicide stories that allowed users to click on a map and find out how many homicides occurred in their neighborhoods. But for Witt, the defining moment of writing on

the Web came not from his staff, but from readers. When famed columnist Mike Royko died in 1997,

within a week 700 readers posted messages to express their grief. "This is where I understood the power

of this medium for the first time," Witt says. "If he had died five years ago, some people might simply

have written a letter to the editor. This (online message board) allows us to let people grieve together and

share something like this. This is a pinnacle of what interactivity means."

Writing Process

• Topics in this section

• Planning the story

• Gathering information

• Organizing information

• Writing the story

• Rewriting

Writing in nonlinear form requires a different way of planning, organizing and crafting a story. In any

medium, a writing process involves planning, gathering, organizing, and writing and rewriting. But online

news requires some elements unique to writing for the Web.

Planning the story

In a major online media site such as CNN, planning involves a team of a writer, editor, and technical staff

- including a multimedia specialist. Jeff Garrard, executive producer of CNN Interactive, says the

planning process begins by listing the stories to be covered on a laminated white board like an oldfashioned blackboard. "It doesn't crash," he quips. Then a writer and associate producer team up. The

writer sifts through wires, CNN reports and video feeds. The associate producer tracks down multimedia

elements and consults with a multimedia designer. A Web editor then searches the Internet for appropriate

links. A writer for a small online news site or even a major online newspaper may have to consider those

elements without such a support team. Some questions to consider for planning:

Does the background for the story lend itself to links to separate Web pages?

Should background or related elements be presented as a timeline or visually instead of text?

Should multimedia elements, such as audio or video, accompany the story?

Does the story lend itself to discussion questions or other interactive elements that will involve readers?

What visual elements does the story need: maps, photos, etc.?

Who needs to be involved early in the process: Web editors, designers, multimedia specialists?

• Back to topics menu

• Gathering Information

Reporting for the Web involves gathering material for brief and in-depth presentation. Even if a site

doesn't feature audio and video now, it probably will in the future. Robin Palley, former Web editor for

the online Philadelphia Inquirer and Philadelphia Daily News, says writing for the Web has to start with

reporting for the online site. Palley says print reporters should take tape recorders and computer disks to

a news event. They should tape interviews for sound bites and ask if a full text of a speech or a complete

list of science fair winners is available in computer form to post on the Web, she says. Reporters also

need to gather information to update the story or plan the next step. A follow-up story could be posted on

the Web in an hour rather then waiting for the next broadcast or print edition. Every news Web site

becomes more like the all-day television or online news sites of CNN Interactive and MSNBC.

Competition of online news sites and the need to be current are forcing a return to the days when

newspapers were published all day long, Palley says. "I think the time will come when we will need a

rewrite desk."

• Back to topics menu

• Organizing Information

• Nonlinear stories pose enormous organizational challenges.

Should they be written in chunks linked to other Web pages?

Should they be written in one long screen with or without links to internal topics?

Before writers craft the story, they should outline. In online storytelling the word "outline" has been

replaced by a more palatable term: storyboarding. And this is a crucial step in online writing. A

storyboard is a diagram like an organizational chart. Each chunk of the story is a box on the chart,

including audio and visual elements. The storyboard is a concept borrowed from film or cartooning where

each panel of the cartoon is a box in the diagram showing the sequence. Related Web pages for

background and other elements are parts of the storyboard.

Dividing the story into subtopics is another way to envision its parts, even if it will be

presented as one complete story. Leah Gentry, editorial director of the online Los Angeles Times,

describes the nonlinear storytelling process as deconstructing and reconstructing a story. She suggests:

Deconstruct: Divide your story into component pieces. Look for similarities and relationships between the

pieces. Group those that are similar. Reconstruct: Then use a storyboard to diagram the relationships

between the groupings. It doesn't have to be fancy, Gentry says. "Mostly I scribble on paper. It becomes a

blueprint for your site." "Every story has a micro element, the part of the story that must be linear," she

says. "For example, a man walks into a room and is shot. The man must have walked into the room before

he can be hit with the bullet, so that sentence is the micro story, a linear part that explains what the story

is about. It could be a sentence or paragraph similar to a nut graph or several paragraphs." The macro

story is the rest of it -- contextual and related information -- in an order the reader can choose. Gentry say

a story also works using a point of view strategy. A story could contain a cast of characters, and the story

could be told several times filtered through the eyes of each character.

Not all parts of the story have to be text, Gentry says. Images or multimedia elements can

also tell the story. But she warns against using technology for technology's sake. "It must further

storytelling." she says. "Anything that doesn't is just noise and it gets in

the way of information." A storyboard might look like this:

Writing the Story

Good writing still begets good reading. Style should be dictated by content. Usability studies suggest the

inverted pyramid to facilitate scanners. But if writers are trying to entice reading, other styles must be

explored. Experiments with writing on the Web involve many fiction sites, and fiction is not written in

inverted pyramid style. The Web offers a chance to be as eclectic in writing styles as it is in its reading

population. One size does not fit all! Here are some tips that can be used for any style of online writing:

Write a discussion question first, whether you will use it or not. That will help you create your focus and

insert a context that will relate to readers. You can move the discussion question to the end later. Write a

nut graph at the top of your story as a teaser. This will help you put your focus high in the story. This

graph can be used as a tool and removed later if it doesn't serve as a subhead.

