

Writing for the internet

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Abstract

Writing for online sources requires a slightly different skillset than writing for print publications. Authors need to be aware of their potential audience's interests. This article explains how avoiding typical online mistakes, and both knowing and making use of the advantages that the web presents, can help to equip authors to write for the internet.

Writing for the Internet

Writing for the internet *is different* to the printed word. In this article, I will outline some of the quirks of writing online which you should keep in mind if you are setting out in that direction. I will also try to turn these differences into tips to improve your online writing.

Why do people read online?

I must admit that I am the kind of person who likes to have a physical copy of what I am reading. I find myself a cosy nook and take my time to read. This is how I tend to read *Medical Writing*. That is, unless I am at work and think of an article I previously saw in the journal which could help me with a particular task. Then I jump on the net, search the archives, and quickly download the relevant text.

Sometimes as I read, I realise it's actually not the article I was thinking of, but it's interesting, so I keep on reading it. Sometimes the articles found this way are even better! If I need to dig deeper, I often click on likely-looking papers listed as a reference. Then these papers might also yield some other interesting references... and on it goes... until I look up at the clock and realise I

have spent an hour this way.

This scenario is perhaps more typical of online readers like medical writers and researchers. It is different for the general public. They don't browse like you do in a library; they are looking for something specific, and they want it quickly or they will soon lose interest in the website. Such readers will jump past lots of content in order to find the section of interest by quickly scanning or using the "find button" to search for the word in question.

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Who is reading online text?

I have probably already burst your bubble. The harsh truth is that while anyone in the world with an internet connection can access and read your work, the reality is that most people will not. Those who do will most likely merely scan over your hard work before clicking away to something else.

The internet is where a lot of people go for medical information – and very soon they wish they hadn't due to the scary things they read there! Keep in mind who your audience potentially is. The European health literacy survey (HLS-EU) is a questionnaire designed to measure health literacy. It was used in a comparative survey conducted in eight European countries in 2011, which found that almost half (47%) of the approximately 8,000 respondents had limited levels of health literacy.¹ Keep this in mind when you are writing online, knowing that patients may access your work. Create something of value by making your piece understandable for everyone who seeks it out.

How is online text read?

When we read books or newspapers, our eyes follow the text from left to right. Studies have shown that when people read online, their eyes start in the middle of the page and move to the right before dropping down to the next line or

section. You can actually see this "F-shaped" style of reading at work if you secretly observe someone reading from their screen. Online content has to therefore look different to the printed page. Paragraphs should be shorter, and lists of bullet points should be more widely used. It has been reported that readers will only read about 20% of the content of an online article about 600 words in length.² Therefore you need to make it easy for your readers to scan the text.

Why do readers abandon pages so quickly? Especially given all the hard work that authors such as ourselves put into each text? We should perhaps be a little more forgiving, because research has shown that reading from a computer screen instead of a page slows down readers by as much as 30%.³ Online readers also experience reading fatigue quicker than "traditional" readers do. Don't forget, online readers are sadly usually not there to enjoy the writing but to get a kick. This kick could be information or diversion.

Think of it like this, offline readers tend to be more conscientious; online readers are scavengers.

Bearing all this in mind, we can improve our online text for potential readers in several ways.

1. Make it shorter

You would not attempt to read *War and Peace* online, (you probably wouldn't offline either, to be honest!) People generally do not like reading long online articles. When someone does, it is usually because it has come from a source well known for long-form reporting such as *The New Yorker*. Otherwise, 1000 words for an online piece is the word limit you often find referenced in articles on the internet. While this might seem like a restriction – an article that is around two pages long – it also works to writers' advantage. Like Quentin Tarantino splitting up *Kill Bill* into two separate films, you too can split up topics or even split one topic into a series of articles – and hopefully get

paid for each one!

Just as the speed of consumption is different for online articles, so too is the speed of production. When I write for print publications, I tend to take my time drafting the article. It is

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You should write in short paragraphs. Adding more headers than you would in print not only breaks up the “wall of words” but also broadens the chances of your article being found by a search machine. It also allows you to use different words for the same topic within the piece to help people to find what they are looking for. This is particularly useful when you think about people using the search function and the fact there are different terms for the same thing. Take “mandible”, “lower jaw”, and “jawbone” for example. A reader might miss what they are looking for if they only search for “jaw” when you have used the term “mandible” throughout instead. Before you know it, they have already jumped back to their list of search results.

