HOW USERS READ ON THE WEB
They Don't.

People rarely read Web pages word by words; instead, they scan the page, picking out individual words and sentences. In research on how people read websites it was found that 79% of test users always scanned any new page they came across; only 16 percent read word-by-word. (Update: A newer study found that users read email newsletters even more abruptly than they read websites.)

As a result, Web pages have to employ scannable text using,

- Highlighted **keywords**
- Meaningful **sub-headings** (not "clever" ones)
- Bulleted **lists**
- **One idea** per paragraph
- The **inverted pyramid** style, starting with the conclusion
- **Half the word count** (or less) than conventional writing

Which one would you read?

Site Version	Sample Paragraph
Promotional writing- *Control condition, using the "marketese" found on many commercial websites.*	Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), Carhenge (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).
Concise text- *half the word count as the control condition*	In 1996, six of the best-attended attractions in Nebraska were Fort Robinson State Park, Scotts Bluff National Monument, Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum, Carhenge, Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park.

Scannable layout- *using the same text as the control condition in a layout that facilitated scanning*	Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular **places were:** • Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors) • Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166) • Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000) • Carhenge (86,598) • Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002) • Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park
Objective language- *using neutral than than subjective, boastful, or exaggerated language (otherwise the same as the control condition)*	Nebraska has several attractions. In 1996, some of the most-visited places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), Carhenge (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).
Combined Version-*Concise, Scannable and Objective*	In 1996, six of the most-visited places in Nebraska were: • Fort Robinson State Park • Scotts Bluff National Monument • Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum • Carhenge • Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer • Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park

WRITING FOR WEBSITES

Why the Web is different
Your work may require you to write for a website as well as print on paper. In some ways this is no different from writing print on paper: you follow the principles of Orientation, Information, and Action just as you do in a business letter or memorandum.

But the Web is a different medium, and its users respond to it very differently from the way they respond to paper documents.

1. Web text is hard to read.
Computer screen resolution is not as sharp as print on paper, so we tend to read it slowly—up to 25 percent more slowly than print.

2. Web text is hard to proofread.
Perhaps because of poor screen resolution, Web writers (like email writers) often miss typos or grammatical errors in their own text. Website visitors, however, are likely to spot those mistakes very quickly. They will gain a poor opinion of your professionalism and attention to detail.

3. Website visitors are impatient.
Because it's so easy to click from one site to another, visitors don't like to hunt around on a site for what they want. If it's not obvious, they'll just go somewhere else. For the same reason, many visitors don't like to scroll down a long text. They would rather jump to another page.

4. Web sites attract different kinds of visitors.
Viewers and **listeners** are looking for graphics and sound; text does not really interest them. Listeners include persons with visual impairments who need text that is understandable when spoken by a voice program.

Users are looking for information. They include customers as well as researchers. They like "chunks" of information—stand-alone blocks of information, filling the screen with 100 words or less, requiring little or no scrolling. Users need concise, well-organized, and well-mapped sites so they can go straight to what they want.

Readers want information too, but they are willing to scroll through complete documents. They may well prefer text adapted for screen display, such as that with lines running only halfway across the screen, and with blank lines between paragraphs. Better yet, they like to print out such documents and read them on paper. So they need documents that are well formatted when printed out.

Talkers are visitors who want to comment on what they find on your site, and perhaps create a link to it on their own sites—especially if they're running Web logs (blogs) dealing with the same subjects you also deal with.

Colleagues may obtain your information through an intranet accessible only to employees. Such visitors need clear, usable, well-formatted information just as much as outsiders do.

Depending on the nature of your site, you should try to appeal to all kinds of visitors. If you're a graphic designer looking for a job, for example, your site should feature many examples of your work, as well plenty of text describing your background and skills.

5. Web text is hypertext.
That is, visitors can jump around from one page to another in any sequence they like. This means every document should be able to stand on its own, without reference to other documents. As a Web writer you should be able to create such stand-alone documents, and to make it easy for your visitors to jump to other documents on your site.

FIVE GUIDELINES
Given these qualities about the Web and Web surfers, you will have to tailor your writing. Here are some guidelines:

1. Write concisely.
If the print version of a brochure is 500 words long, try to condense the Web version to 250 words. Keep most sentences under 20 words long.

2. Break up paragraphs.
A solid block of text is very hard to read on screen, so keep paragraphs to three or four sentences each, with space between them.

3. Use lots of headings and subheads.
These help your visitors find what they're looking for.

4. Use "blurbs" to describe what visitors will find when they click on a link.
For example:
> Lodging in Whistler. From 5 star hotels to inexpensive hostels.

5. Make action easy.
> Click here to subscribe.
> Email us!
> Post your reply.

THREE BASIC PRINCIPLES
Once you understand the people for whom you're writing, your text should reflect three basic principles of Web and workplace writing: orientation, information, and action.

Orientation
Visitors to your site have two questions on arrival: they want to know where they are in the site and how to move around within it. Because visitors may arrive via search engine at a page buried deep in your site, you need to provide those answers everywhere—not just on your front page. Your site name should be self-explanatory, stating its purpose, and every page should provide links to other pages, showing how the site is organized and how to navigate it.

Information
This is what your visitors are here for. Some visitors want the print versions of your material, so they can look in your site's archive—wherever you store complete documents. For others, however, you need to adapt your text by cutting, hooking, and organizing.

