

## HOW TO MAKE DIGITAL CONTENT SCANNABLE

The way that we access, or read, material that has been posted on the Internet and in other new media is very different from the way that we access, or read, material that has been published in traditional media.

### **Writing for Traditional Media: Books, Newspapers, Magazines, School Essays**

When we read something written for traditional media, for example a book or a novel, we generally start at the beginning of the novel and then read word for word until we reach the end. We don't want to miss a nuisance or a description, or a twist in the plot, or any of the action. And everything is written in full sentences, paragraphs and chapters – and that's a lot of words!!

Novels, in particular, are specifically written in a style that scatters clues and information throughout the book, or builds suspense in ways that requires readers to read from start to finish without skipping any (or much) of the content along the way.

Magazines use a similar style for their articles. Even though their articles are much shorter than the contents of a book, information is scattered through the article requiring readers to read the article from start to finish.

Even non-fiction books are generally written so that the information presented logically flows from the beginning to the end.

Newspaper articles use a different style, one that is referred to as the 'inverted pyramid' style. With this writing style, the most important facts and information are at the beginning of the article, in the first paragraph then each successive paragraph has progressively less important information in it.

Newspapers use this style so that editors can adjust the column length of all articles to fit with the amount of space on a page that hasn't been sold to advertising, and so that there is the flexibility on each page to fit those important advertisements in. The reader must start reading articles at the beginning and read enough paragraphs to gain the information they want.

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The bottom line is that these media are written in full sentences and paragraphs, are generally read linearly from start to finish, and the reader isn't looking for specific words or phrases, they are reading to find out what is there.

### **Writing for New Media: Websites, Blogs, Facebook**

When readers access information from new media, they tend to scan the material in a pattern that looks a lot like the letter "F". Reader's eyes scan the material, looking for specific bit and pieces of information that interest them.

In the few seconds it takes to scan a page, readers pick up an overview of the page to determine if the website, or blog, etc, is something that they want to explore more deeply. If they don't find information in that few seconds that appeals to them, they move on to the next website or blog and scan again.

Jacob Neilson (www.useit.com), long-time researcher on Web usability, developed this diagram of how readers scan web pages showing where reader's eyes tend to look when they access a new website.



Jakob Neilson's "F-Pattern" for scanning websites\*

## **So how do you catch the readers eye during those few seconds that it takes them to do the initial scan on your website or blog page?**

Fortunately, there are a few tricks and techniques that writers for new media can easily use to make scanning easier and more productive for readers.

### **Guidelines for Scannable Web Content**

The following guidelines will help you create easily scannable materials for your website or blog:

1. **make good use of a page's 'hot zones'** – the areas shown as yellow and orange in Jakob Nielsen's image above. These areas are where keywords, keyphrases and major points should be placed. Ads tend to be more effective if they are placed in these 'hot zones' (as long as you also follow a few other style recommendations that will be outlined in another article).
2. **use lots of headings and subheadings** – use headings and subheadings to present an idea of the content that follows. Use keywords in headings and subheadings, draw attention to headings and subheadings by using **bold**, *italics*, underlines, CAPITAL LETTERS, or **a different color**.
3. **use lots of white space** – readers often feel overwhelmed when confronted with solid block of text. White space makes even long articles easier to read.
4. **use graphics, pictures and videos** – use the media capabilities of the Internet to make you web pages attractive and entertaining
5. **people scan in an 'F' shape** – important information should be placed down the left side, across the top, and in the middle (provide extra highlighting by leaving extra white space around this information, or framing the material)
6. **use short sentences and short paragraphs** – these are easier to read and scan through
7. **break long articles or posts into chunks** – small chunks are easier to read and focus on.
8. **use links** – use hyperlinks to connect sections of longer articles, to connect articles or posts to other material on your site, to connects your articles or posts to materials on other sites.
9. **create lists** – lists are easy to read and pack a lot of information into a small space.

10. **don't bury your points** - the lead sentence of your paragraphs should be the most important point you are making in your paragraph. The remaining sentences of the paragraph generally support or explain this first sentence. You might even try using the **journalist's 'inverted pyramid' format** – place the most important information at the beginning of your post, with progressively less important information making up the remainder of the post or article.
11. **highlight important words and phrases throughout your post** – using **bold**, *italics*, underlines, CAPITAL LETTERS, or a **different color** draws the reader's attention to the important information. Try not to have too much information highlighted through your content as that only confuses readers and makes the content hard to scan.

Incorporating some, or all, of these guidelines into your new media content helps create an attractive, easy to read website that not only attracts readers, but helps keep them coming back to read more.