Web Writing Guidelines

Updated on February 1, 2016

The following guidelines, originally written for the Tufts Student Life website <http://students.tufts.edu/> by the web strategy and design firm mStoner <http://www.mstoner.com/>, can be applied to most Tufts websites that target an external audience.

Style

* We write in active voice and use first- and second-person in order to keep the copy of our site conversational.
* We are clear and direct — we neither condescend nor make our content inaccessible.

We aim for content targeted to a high school graduate reading level .

Editorial Standards

We reference *The Chicago Manual of Style*, with a few exceptions specific to the university:

<http://communications.tufts.edu/wp-content/uploads/editorial_style_guide.pdf>.

Best Practices

* **Create unique page titles.** Each page of your site should have a title tailored to the content on the page.
* **Anticipate terms that your visitors may use to search for content.** Weave those words and phrases into the copy that you write.
* **Use the inverted pyramid to structure your page:**
	+ Start with the most important information in the opening sentence. That sentence should answer who, what, when, where, why, and how.
	+ Fill in the rest of the story, with increasing detail, in the paragraphs that follow.
	+ Place the least important information toward the bottom of the page.
* **Be succinct.** If there’s a shorter, simpler way to say something, do it that way.
* **Keep paragraphs short.** This — especially if paragraphs have topic sentences —speeds scanning and alleviates fatigue.
* **Use subheads, section titles, bulleted lists, and anchors to make copy scannable.** When you have a good deal of information that belongs together on a single page (student organizations, for instance), use anchors so that the reader can scan the list quickly and jump directly to the section of the page that’s of interest.
* **Ensure that the name of a link matches the name of the page to which it links.** For instance, if you click on a link entitled Financial Aid, you should get to a page named

Financial Aid, not Types of Aid or Financial Assistance. You have a little more latitude with hyperlinks, but the relevance between the name of the hyperlink and the page it links to should be readily apparent. (Otherwise, visitors get irritated.)

* **Use common terms that users will understand.** A clever-but-somewhat-obscure link name can cause frustration and confusion.
* **Hyperlink phrases rather that single words.** The reason: It’s easier to spot a phrase than a single word.
* **Guard against irrelevant hyperlinking.** Just because you use a word that is the name of another page on your site doesn’t mean that it’s relevant. Be sure to check the content of the linked page to ensure that it is relevant and will help the reader.
* **Avoid Web clichés.** These include:
	+ Welcome to our site.
	+ Click here.
	+ On this Web page you will find…
* **Remember you’re in a nonlinear medium.** Many readers may arrive on your pages directly from a Google search. Recognizing that those visitors will benefit from a little context, providing a little introductory copy will be helpful.
* **End each page with a call to action.** Highlight next steps and provide links that encourage readers to explore and engage.
* **Your visitors don’t necessarily think like you do.** They visit the site with a specific goal in mind, but may not know exactly what it’s called by those internal to the institution.
* **The average visit time** for .edu visitors is 2m45s or ~500 words read. Use this as a rule for how long your pages should be.
* **Visitors will eventually use the search box** if they cannot find what they need – usually within the first minute of browsing.
* **Write for accessibility:**
	+ Page titles should match the links used to get to them.
	+ Subheads describe the purpose of the page and help with scanning.
	+ No abbreviations or acronyms allowed until they have been spelled out at least once.
	+ Always include alt tags for images - these are brief captions describing what is happening in a particular photo, and need to be able to be read aloud by a screen reader. One tip is to picture yourself on the phone with a friend, trying to describe what’s happening outside your window.
* **Never assume that anything is ‘obvious’ or ‘self-evident’.** As much as certain transactions and processes may seem routine to us, we need to treat even the most frequent and common content as if our visitor knows nothing about it.