WRITING for the WEB

Why reading differently means writing differently

ACM
TRAINING

get it right
before it
goes live

by Richard Uridge

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Introduction

We don't read like we used to. In a linear fashion. Line by line. Page by page. Chapter by chapter. These days many of us view words more on screen than on paper. The web has turned us into skimmers and dippers - skimming online content until we see something interesting and only then dipping deeper. Which presents writers with a huge challenge. Because reading differently means writing differently.

About the author

I've been writing professionally (I use that term loosely) as a journalist and broadcaster for more than 40 years. That sounds suspiciously like a life sentence when you say it out loud, with no time off for good behaviour - not that there's been much.

Having started as a cub reporter on the Reading Chronicle newspaper with a spiral-bound notebook and an inky-ribboned typewriter, I can say in all honesty that I was a bit of a Luddite when first the Internet and then the social web came along and transformed the way people consumed news specifically and words more generally. Smarter people than me proclaim that transformation as the moment we entered the post Gutenberg era. Johannes Gutenberg was the 15th Century German inventor behind the moveable type printing press which lead to the written word being available to the masses not just the wealthy few who had access to manuscripts written by quill-toting monks. That may be overstating it. But I'm grateful nonetheless that I didn't have to use a sharpened feather to write this book.

I'm also grateful that, unlike those old dusty tomes, it's easier to update books these days. No more skinning of goats, dipping of ink wells and scratching on velum. When Twitter doubled its 140 character limit, changing the relevant page here took moments. That said the online world of words is changing so giddyingly fast that I apologise in advance for any errors, omissions and updates I may have overlooked and would ask you to get in touch to put me right.

I'd also encourage you to sign up for the ACM Training blog where there's a whole category devoted to words - written and spoken, online and offline and, if you're into that kind of thing, follow Bespoke, my personal blog, which focuses on poetry, cycling and dementia (an odd mix I'll grant you).

Happy reading!

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DIGITAL vs ANALOGUE
Same words different medium

Isn't writing for the web just like any other writing?

Well yes and no. Yes, because the web provides writers with just another medium for their words. No, because web users read in a different way to readers of text in other media such as newspapers, books and magazines. They read in a much less linear fashion flitting across the screen like a butterfly looking for something to settle on. And when they do settle they tend not to hang around for long if there's nothing of interest – not least because just a few clicks away there's the whole of the World Wide Web to distract them. So as a web writer first you've got to grab your readers' attention, then you've got to hold them long enough for your words to work their magic. And if that wasn't hard enough you've got to very little space to do it – especially if your words are displayed on a tablet or smartphone.

If I viewed the preceding paragraph on my iPhone in landscape mode, in a font large enough to read without straining my eyes (Calibri 11 if you're a real anorak and want to check for yourself) I 'd get halfway through the seventh line before having to scroll down. As a rule of thumb - an ancient expression that seems oddly modern in an age of handheld devices – you can squeeze 120 words on a Smartphone.

Tablets, laptops and desktops can, of course, accommodate progressively more in one "screenful". Read this on your iPad in landscape mode and you'd get about as far as the word anorak in the second paragraph – a word count of about 200. Turn the screen through 90 degrees and you can squeeze in an extra hundred or so words - 330 in total. A figure not to be scoffed at in a world where Twitter limits you to 280 characters (it doubled from 140 in 2020) but still relatively few compared to the olde worlde of paper and ink.

Take the book that's been gathering dust under my bed for so long it's now more dust than book. It's called The Isles – A History by Norman Davies. It contains approximately 450 words per page – twice that between page turns given that you get to see two pages at a time. How do I know this? Because I am that anorak!

What's more I've just counted 2,750 words on a double page spread in a tabloid newspaper that shall remain nameless (but promised 100 days of snow this winter) and 3,056 words on a similar two pager in the Daily Telegraph.

I'm not saying people won't scroll down…

…I'm just saying that these differences between screen and page demand much of us as writers. Certainly we shouldn't be putting really important stuff so deep into a webpage that people have to scroll down to find it because they simply may not bother.

To avoid this problem we have to "front-load" web pages – that is, put the most critical information at the top of the page where it's clearly visible. In the old days of broadsheet newspapers it was called putting stuff "above the fold" where, on a newsstand, the bit of the article on the top half of the front page could instantly be seen by potential buyers. We'll return to the important concept of front-loading later.

Authors have long been aware of the need to keep readers reading over the potentially awkward chapter breaks. That's why they often set up some kind of conflict towards the end of one chapter but keep the resolution from us until the beginning of the next. Done well the book becomes unputdownable. The challenge then is to make our websites unclickawayfromable!

> Oh my God there's a man at the door dressed in a black cloak and carrying a scythe. Excuse me for a moment while I answer his insistent knock….