

Electronic media writing guidelines for UPMC Public Relations and UPMC Marketing Communications

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Pre-writing

- Consider who will be reading your piece online.
- In 25 words or less, describe what your article, research piece, or PR blurb is about.
- Block off sections to describe your points. Can these sections be placed onto separate pages? Is it possible that some of the information already exists on the UPMC site?

Structure and Process

The following guidelines can be useful:

1. **Use inverted pyramid style.** The most important story concept (the main idea) belongs at the top of the story. The least important details belong at the bottom.
2. **Use headers and sub-headers.** All main headlines summarize the story and entice the reader to learn more. All secondary headers summarize the story section that is to follow. Formatting your story into appropriate sections allows you to eliminate lengthy, confusing blocks of text.
3. **Streamline your content.** Your goal is to use short, informative sentences that are free from technical jargon, clichés, or redundancies.

To streamline further, consider:

- Can you link part of your piece to an already existing page? This saves you from doing extra work.
- Can you shorten your piece by eliminating the “narrative” (the story or tale)? Your Web audience does not have patience for a lengthy narrative.

4. Use **bulleted lists, ‘Frequently Asked Question’ sections, and/or sidebars** to streamline copy further. Eliminate long paragraphs by using section headers and bulleted lists. Lists should contain 5 to 7 items at most.

Are you writing patient care instructions or a “how-to” guide for selecting health insurance? Then your subject matter is a perfect fit for a numbered list. The order of the instructions should make natural sense.

Finishing your Piece

To finish your piece for your editor, consider:

- **Streamlining your piece again.** Sentences that do not add information – also known as “filler” or “empty phrases” – can be eliminated.
- **Eliminating needless words.** Readers only read 20 percent of online content. You can cut 40 percent of the words and eliminate only 30 percent of the (low-priority) information. Refer to the Tautology section for more details.
- **Adding appropriate links.** Does the content already exist elsewhere on the site? Are you writing a series of pages that must be linked together? Does your piece include e-mail contacts? Hyperlinks within your text make a “flat” page come alive.

8 Quick Rules

- Make headlines and headers brief.
- Use bullet points or numbered lists wherever possible.
- Separate content into different sections or pages.
- Choose active verbs over passive verbs.
- Choose simpler words over more complex words. Plain English wins over academic verbiage, every time.
- Choose shorter sentences; longer sentences can often be divided.
- Avoid redundancy. See the passage below on tautology.
- Edit twice, cut more.

In Brief: Tautology

Tautology is defined as the use of (usually unnecessary) repetition in rhetoric. In medical writing, tautology is often seen in abbreviations.

“HIV virus” is tautology. HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. “HPV virus,” ditto; the acronym stands for Human papillomavirus. Tautology can be used anywhere, though. A common example is “free prizes.” A prize is free, so if you’re writing an *Extra!* story about a giveaway, free the word “free” from your “prizes.”

Suggested References

Anderson, Paul. *Technical Communications: A Reader-Centered Approach*. Boston: Thomson Wadworth Corp., 2007.

(This is a good resource for information design from the web reader’s perspective.)

Foster, John. *Effective Writing Skills for Public Relations, Fourth Edition*. London: Kogan Page, 2008.

(This is a UK book; so if you read it, you’ll notice variations from American PR protocol. It’s a great all-around PR book with a decent section on writing concisely.)

Krug, Steve. *Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability*. Berkley, Ca.: New Riders Press, 2006.

(This book emphasizes cutting down your word count and using logical information design tactics for electronic media.)

Morkes, John and Jakob Nielsen. *Concise, Scannable, and Objective: How to Write for the World Wide Web*. <http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/writing.html>, 1997. Accessed Aug. 23, 2008. Supplemented by information from Nielsen-Norman Group, www.nngroup.com

(This resource is more than 10 years old, but has set a great precedent for online information organization that is very relevant today.)

Neilsen, Jakob, PJ Schemenaur, and Jonathan Fox. *Sun Microsystems’ Writing for Web*. <http://www.sun.com/980713/webwriting/index.html>, 2008. Accessed Oct. 6, 2008.

(For those of us who write more technical materials, this guide is a great go-to.)

Price, Jonathan and Lisa Price. *Web Writing that Works!* <http://www.webwritingthatworks.com/BGuide.htm>, 2004. Accessed Oct. 8, 2008.

(This is a fun, multidimensional site that contains tutorials and interactive elements to get you thinking about electronic information design.)

Redish, Janice. *Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Communication that Works*. New York: Morgan Kaufmann, 2007.

(Janet Tripodi recommends this book. It's chock-full of great illustrations that demonstrate what works and what doesn't when writing for Web.)

Rosenfeld, Louis and Peter Morville. *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web*. Sebastopol, Calif.: O'Reilly Media, 2002.

(This is a “geeky” book that explains how information design works. Whether you’re a technology novice or a guru, this book teaches you much of what you need to know about information architecture.)

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