Use short sentences. Avoid connecting sentences with conjunctions.

Use short paragraphs.

Write topic subheads.

Use lists to help the reader scan the page.

Write in chunks of information that can be split into logical subtopics and related nonlinear parts. If

stories are presented on different Web pages, treat each chunk as a separate story like a sidebar. Restate

the context. Use the blocking technique when possible, especially in a basic news story. If a story has

three or more sources, try to structure the story so each source is in one block and does not have to be

used again. See next point. Avoid the journalistic convention of using last-name only on second reference.

When readers scroll different screens or click to another chunk on a separate Web page, the second

reference is confusing. Ignore journalistic taboos of writing questions for leads or transitions. They work

well on the Web, especially at the end of chunks. Try cliffhanger endings if the story will link to another

screen.

Rewriting

The Web has unlimited space, but readers don't have unlimited attention. Cut every extra word,

conjunction and unnecessary adjective. Count the number of lines in each section of your story. A

computer screen generally contains 29 lines of type. Use this as a guide to see where subheads might be

placed. Scan the story. Does your eye focus on subtopics or other points of entry? If not, create them.

Check your endings and transitions to new screens. Does the story lure readers to continue to another

screen or Web page?

Eye movement study

Before you decide how to write a story for the Web, it helps to understand how people read online.” They

don't," says Jakob Nielsen, a consultant and former Sun Microsystems distinguished engineer. He has

conducted several studies about reading and writing on the Web. He says readers are scanners in search

of information. A leader in Web usability research, Nielsen says reading on the Web is 25 percent more

difficult because of screen resolution. That doesn't mean writing should be 25 percent shorter, he writes

in a bimonthly column on the Sun Microsystems Web site. It should be 50 percent shorter, he says. His

advice: Writing for the Web should be short, simple and written in inverted pyramid style. But major

news stories in the past two years indicate that online reading is increasing. After the death of Princess

Diana and during the scandal involving President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, a former White House

intern, Web usage in news sites soared. Whether users scanned or read thoroughly is still unknown. But

studies by Nielsen and other researchers provide valuable insights.

Writing for the Web study

Nielsen conducted three studies from 1994 to 1997 with fellow researcher John Morkes. "Our studies

suggest that current Web writing often does not support users in achieving their main goal: to find useful

information as quickly as possible," they wrote. "We have come to realize that content is king in the

user's mind," they concluded. "When a page comes up, users focus their attention on the center of the

window where they read the body text before they bother looking over header bars or other navigational

elements."

In their study, "How to write for the Web," conducted in 1997, they tested four models of writing.

Promotional writing using adjectives and "marketese" found on many commercial sites concise text with

half the word count of the promotional model scannable layout, using bullets objective language,

eliminating adjectives.The concise text was the most popular, followed by the scannable model with

bullets and then the objective language model. None of the test subjects chose the promotional writing

model, which impaired credibility. Based on this study, Nielsen and Morkes suggest these techniques for

writing scannable text on the Web:

Highlighted keywords

Meaningful subheads (not clever ones)

Bulleted lists (They help scanners move through information.)

One idea per paragraph

Inverted pyramid style

Half the word count (or less) than conventional writing.

The last study was one of the first to test different writing styles, and its results are significant. But it

must be viewed with caution for online news writing. The 41 users in the study were tested for their ease

of searching for information, recall, and subjective satisfaction, not for reading news. The test only

involved different versions of a story about travel attractions in Nebraska. And, as the researchers note,

content is still a major factor in readability. Other news writing styles can be as effective, as this Poynter

report will show.

Formula to Measure Readability

Another study by User Interface Engineering, a Massachusetts consulting firm, tested nine Web sites for a

variety of design factors influencing ease of use. As part of the study, Jared M. Spool and other

researchers used formulas that calculate readability, such as the Gunning Fog Index. This tool measures

readability based on the average number of words, sentences and syllables.

The researchers found that Web users find information better in online text that contains fewer

conjunctions and lacks standard grammatical structures. The study presumed that users were skimming

text in search of information, not reading it thoroughly. They found that writing for the Web may require

shorter sentences with simpler words.

Embedded links surrounded by text were another deterrent to readability. The researchers found that

links contained within a sentence make it harder for readers to find information. Readers who skim tend

to look for links. If links are buried inside text, they slow the readers' progress and are more difficult to

understand, the study says.

Clicking vs. scrolling

In early studies conducted by researchers Jakob Nielsen and John Morkes, the majority of users preferred

to click rather than scroll below one screen to get information. In their 1997 study on writing for the Web,

they found that readers are becoming more receptive to scrolling past one screen if the content interests

them. My own studies with journalism students for the past two years revealed similar findings. Five

unscientific surveys showed that in 1997 more students wanted to click through screens than scroll. In the

most recent survey conducted in 1999, students were evenly divided among the clickers or scrollers. In all

the experiments, almost all the students said they scanned when they read text on the Web instead of

reading stories thoroughly. Their comments were more revealing. Those who favored chunks of text with

links to click to the next part:

"I seem to lose my place when I scroll."

