The Elements of Web Communication (for Amateurs)

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1. The Elements of Web Communication (for Amateurs)

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2. Preface/Table of Contents

We're going to talk briefly about the reason for this presentation.

We'll go through areas of research, followed by recommendations and some practice for each.

pRactice -- we're amateurs. We studied librarianship, not marketing and communication, not web content management, not web strategy.

Rocket science -- so, as amateurs, leading and teaching amateurs, none of this is going to be rocket science. I hope the eminent common sensibility of today's presentation is a strength, in that it encourages you to go back and attempt what you learn here.

3. Your website is important

At Wayne State, Physical circulation has dropped from around 500,000 in 1997 to around 15,000 last year – whereas the website is getting about that many visitors in a daily basis.

Pew Internet: 3 in ten adults read an e-book in the past year.

1. Zickhur, K. & Rainie, L. (2014, Jan. 16). E-Reading Rises as Device Ownership Jumps. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/01/16/e-reading-rises-as-device-ownership-jumps/

4. Your website is text

At its very base, a website is text. Your events are text. Your book descriptions are text. Your list of fines and loan periods is text. The HTML underneath your website is text. Text is meant to be read.

5. So what?

You need to consider who you're writing for and how you write when drafting copy for your website.

If you ignore literacy and web-reading research, you risk losing half or more of your population.

So we're going to look at research in three areas: Reading Online, American Literacy, and Eye/Mouse Tracking or Website Interaction, and make recommendations accordingly.

We're talking about reading instead of writing: we're taking the users' perspective to motivate us to write well on the web.

6. Reading online

7, 8, 9. How far down do most people read?

On an article based website, how far down do most people read? 2013 study of article-based websites pegs median scroll to about 60%, although 10% of visitors never scroll at all. "Few people are making it to the end, and a surprisingly large number aren't giving articles any chance at all."

1. Manjoo, F. (2013, June 6). You won't finish this article. *Slate.* Retrieved from http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2013/06/how_people_read_online_why_you_won_t_finish_this_article.html

10. Power Browsing

Nicholas Carr, talking about research that resulted in *The Shallows*: "power browsing", reading horizontally across articles, never returning to sources once scanned, going for the greatest hits.

1. Carr, N. (2008, July/Aug). Is Google making us stupid? What the internet is doing to our brains. *The Atlantic.* Retrieved from http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/

11. "...when you add verbiage to a page, you can assume that customers will read 18% of it."

Jakob Nielsen, from a 2008 study: "users tend to spend more time on pages with more information. However, the best-fit formula tells us that they spend only 4.4 seconds more for each additional 100 words. Usually, I assume a reading speed of 200 words per minute (WPM), but because the users in this study are highly literate, I'll go with 250 WPM. At that reading speed, users can read 18 words in 4.4 seconds. Thus, when you add verbiage to a page, you can assume that customers will read 18% of it."

1. Nielsen, J. (2008, May 6). How little do users read?. *Nielsen Norman Group.* Retrieved from http://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-little-do-users-read/

12, 13. "On an average visit, users read half the information only on those pages with 111 words or less."

Jakob Nielsen: "When we chart maximum amount of text users could read during an average visit to pages with different word counts: This is a very rapidly declining curve. On an average visit, users read half the information only on those pages with 111 words or less. In the full dataset, the average page view contained 593 words. So, on average, users will have time to read 28% of the words if they devote all of their time to reading. More realistically, users will read about 20% of the text on the average page."

1. Nielsen, J. (2008, May 6). How little do users read?. *Nielsen Norman Group.* Retrieved from http://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-little-do-users-read/

14 - 17. How many Americans own a mobile phone? Go online on their phone? Only go online on their phone?

As of October 2014, "64% of American adults own a smartphone. **90%** own a cell phone."

As of May 2013, "63% of adult cell owners use their phones to go online." That's **57%** of all American adults.

"34% of cell internet users go online mostly using their phones, and not using some other device such as a desktop or laptop computer." That's **19%,** or 2 in 10 of all American adults.

1. Mobile technology fact sheet. (n.d.). *Pew Research Center.* Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/mobile-technology-fact-sheet/

18. How many 18-29 year olds only go online on their phone?

"A whopping 45 percent say most of their internet browsing is on their phones."

If you serve a socio-economically underprivileged population or a racial minority, the numbers can be even higher:

"People who are less likely to have a broadband connection at home are more likely to rely solely or mostly on their mobile device for internet access:

51 percent of Black Americans
42 percent of Hispanic Americans
43 percent of Americans earning less than $30,000 per year
39 percent of Americans with a high school or lower education"

1. McGrane, Karen. (2012, Nov 5). Uncle Sam wants you (to optimize your content for mobile). *A List Apart,* 364. Retrieved from http://alistapart.com/article/uncle-sam-wants-you-to-optimize-your-content-for-mobile

19. They don't scroll. They won't read all your text. They're seeing your site on a mobile device.

20. Recommendation: Make it brief

The less there is on the page, the more your users will engage with it. I know of no better template for brevity than…

21. Strunk & White.

The chapter on Principles of Composition in The Elements of Style makes a number of suggestions that are really helpful for amateurs writing for the web.