Cutting is essential for text adapted from print. Even if you're archiving huge documents, you should also include summaries of them. Because visitors are reading at 75 percent of normal speed, and are impatient for those jolts of gratified inquiry, consider the "50 percent rule": cut any given text by half, especially if you're adapting from print, which relies heavily on transitional phrases that don't belong in hypertext.

Even if you're creating original text, writing long and cutting short will keep your text tightly focused. If the writing still makes sense when cut in half, then leave it short. If you need more text, add it word by word until you have just enough.

Cutting works on all levels. You can cut a whole paragraph, or cut sentences and phrases. You should also try to use the shortest possible words. That means writing "use" instead of "utilize," which is identical in meaning but has two more syllables. It means writing "decided" instead of "made a decision.

Hooking an impatient visitor is vital. Your readers are skimming and scanning, so use both headlines and text to grab them. Headlines should be simple and informative. Text can exploit devices long known to magazine writers for catching readers' interest.

"For example," he said, "use quotation marks because people seem to prefer reading what someone actually said." Other hooks include:
- questions — they make us seek the answer
- unusual statements — we love surprises
- news pegs — to tie content some big current news story
- direct address — we love personal attention

Organizing Web text isn't always as easy as cutting and hooking. Print on paper can be narrative, logical argument, or categorical. Narrative order, which relies on chronology, imposes a sequence that Web users may not want or need. Logical argument tends to be too long and sequential for impatient visitors.

Web writing, being hypertext, thrives best under categorical organization: "The Five Signs of Cancer," "Best Golf Courses in Victoria," "Favourite Beaches in Cabo San Lucas." When users can jump from chunk to chunk, they get to their destinations much faster.

You should organize even within a chunk. A hundred words in one solid block of text is a symptom of "paragraphosis," in which the eye becomes unable to focus or track through a mass of type. A chunk could have two or three short paragraphs, each with a subhead, all surrounded by lots of white space.

Organization can also mean junking declarative sentences and offering just fragments. Sometimes. Not always. Bulleted lists? Great!

Action
Your site needs to welcome action by your visitors, even provoke it. If all you want is for them to click through to another page, the link title and blurb should make it seem worth their time. If you want them to join your movement, fill out your form, or buy your software, you need to make it appear to be in their interest to do so, and to make it effortless.

To achieve all this—orientation, information, action—demands much more than technical expertise with Flash or XML. It demands that you put the visitor's needs first. On the Web, the customer really is always right, and vanishes the moment you indicate otherwise. So you need to make a leap of empathy to put yourself in the visitor's shoes, and write your text accordingly.

TEXT AND SUBTEXT
Every message in every medium has both a text and a nonverbal subtext. "You really impressed the interviewer" is a text. If the speaker's tone (the subtext) is sincerely admiring, you can take pride in your interviewing skill. If the speaker's tone is sarcastic, however, the subtext completely undercuts the text.

Your Web text has a subtext also. If you write: "Welcome! We're delighted you're here," but the site is hard to navigate and hard to understand, your visitors won't feel welcome at all. If you write: "You're the reason for this site," but you always talk about "we" the company, your visitors will doubt your sincerity.

So your site is something like a business letter. You always want your letter to convey the subtext that you're a capable professional and you care about your reader. Your Web site should convey that message too.

REVIEW YOURSELF
You've written the text for your site. How can you evaluate it? One way is to review other sites that try to do the same thing, and to compare those sites with your own. Or you can write a letter to yourself about the own site's strengths and weaknesses—a kind of "autoreview." Detailing the site's failures leads quickly to ideas for solutions. You may decide to use some or all of the following standards:

Purpose. Is the site for entertainment, marketing, information, education? Purpose achieved? How? Not achieved? Why not? Can visitors understand what the site is about within three seconds, without scrolling? Is it obvious whose site it is, and where it's located?

Audience. Are your intended visitors veterans, experts, or novices? Are they young or old, male or female? Can they get the basic information about the site regardless of their computer skills, browser, or special applications like Flash? Does the page load quickly?

Content. Is it information-rich or just a jump page? Do you have adequate chunking and archiving? Is the text clean, clear, well organized, and suited to the purpose and audience? Will visitors say "So!" or "So what?" Will they believe what you tell them? Why? Will they act on what you tell them?

Appearance. Do graphics enhance text or distract from it? Does text invite reading thanks to short paragraphs, legible fonts, relatively narrow columns, and white space between paragraphs? Does the page look spacious and calm, inspiring confidence in visitors?

Organization. Is the site easily navigable even on the first visit? Does it require a lot of scrolling? Can you get anywhere from anywhere else on the site?

Websites for Web Writers

Alertbox	ClickZ
http://www.useit.com/alertbox	http://www.clickz.com/
Crawford Kilian on Web Writing	Edit-Work
http://crofsblogs.typepad.com/	http://www.edit-work.com/
Webword	Words for Web
http://www.webword.com/	http://www.wordsforweb.com/
Writing for the Web	WWW Scribe
http://www.writingfortheweb.com/	http://www.www.scribe.com/

Name:_____

Class:_____

KEY POINTS FOR READING AND WRITING ON THE WEB

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