Writing for the web and SEO

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Writing for the web

This is an overview of concepts and practices for creating effective written material online. For more information, ask your Web Content Editor.

Writing effectively for the Internet is different to creating material for other purposes. Visitors to your web page may have arrived there by a number of different routes, and you can never be sure who they are or what they are looking for. You must help to decide quickly whether the page is right for them (and get them to read on) or irrelevant (and click through to a more appropriate page of the web site).

These writing guidelines should help you to create informative and engaging text for your website visitors.

CHANGE PRINT TEXT WHEN RELEVANT

In general, simply copying printed reports or material onto the website is a bad idea. Text needs to be made more accessible and broken up to let users scan it effectively.

This is not a firm rule however, and there are exceptions to it – such as the content of a legal document or an important letter (from the Vice-Chancellor for example). Exercise judgement in deciding what can be changed – but if it can be made easier to read, it should be.

CONSIDER THE AUDIENCE

Do you know who you are writing for? Before you type your first word who must carefully consider your target audience and make sure that you communicate with them with appropriate language. Prospective 18 year-old students are quite different to international graduates or peers within your field of research!

If you feel that you need to attract multiple audiences, think about how you can use landing pages or entry level pages for more broadly appealing content that easy to digest. Use the deeper level pages for more detailed and specific content and these will be the pages looked at by people who have an interest.

Different audiences you may write for are:

- **RESEARCHERS** – researchers have a high level of subject knowledge and will understand most of the detail. They will also be interested in links to department pages and/or publications that can also be discussed. Note that centres and institutes will usually moderate their own content as they have a different audience of mainly specialist researchers/academics.

- **POST-GRADUATES** – post-graduates are also very technically literate, particularly in their specialist area. Ensure that the benefits of post-graduate courses and support are communicated effectively. Some subject pages will be aimed primarily at post-graduates.

- **UNDERGRADUATES** – ensure that you tell undergraduates how each School is different; explain the important KIS data and the key supported messages being presented by the School. This is writing for a young audience with less specialist knowledge and the main audience for subject pages.

- **THE PUBLIC** – providing general information for the public means disseminating detail at a level suitable for a potentially wide-ranging audience. Make text accessible and break up pages into key points that clearly explain the purpose and impact of research, or other details of the relevant topic.

Try to identify exactly who you are writing for and then provide them with the information they need and want – not the information you happen to have and want to publish. It may be OK to use technical terms and jargon for pages aimed at expert researchers, but what if an undergraduate student clicks through to that page? Is it clear how they can navigate to a more suitable page?

Make sure that you summarise every page in plain language in the first paragraph and provide links to related content for your non-target audiences who may have arrived on your page via a web search.

PUT INFORMATION ABOVE THE FOLD

Ensure that the most important content is placed 'above the fold' – high enough up the page so that users do not have to scroll down to read it. Many people are only on a web page for a very short amount of time, and if they don't think that the page contains the information they are looking for then they will soon go elsewhere.

UNIVERSITY TONE OF VOICE AND EDITORIAL GUIDELINES

All the text across the University's websites should have a consistent tone of voice and comply with branding guidelines. You can get advice and tips on the style and tone of text at http://www.brand.manchester.ac.uk/written-word/.

HOUSE STYLE

There are eight main branding guidelines:

- Use the first/second person ('we', 'you')

- Be specific – include facts and figures; explain benefits rather than simply saying things like 'We're great!'

- Open with the exciting news

- Look to the future

- Get straight to the point

- Be consistent

- Say what we do, not what we might try to do

- Steer clear of sector-wide clichés, instead say what makes us unique

MORE QUICK TIPS:

Only capitalise the first word of headings (except for proper nouns) and do not make headings or sub-headings overly long (in particular try to keep them to one line).

Avoid colloquialisms, idioms and other such references in headings that will not be instantly understood by the vast majority of viewers.

Never use ampersands unless they are used in the official name of an organisation (e.g. HM Revenue & Customs).

Undergraduate and taught masters degrees are 'courses' (not programmes). Research degrees (PhD, MPhil etc) are called programmes.

Degrees are made up of 'units' not modules.

Refer to the university as 'The University of Manchester' at all times.

TIMES, DATES AND NUMBERS

Write times in the form "9am" or "5.30pm"

Write dates in the form "25 December 2013" or "Wednesday, 25 December 2013"

When writing numbers; for the numbers 1-10 write the words "one to ten", for numbers 11 or greater write the digits "11", if mixing numbers below 10 and above 10, use digits (e.g. "1 to 20")

Dos and don'ts

DO USE SHORT PARAGRAPHS – try and make one point per sentence and keep paragraphs to two or three sentences. Paragraphs will have a blank line above and below them so a page with a number of paragraphs will look better laid out and easier to access for a reader.

DO USE SUB-HEADINGS – breaking up text with sub-headings at different levels is also good practice. Website readers scan pages rapidly and make snap judgements on whether content is relevant to them. Sub-headings will let the viewer easily see if the information they need is contained on the page and let them skip to different sections of it quickly.