Something else to keep in mind is that readers can come from anywhere. By that I don’t just mean from anywhere in the world, but how they get to the page containing your writing. Maybe they have followed a link from your previous piece, maybe they used a crazy combination of words on Google, maybe they are already experts in the topic, maybe they are schoolchildren researching for a project. You simply have no way of knowing. Once again, this is another rationale for clearly signposting what the piece is about each time it appears on a new webpage. Repetition or duplication of information isn’t as big a problem online as it is in print. Modern web design will often take care of this for you by having a “fixed” headline above the text, but not always! Research in advance how articles appear on the website you are targeting. (It’s not that dissimilar to when you research the layout of print journals in advance of submitting pieces to them).

You can use boldface or add hyperlinks (which often appear in a different colour and underlined) to make certain words or phrases stand out. Hyperlinks are also useful because they help your page to be more easily found by search engines. Be careful not to overdo it though; it looks amateurish if huge quantities of text are highlighted this way.

Consider credibility too. Make sure your

hyperlinks are to reputable sources. If possible, make sure that relevant information about you, your company, etc. is also available. Online readers are (rightly) suspicious of the *bona fides* of many websites these days.

3. Be mindful of tone

The tone of writing is different online. It is usually more direct and more informal. This article has been written somewhere between the normal tone of a printed article and an online one. Online writing has the advantage of allowing you to express your voice more. You will know this is true when you consider that any one of a number of writers could write a similar sounding scientific report while a popular science blog, for example, will have a very discernible style. Don’t be afraid to embrace the “room to manoeuvre”

that online writing gives you. There is a bit of cyberspace reserved for you!

A quick word on graphics and pictures. They must be appropriate to the piece and of high quality. Unfortunately, this is often not the case. Medical journals still publish graphs that are unreadable. I have seen photos still containing copyright watermarks used by companies that should know better. Don’t let the images around your words have a negative overall effect!

Where to start writing online?

Luckily, because the internet is endless, there are myriad possibilities for where you can start. Maybe you want to begin writing a blog? This could be for your own website, be it

personal or professional. Or why not pitch the idea to your boss (with you taking the writing lead of course)? Many “traditional” companies also have online blogs.

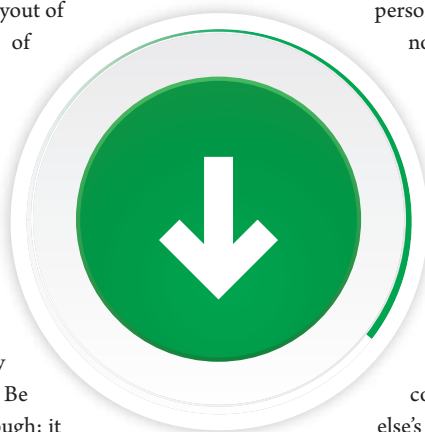
LinkedIn is an excellent option if you just want to dip your toe into online writing. You don’t even have to write a full article. A short commentary on someone else’s work might well be enough to generate some online attention to your words. Some people have lots of followers due to the high-quality posts and articles they

share. Take some time to analyse why certain pieces are gaining traction in your industry and try to incorporate these learnings into your own online writing for LinkedIn. You could post a short piece on something very contemporary, or a longer piece that is more philosophical or analytical.

Of course, there is one place where a medical writer’s work intended for the web is very likely to find a good home. If you are an EMWA member and would like to put what you have just read into action, please remember that we are always looking for content for the EMWA website. Just drop me a line (webmanager@emwa.org) with your article or an idea for an article and your work could soon be available to the whole online world!

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Diarmuid De Faoite is the EMWA Web Manager. Since 2016, he has led the *Writing for the Internet* workshop at EMWA conferences. After a career in clinical research communications, he is now the Communications Manager at AIPPI, an international association for intellectual property rights founded in 1897.