Effective Writing on the Web
Chapter One – *Style*

Catch Their Eyes...Grab Your Visitors!

Make Them Read Your Message

You've done the legwork; you've toiled for weeks...you've created the greatest-looking website ever! But what if nobody gets what you're trying to sell?

In the lightning-fast world of the Internet –with millions of pages of copy just a click away—you have only a fraction of a second to catch your visitor's eye, pique their interest and keep them on your site. Emphasis words and carefully crafted phrases, of course, are essential to the process. A compelling headline and an intriguing teaser is the closest thing to "visitor insurance" that a web writer can get.

Like so many other stimuli in the world around us, much of the effect of a good headline, subhead or clever copy is subliminal. As in poetry, good use of balance and cadence create a sense of "dialogue" with the reader, as opposed to hammering away at them with lines of copy that could have come from a product label. Whenever possible, creating a familiar scenario that the visitor recognizes or relates to is the surest way to draw them in.

Where the *Action* is...

Active, present tense verbs in your headlines and teaser make your story feel like it's happening **now.** Both of the following are decent headline couplets, but which feels most active?

A.   **Hillary Clinton to Run for President**
         First Lady Makes Official Bid For Oval Office

B.   **Hillary's Running!**
         First Lady Sets Her Sight on the Presidency

Even if your article is basically old news, try to incorporate some language that suggests an ongoing event.

A. **Mysteries of the Titanic**
Scientists' Latest Discoveries

B. **Titanic Mysteries Deepen**
Experts Puzzled by New Finds

The simple addition of **"ing"** to most passive verbs turns a headline from a static command to an engaging activity.

A. Find The Best Prices on Furniture   **B. Finding the Best Prices On Furniture**

A. Travel to Your Dream Spot   **B. Traveling to the Destination of Your Dreams**

Impact Words

As anyone with a four-year-old or a teenager will attest, **"no"** is probably the most powerful word in the English language. It is succinct and it is devoid of ambiguity.

A. **Should You Consider an Interest-Only Mortgage?**

B. **Just Say "No" to Interest-Only Mortgages**

Suggesting a positive solution with a negative command has more authority and demands the reader's attention more effectively:

A. **Safe and Effective Ways to Fertilize Your Lawn**
Improper Fertilization Can Harm Your Yard

B. **Don't Kill Your Front Lawn!**
Fertilize Your Yard Safely and Effectively

Of course, you never want to be dramatic simply for drama's sake. Make sure that your words are an accurate reflection of the material in your article.

Any words that suggest immediacy, such as **"now"** and **"today"** or **"must"** and **"final"** are excellent eye-grabbers.

Tell a Story

Example: **A. Household Germs**
          Keeping Your Home Germ-Free

          B. Germ Warfare on the Home Front
          Battling Back Against Household Bacteria

A little drama and imagery makes a potentially dreary, mundane topic seem a little more colorful. Now lay it on a little thicker:

Teaser--   **They're hiding everywhere, just waiting to reach out and strike. Think you're safe at home? That's where the *real* danger lurks.**

Now give the reader a clear and familiar visual image:

Intro--   **You are a meticulous housekeeper. Your kitchen radiates with the pride and precision of a model home. Fixtures gleam and surfaces shine. As the old cliché goes, "that floor is so clean, you could eat off of it."**

Now disconcert them slightly; make them pause:

    Guess again.

And finally, zap them with a dramatic fact and something they weren't expecting:

    You'd probably be better off dining in the bathroom.

If they've read this far, odds are good that they'll continue.

Here's the intro unsegmented:

    You are a meticulous housekeeper. Your kitchen radiates with the pride and precision of a model home. Fixtures gleam and surfaces shine. As the old cliché goes, "that floor is so clean, you could eat off of it." Guess again. You'd probably be better off dining in the bathroom.

Headlines as Questions

Questions posed in headlines and teasers are often great ways to engage and involve the reader in your topic.

Examples: **Will I Ever Be Able to Retire?**
Am I at Risk For Colon Cancer?
Your House is a Disaster! Who's Going to Clean It Up?
Can I Afford to Protect My Home and Family?
When Is It Okay to Tap Your 401k?

Human beings are inherently curious. More often than not, when a question is posed, people stick around for the answer, even if the particular subject matter is not of particular interest to them.

Questions can be situated in the Headline, Subhead or Teaser as warranted.

Example: **Myth Vs. Reality of the SAT Test**
Confusion Reigns Over New Testing Format

How important is it for college admission?

Of course, any question regarding the well-being of someone's child will tweak parental instincts:

Example: **Is Your Child Making the Grade?**
Curriculum guides tell whether your child is on track.

When posing a question in a headline or subhead, the promise of an answer or the proposed search for an answer can be equally compelling. The subhead above says, "Hey, we'll find out if your kid *is* doing okay."

A self-help book from a couple of years back was titled "Am I Normal?" I don't know how well it sold, but I guarantee that people picked it up, looked over their shoulders and thumbed through it.