Heading 1 should only be used for a page title (only at the top of a page)

Heading 2 should be used for subheadings within the page

Heading 3 should be used to further break down information in a logical hierarchy

YOU SHOULDN'T NEED TO USE HEADING 4-6. IF YOU NEED TO DEFINE SOMETHING BEYOND HEADING 3, PLEASE USE PARAGRAPH & BOLD.

Do use bullet points – bullet points and other lists work well on the Web; readers can view a logical presentation of information and short lists are easier to read online. Please note that while bullet points look very close together in the T4 editing page, they will appear uniformly spaced out on the live site. You do not need to add in any spaces between bullet points.

Don't use blocks of text – large, unformatted blocks of texts with few paragraphs or sub-headings won't be read by website viewers. The information won't be clear or accessible and they will quickly look elsewhere.

Do create contextual links – try to use 'contextual links' where a specific term is linked to encourage a web viewer to click and find out more. For example, in the text "Results from our new collaborative archaeology project in Brazil..." the underlined words are a link to another page. The reader has a clear idea of the information on this new page.

Don't use 'more' or 'click here' links – such text links break up the flow of information for the reader and are not illustrative of the page being linked to. Similarly, don't put contextual links onto single words in the text, as it won't be obvious where this will lead the reader to. For example, just linking the word 'Brazil' could link through to a new collaborative archaeology project in Brazil, but it could equally link to a Wikipedia page on the country, or a tourist information page.

Do use lists of links – instead of creating a large number of contextual links in the body of a piece of text, hence making it look untidy with several underlined links around the page, it is better to include a bullet point list of links at the bottom of the page or beneath that section. As a guideline, try to keep the number of links included in a piece of text to one per paragraph.

Do seek feedback – when you have written a page, ask people – preferably from your target audience – for feedback before you submit the page for publishing.

Do use useful images – images should only be used when they add genuine value or information to a page. They must add to the 'story' being told on the page and ensure that the page is richer, clearer and more informative with their inclusion than their absence.

Search engine optimisation

WHAT IS SEO?

SEO stands for Search Engine Optimisation and is the practice of making web pages appear higher in search engine results for specific target keywords and phrases. This enables web content that is useful and relevant to readers to be found more often by them.

The Faculty Web Team is working with the Central Marketing team to ensure that the new T4 templates are fully optimised for search engines. Every month we produce a Google Analytics report which we use to inform on-going developments.

DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF SEO

There are two different aspects of SEO; off-page and on-page. Off-page refers to actions taken outside of editing website content on a particular website – referring to things such as building links from other websites to your material, sharing web material on social networks and acquiring press coverage on other websites.

On-page SEO refers to activities that optimise the actual content published online so that it works better with search engines. The information below is advice on on-page SEO activity.

HOW CAN I IMPROVE SEO FOR MY PAGES?

KEYWORDS

First you must determine what keywords and phrases you wish your web material to rank for in search engines. For some material this may be obvious, whereas other material may need some thinking to determine relevant key phrases.

Ensure that the key phrases being targeted are relevant to human searches as well as search engines themselves.

Some of the SEO activities, for example creating metadata for a page, should be done in collaboration with your Web Content Editor. However, when you create or edit website material it is always a good idea to think about using keywords and phrases, although never prioritise these at the costs of writing clear and engaging prose! Search engines are pretty clever these days and can work out when text is 'over optimised'. Your human audience comes first, search engines second. Three to five instances of your key phrase or variations of your key phrase on a page is a good rule of thumb.

CONTEXTUAL LINKS

Search engines particularly like contextual links – the linked words are treated like keywords and search engines will rank the page higher if the words within a link are also keywords on the target page.

Use keywords in <alt> tags

If you upload a video, image or other files from your own PC, make sure the file name also includes your keywords.

FOCUS ON YOUR CONTENT

Do not expend a large amount of time or resources on SEO – the ranking of websites in search engines is not something that website owners can directly control and is liable to change in the future as Google, Bing and other search engine owners tweak their search algorithms to deliver better results for searchers. Simply focus on making your content accurate, high quality and useful to real people.

SEO CHECKLIST

- ☑ Ensure your pages have meaningful headings.

- ☑ Use a consistent heading structure (H1, H2, H3).

- ☑ Keep pages short and succinct.

- ☑ Ensure that relevant keywords are present within the copy.

- ☑ Ensure that pages contain relevant contextual links to other areas of the website.

- ☑ Make sure that any images and videos have relevant <alt> text.

- ☑ Try to get other websites to link to your pages.

Find out more

PUBLISHING GUIDE - describing the publishing workflow in place and the publishing rights of different web users.

PAGE LAYOUT AND TEMPLATE GUIDE - describing the different page layouts and range of templates that can be used on web pages.

A CONTRIBUTOR'S GUIDE TO USING T4 - explaining the key tasks that Contributors will need to maintain their web pages.

WRITING FOR THE WEB AND SEO - a guide on how to create text and pages for the web that work for both people and for search engines.

POLICIES AND GOVERNANCE - explaining the policies that IT has in place for publishing web material and social media use.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS - a guide on how to create text and pages for the web that work for both people and for search engines.

IN A NUTSHELL - a summary of the most common tasks carried out by T4 users.