1. Strunk, W. Jr., and White, E. B. (1979). *The elements of style* (3rd ed.). NY: Macmillan.

22-24. Use the active voice

"The active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive. Habitual use of the active voice makes for forcible writing. When a sentence is made stronger, it usually becomes shorter. Thus, brevity is a by-product of vigor."

So, instead of:

"Cards can be obtained by residents living in the boundaries of the city, without a fee."

Try:

"City residents can get a free library card."

Usability.gov makes the same recommendation.

1. Strunk, W. Jr., and White, E. B. (1979). *The elements of style* (3rd ed.). NY: Macmillan.

25. Put statements in positive form.

Instead of "Patrons who do not have a picture ID can not get a library card," "You must show some form of picture ID to get a library card."

26. Omit needless words.

"Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences." Usability.gov suggests "The ideal standard is no more than 20 words per sentence, five sentences per paragraph." And remember Jakob Nielsen's caveat: for every 100 extra words, your reader will read only 18.

1. Strunk, W. Jr., and White, E. B. (1979). *The elements of style* (3rd ed.). NY: Macmillan.
2. Writing for the Web. (n.d.). *Usability.gov*. Retrieved from http://www.usability.gov/how-to-and-tools/methods/writing-for-the-web.html
3. Nielsen, J. (2008, May 6). How little do users read?. *Nielsen Norman Group.* Retrieved from http://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-little-do-users-read/

27. (Further recommendations)

"Use pronouns. The user is "you." The organization or government agency is "we." This creates cleaner sentence structure and more approachable content.

Use bullets and numbered lists. Don't limit yourself to using this for long lists—one sentence and two bullets is easier to read than three sentences.

Use clear headlines and subheads. Questions, especially those with pronouns, are particularly effective.

Use images, diagrams, or multimedia to visually represent ideas in the content. Videos and images should reinforce the text on your page.

Use white space. Using white space allows you to reduce noise by visually separate information."

1. Writing for the Web. (n.d.). *Usability.gov*. Retrieved from http://www.usability.gov/how-to-and-tools/methods/writing-for-the-web.html

28. (Exercise)

Handout: text from large Michigan library system website. Small groups identify three edits that could be made, and tie directly to one of the 8 suggestions just reviewed. 5 minutes, followed by a brief group share.

29. Reading at all

Next I want to talk about the Literacy of your audience.

30. Not all Americans read well.

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) *Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), 2012* executive summary presentation includes the following:

U.S. below international average in all subject areas

U.S. has a higher percentage at low proficiency levels than international average

1. Goodman, M., Finnegan, R., Mohadjer, L., Krenzke, T., & Hogan, J. (2013). *Literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments among U.S. adults: results from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies 2012*. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2014008

31. [PIAAC chart]

500 point scale, 1 low / 500 high

> 1: Locate single piece of information in familiar texts. (4%)

1: Read relatively short digital, print or mixed texts to locate single text. (14%, cumulative 18%)

2: Make matches between text and information that may require low level paraphrasing and drawing low-level inferences. (34%, cum. 52%)

So 52% of American adults can, at most, make the kind of low-level inferences that library website reading might require.

1. Goodman, M., Finnegan, R., Mohadjer, L., Krenzke, T., & Hogan, J. (2013). *Literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments among U.S. adults: results from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies 2012*. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2014008

32. [NAAL chart]

[Another view of American adult literacy, showing the large percentage at basic or below basic competencies].

1. National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.) *National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) key findings: Demographics.* Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/naal/kf_demographics.asp

33. Recommendation: Make sure they can understand.

Write so that your audience can understand what they read.

34. Know your audience.

We'll give this some practice explicitly later, but it's important to say you have to know your audience before you can write so they understand. For instance, 44% of Michigan libraries are rural, and 13% city, according to the IMLS Michigan fact sheet from the 2012 Public Library Survey. What kinds of difference

do you expect in reading and types of readers between those two populations? So demographic research is important.

1. Institute of Museum and Library Services. (2012). *Michigan public libraries Public Library Survey fact sheet, fiscal year 2012.* Retrieved from https://www.imls.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/assets/1/AssetManager/PLS_FY2012_SP_Michigan.pdf

35. Microsoft Word.

Usability.gov recommends using Microsoft Word's Spelling and Grammar Readability Statistics tool as a quick check on the reading level of your text. On Mac, you can turn this on under Preferences.

This will give you the Flesch Kincaid Reading Level, represented as a grade level, and the Flesch Kincaid Reading Ease, represented as a score from 1 (difficult) to 100 (easiest), for the text.

36. Read-able.com

A personal project of coder David Simpson, this will evaluate your text on a number of different readability algorithms, either by URI or direct input. Let's try it shall we?

[run readability scores for West Bloomfield Township Public Library (https://www.wblib.org) Grow up Reading http://www.growupreading.org/kindergarten/september.php, demonstrate appropriateness of the reading level to the content]

37, 38. Recommendation: Shorter sentences, fewer syllables.

Texts with shorter sentences and fewer syllables score better on readability statistics.