Be Conversational

Anytime you can make your reader feel as if another living, breathing human being is talking to them, you're at least halfway home in your effort to get them to land on your site for a while. When the subject matter of an article is a little on the dry side and it doesn't lend itself to sizzling headlines and teasers, a conversational approach is the best way to draw your reader in.

Example: **Winterizing Your Yard**

Protect Your Outdoor Greenery During the Harsh Months Ahead

Teaser--   Brrrrr! It's getting cold outside…and plants have feelings, too! We've got some simple tips to insure a safe winter and a green and healthy spring for all your outdoor foliage.

Body--   The winter doldrums are upon us. And although the nights are already as long as they're going to get, for most of the Northern Hemisphere, the coldest weather of the season is still ahead. Did you remember to bring in the pets? Great. But what about that potted plant on the back porch that you nurtured so tenderly from April to October? And after struggling to perfect the front lawn all summer long, is it going to look as lush in the spring?

Balance, Rhythm & Cadence

Headlines, subheads and teasers can all be improved greatly with just a little attention to the balance and rhythm of your descriptive language. When contrasting or comparing items, make sure that if one of them has been enhanced with an adverb, the rest are as well.

A.   **From the totally fabulous to the horrendous, we'll check out the latest spring fashions.**

B.   **From the totally fabulous to the *utterly* horrendous, we'll check out the latest spring fashions.**

A.   **Effective marketing solutions and strategic advertising initiatives at an affordable cost.**

B.   **Effective and strategic marketing and advertising solutions at an affordable cost.**

While, by no means, the most creative heads and teaser, this next example is perfect in its simplicity and use of balance and contrast:

Living Large In Small Spaces
Turning Cramped Quarters Into Spacious Style

Teaser-- Too much stuff and too little space? You can fit a 2,000 square-foot lifestyle in a 1,500 square-foot home if you know how.

The headline contrasts "large" and "small" and the remaining words form the subject of what's being discussed: "living spaces". The subhead then reverses the large and small references and contrasts "cramped" and "spacious". And finally, the teaser does it one more time, then suggests that a solution is possible.

Tone

Of course, the nature of your client's business will determine the overall "tone" of their website's narrative content. The whimsical approach of a Closet & Home Organization site is miles apart from the staid, gravitas of that you'd expect from a Legal Firm or Financial Consultant.

Language

Alliteration: Even if your visitor's lips aren't moving while they read your article, good phrases still mentally "roll off the tongue". A little bit of alliteration works silently, too.

Examples: **Learn How to Dump Your Debt**

Find the Key to Clear, Concise Communication

Innuendo and suggestiveness can go a long way. Sex sells. Even if a topic is fairly benign and completely devoid of any provocative content, certain phrases strike subliminal chords.

Examples: **Treat Yourself to a Horizontal Holiday This Season**
Cross-country skiing is the way to go

Let's talk about sleep, baby!
Are you getting any?

Punctuation*:* As stated previously, posing questions in a headline, subhead or teaser can be a very effective way of commanding your visitor's attention. A question mark (**?**) always catches the eye and involves the reader. While exclamation points (**!**) should be used sparingly in the text of an article, they can be very effective in conveying excitement or accentuating the action verbs of your headlines.

For a momentary pause between disparate thoughts or phrases, an ellipse (**...**) works much better in a headline than a semi-colon.

Example: **Catch Their Eyes...Grab Your Visitors!**

Redundancy: While you want to reinforce your client's message throughout their website, you don't want to keep repeating the same phrases or using the same language over and over...and over again. The Thesaurus is your friend and best line of defense against this common problem. Unfortunately, certain terms like "services" provide no alternate choice, so you simply have to avoid saying thinks like, **"The services we provide include superior carpet cleaning service."**   Try, **"Among our many services, we provide superior carpet cleaning."** You will notice throughout all your ***TruePresence*** literature, the three terms "Web", "online" and "Internet" are alternated regularly to avoided the dreaded redundancy in language.

Word Play

A play on words or a clever turn of a phrase are good ways of humanizing your headline, subtly suggesting to   your reader that another person is talking to them.

Example: **Making Allowances**
            Four questions to ask when deciding how much spending money to give
       your kids.

Occasionally you'll get lucky with a silly coincidence and be able to inject a little levity into a dry subject:

Teaser--   **Looking for that perfect home entertainment gift but don't know DVD from your BVDs? Here's a side-by-side comparison of some of our best new products.**

Tell a Story, Paint a Picture

We all want to be entertained. And information that entertains or at least engages us is infinitely more effective. Don't just state that a product is great, tell how it will make the customer's life easier. Are your client's services the best in the region? Share a case study on how they've made a difference for other customers. Paint a picture and place your visitor in the midst of it and results will increase dramatically.