"Clicking is a more active thing. It seems more engaged."

"Scrolling tires your eyes because you have to pay attention to the moving lines in order not to scroll too

far." Those who favored scrolling:

"I hate waiting for the next page to load."

"I'm a scroller because I like to have everything on one page, and it is easy to move up and down with the

scroll. I like to click when the subject is different."

"In case I need to reread a little above, it's still on the screen. I can take it at my own speed, and it's easier

to keep my place."

If there is any conclusion for writers on the Web, it is that if the content is worth reading,

Web users will click or scroll to get it. But the majority will scan it and print it out if they want thorough

readability.

Eye Movement Study

In the early 1990s, The Poynter Institute for Media Studies conducted scientific tests by using eyetracking equipment to see how people read newspapers. The study, Eyes on the News, by Mario Garcia

and Pegie Stark Adam, also concluded that most readers are scanners. Although it was primarily aimed at

testing the impact of color and graphics in newspapers, the study found that only 25 percent of the people

tested began reading the text and about 12 percent actually read stories thoroughly. These findings for

print readers are even more significant for online readers.

Garcia, author of Redesigning Print for the Web, now concentrates on consulting for online news sites.

The Web is obviously ideal for scanners, he says. The average time spent reading on the Web is seven

minutes compared to 20 minutes for newspapers.

"People who use it are highly educated," he says. "They want a lot of information. All the evidence

from focus groups shows that word links tend to be more effective than icons in making people click.

Good writing is crucial. We need headlines that entice you to click. We are going to need the best word

people in the world. The art of writing is back."

Teaser Study

• Topics in this section

• Teaser study overall results

• Summary vs. broadcast-style

• Repetition of headlines, subheads and leads

• Comparing print and online reading patterns

• Conclusion

Headlines and summaries that introduce Web stories are the first step in enticing readers. But summary

teasers often tell so much about the story, they give the reader little reason to click into it. If the reader

does click, repetition awaits because most subheads on the main page merely duplicate the lead in the

story. If most Web readers are scanners and we are competing for their average of seven minutes of

online reading time, should we ask readers to read the same information two or three times? Or is the

repetition of summaries and leads helpful to Web readers so they know they have accessed the right

story?

Teaser study

An unscientific study of the affect of writing styles for Web headlines, subhead and leads on readability

revealed conflicting results. Although the majority of respondents in the study said it bored them to read

leads that had been repeated in headlines and subheads, the repetition did not affect whether or not they

would read the story. Nor did the style. content was the major determinant. The study of 52 journalism

students, ranging in age from 20 to 50, tested four factors: Summary versus broadcast-style teaser

subheads: Which were more effective in enticing users to click into a story? Students chose broadcaststyle "stay-tuned" teasers over inverted pyramid-summary subheads in four out of five examples, but

they said they preferred summary style when scanning the Web. Their comments: "Content would be a

major factor. If I'm interested in the story, it wouldn't matter if it were a summary or a teaser."

"I like summaries better. There's less chance for misreading the facts. It also cuts to the

Chase. I pay for online time. Cut to the chase and don't be coy."

"I like teasers because they entice you. It makes me want to read on. But when I don't

have time to read the whole article, I like summaries."

Impact of repetitious headlines and subheads on readability of leads:

53 percent said repetition made no difference whether they would read the story.

18 percent said repetition helped their comprehension.

29 percent said repetition bored them.

Many students commented that they wanted headlines and subheads to be brief – not several paragraphs

that would be repeated in the story. However, 46 percent said they often skip reading the lead in online

stories if the subhead repeats it, and 29 percent said they sometimes skip reading the lead if it is

repetitious. The percentages were similar for skimming or skipping repetitious leads in print. Their

comments:

"I like, or don't mind, a repetitious headlines, subhead and lead if not too much of the

story is given before you reach 'click here' for full story. If three paragraphs are given, then I get

annoyed because I'm into the story; one paragraph is OK. "It helps to hammer home the point of the

story. And since I don't read stories on the Web thoroughly, it helps me get as much information as

quickly as possible." "I hate repetition. It's a waste of my time."

Comparison of print and online reading patterns: Did users read print stories that interested them more

thoroughly than online news stories. Almost all the respondents show similar patterns for print and online

news reading.

Always read print news stories of interest thoroughly -- 21 percent compared to 11 percent online. Often

read print news of interest thoroughly -- 62 percent compared to 60 percent online. Most of these students

who answered often for print responded the same for online.

Sometimes -- 12 percent for print news stories, 25 percent for online. Age made no difference in reading

patterns. Undergraduate students in their 20s had the same patterns for print and online as did graduate

students in their 30s, 40s and 50s.

Conclusion

Content is the main factor in enticing readers to click. Shorter subheads work better than detailed ones

with several paragraphs. Subheads that don't repeat the leads are preferable because readers will skip

repetitious leads. This unscientific survey should only be viewed as a starting point to consider whether

summary or teaser subheads and repetition should be used. A more thorough scientific study neede to drive definitive conclusion,