39. (Exercise)

(Use read-able.com to evaluate the text spoken in slide 36 ["A personal project of coder David Simpson, this will evaluate your text on a number of different readability algorithms, either by URI or direct input. Let's try it shall we?"]. Live-edit the text with suggestions from the audience, to achieve a more readable score without losing any of the meaning. Re-evaluate the edited text.)

40. Reading patterns

Let's look at the layout of your page.

41. (F-pattern illustration)

(**Note: the actual illustration, available at the link cited below, has been redacted from the presentation as archived.**

This page, taken from Jakob Nielson's research, shows a typical F pattern.

In his book, *Eyetracking Web Usability*, Jakob Nielson identifies users' tendency to view a page in an F pattern and to focus their attention on information presented in bulleted lists.

Research shows that there is a high correlation (84 to 88 percent) between eye-tracking and mouse-tracking movements; the combination of both mediums is considered solid evidence and provides many insights into how users read text presented on a screen.

1. Nielsen, J. (2006, Apr 17). F-shaped pattern for reading web content. *Nielsen Norman Group.* Retrieved from http://www.nngroup.com/articles/f-shaped-pattern-reading-web-content/

2. Lior, L. N. (2013). *Writing for interaction: crafting the information experience for web and software apps.* Burlington, MA: Morgan Kaufmann.

42-48. (F-pattern demonstration)

Users start reading at the top left corner of the page and move horizontally, in an F formation (this is the opposite for right-to-left languages).

After reading the first or second line of text on a page, users begin scanning the text.

Users scan text looking at keywords or phrases that will help them complete the task at hand. They do not read word by word, or read entire blocks of text. Rather, they are looking for relevant bits of information.

Users are more likely to read **bulleted lists** than blocks of text.

Users make a selection on the page as soon as they think they have enough information to understand the options. This is the point when they stop reading or skimming the text.

Users rarely, if ever, focus on the bottom right corner of the page.

1. Lior, L. N. (2013). *Writing for interaction: crafting the information experience for web and software apps.* Burlington, MA: Morgan Kaufmann.

49. Recommendation: Put it where they'll see it, how they'll read it.

Write so that your users read your message. Don't ignore usability research.

50-54. (Recommendations)

Provide the most important or useful pieces of information at the top of the page. If you have information the user must know before doing anything else on the page, it should be in the first line of text or set apart from another block of text.

Make the text easy to scan. Start a sentence with the main point of the sentence and use concise language throughout.

Avoid large blocks of text. **Break your content into meaningful chunks of information** in order to help users scan it for the information they need. Keep in mind that long lines of text are hard to scan.

Be aware that the words you use will help users find information as they skim through the page. **Make sure keywords are easy to locate within the text.**

To help users understand the relationship between text and interactive elements, **maintain visual proximity between text and corresponding options.**

1. Lior, L. N. (2013). *Writing for interaction: crafting the information experience for web and software apps.* Burlington, MA: Morgan Kaufmann.

55, 56. Ranganathan's 4th law

We already know this stuff!

Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science:

1. Books are for use.
2. Every reader his / her book.
3. Every book its reader.
4. **Save the time of the reader.** (that's what we're doing when we pay attention to our writing for the web).
5. The library is a growing organism.

1. Ranganathan, S.R. (1931). *The five laws of library science.* London: Edward Goldston, Ltd. Available at http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b99721;view=1up;seq=13

57. Who is the reader? What is she doing?

We can't save the reader's time if we don't know the answers to these questions.

58. Recommendation: User profiles and task analysis

These are pre-writing actions that can make your writing more effective. User profiles are generalized descriptions of one or more types of patrons who utilize your library or website. Task analysis is a method of identifying and breaking down a particular action, in this case on your website.

59. User profiles: "Walk me through a typical day," (and Exercise)

You have multiple chances daily to interact with your users-- user surveys can quickly help you understand your patrons habits on your website.

One very easy question to ask your patrons is "Walk me through your typical day." Your patron will reveal a surprising amount of information about herself—class, age, socioeconomic status, interests—simply by describing her typical day. All you have to do is listen well.

(Demonstrate this live with a volunteer, both performing the interview and narrating it for the rest of the audience)

60. Task analysis: "Describe what you do on our website."

Akin to the above, "Do you use the library website?" "What do you use the website for? Describe what you do?" "Walk me through a typical visit to our website," especially if you can watch the user actually use the site.

These can help you create sets of typical tasks on your site, for further task analysis.

Task analysis:

Identify the task to be analyzed.

Break this high-level task down into 4 to 8 subtasks. The subtask should be specified in terms of objectives and, between them, should cover the whole area of interest.

Draw a layered task diagram of each subtasks ensuring that it is complete

Produce a written account as well as the decomposition diagram.

Present the analysis to someone else who has not been involved in the decomposition but who knows the tasks well enough to check for consistency

1. Task analysis. (n.d.). *Usability.gov*. Retrieved from http://www.usability.gov/how-to-and-tools/methods/task-analysis.html

61. Recap

Make it brief.

Make sure they can understand.

Put it where they can see it.

62. Resources and Responses