Effective Writing on the Web
Chapter Two – *Form*

Digestible Chunks of Copy

Long, interminable paragraphs just never fly on the Web. Between shortened attention spans and viewer fatigue, information must be imparted as quickly and concisely as possible. Keep paragraphs to three or four sentences, max. And when working with an extended piece of copy, banner every two or three of those paragraphs with **bold subheads** that contain a kernel of the info contained in the following copy.

Example: ***Welcome...***

Among the many valuable tools we will be placing at your disposal is our ***Online Best Practices Guide*** portfolio. These documents are comprehensive guides to more than 100 different areas of business – retail, industry and professional services—that are rich targets for a new or improved web presence.

From Auto Repair to Healthcare, Caterers to Accountants, and Restaurants to Retirement Homes –whatever your prospective client's enterprise may be—you will be armed with a comprehensive working knowledge of their trade even before you pick up the phone or walk through their door.

Instant Expertise

We've researched literally thousands of websites, spanning every occupation and industry, determining and compiling the best web-based initiatives for helping your clients achieve their business objectives through an effective online presence.

So in addition to being armed with an immediate familiarity of your client's profession, the **_Online Best Practices Guides_** will provide you with a virtual "Greatest Hits" of suggestions for creating the most effective website and marketing campaigns in their field.

Client Portrait

While these guides will provide you with a very thorough template for designing a complete web presence, remember that every situation and enterprise is unique. Use the information as a springboard to determine the full scope of your clients' services, products or practice, as well as the goals they wish to establish for their business, both on- and offline.

Bullet Points

Valuable lists of information often get lost in dense, run-on sentences and paragraphs. The Internet was made for the outline format, and a bullet-point list of essential services will leap from the computer screen much more effectively. Compare these two examples:

ACME Web franchisees provide their clients with a wide array of the most innovative services in the Web Solutions industry, including, Domain Name Management, Website Design, Mobile Apps Development, Content Management, E-Commerce Solutions, Search Engine Optimization (SEO), Email Marketing, Online Advertising, Pay-Per Click, (PPC), and Site Hosting & Technical Support.

Versus:

ACME Web franchisees provide their clients with a wide array of the most innovative services in the Web Solutions industry, including:

- **Domain Name Management**
- **Website Design**
- **Mobile Apps Development**

- **Content Management**
- **E-Commerce Solutions**
- **Search Engine Optimization (SEO)**
- **Email Marketing**
- **Online Advertising**
- **Pay-Per Click (PPC)**
- **Site Hosting & Technical Support**

Q & A Format

Certain types of sites and the information they provide lend themselves to being presented in a Question & Answer format, not unlike the standard Frequently Asked Questions or FAQ feature you'll see tabbed on many websites. This is a great way to provide substantial amounts of info without creating dense and lengthy paragraphs. Businesses such as legal practices, insurance agents, realtors and medical services, among others, often benefit from this approach.   Here's a passage from the Orthodontists *Online Best Practices* Guide (edited for brevity) as an example:

- **What is orthodontics?**
  Orthodontics is the branch of dentistry that specializes in the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of dental and facial irregularities. The technical term for these problems is....

- **What is an orthodontist?**
  All orthodontists are dentists, but only about six percent of dentists are orthodontists. An orthodontist is a specialist in the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of dental and facial irregularities. Orthodontists must first attend college...

- **At what age can people have orthodontic treatment?**
  Children and adults can both benefit from orthodontics, because healthy teeth can be moved at almost any age. Because monitoring growth and development is crucial...

The Q&A format is also excellent for businesses that specialize in products that have a do-it-yourself factor built in, such as home improvement, lawn care and maintenance items. The easy-to-use information is not only a big value-added feature for the customer, it also reduces the number of incoming customer service calls from perplexed product users.

Credit Where Credit is Due

It's all right to use non-proprietary information from other sources on a website, but it's never all right to copy the language verbatim. As in the print world, plagiarism online is not only wrong, it's illegal. Paraphrase general ideas, credit sources for specific info, and secure permission if you want to quote extended passages from another's work. When working with clients in Professional realms such as Law or Medicine, you may find material in their corresponding ***Online Best Practices Guides*** that have attributions to professional associations such as the AMA, ADA and others. Always credit these sources if you reprint this material.

Effective Writing on the Web
Chapter Three – *Function*

What happens when I push this button?

...or click on this tab?

It's imperative that the words on the navigation tabs best convey the destination awaiting the visitor at the click of a mouse. A website that provides a wild goose chase is one that is quickly exited.

Differentiate pages such "Products" and "Services". Eliminate guessing games when it comes to finding information on the site by making tabs, lists and category names as straightforward and as intuitive as humanly possible.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) – *Boost Site's Online Profile*

In each ***Online Best Practices Guides***, a list of suggested "keywords" can be found that, when implemented, help place your client's site higher in search engine results. Words such as these, when pertinent to your client's business, should be integrated liberally –but organically—throughout the website copy. Is your client an online retailer who happens to sell a hot new, trendy product? Mentions of that product in the site content will result in additional hits when someone does an Internet search for it.