Writing for the Web

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Content is Still King
How Little Do Users Read?

by Jakob Nielsen on May 6, 2008

Topics: Writing for the Web

Summary: On the average Web page, users have time to read at most 28% of the words during an average visit; 20% is more likely.

We’ve known since our first studies of how users read on the Web that they typically don’t read very much. Scanning text is an extremely common behavior for higher-literacy users; our recent eyetracking studies further validate this finding.

The only thing we’ve been missing is a mathematical formula to quantify exactly how much (or how little) people read online. Now, thanks to new data, we have this as well.

The Research Study

For full details, see the following academic paper:


In the study, the authors instrumented 25 users’ browsers and recorded extended information about everything they did as they went about their normal Web activities. What’s important about this study is that it was completely naturalistic: the users didn’t have to do anything special.

One downside of the study is that the users had above-average intelligence, with several being university employees. This might not be a problem in the long run, however. If, for example, we compare data we collected in 2008 for our Top Web UX Design Guidelines seminar with a similar study we ran in 2004, we find that 2008’s average behavior is close to that of 2004’s higher-end users. Thus, even though Weinreich et al.’s data represents high-end users, it’s likely to be fairly representative of broader user behavior in the future. In fact, the authors collected their data in 2005, so the recorded behaviors might already be fairly common.

In any case, the research yielded several interesting findings, and the full paper is well worth reading.

Among other things, the authors found that the Back button is now only the 3rd most-used feature on the Web. Clicking hypertext links remains the most-used feature, but clicking buttons (on the page) has now overtaken Back to become the second-most used feature. The reason for this change is the increased prevalence of applications and feature-rich Web pages that require users to click page buttons to access their functionality.

Of course, Back is still the user’s lifeline and is so frequently used that supporting it remains a strong usability guideline. (Breaking Back was the #1 design mistake of 1999 and it’s one of the top mistakes to this date.)

Real-Life Reading Behavior

Harald Weinreich graciously provided me with the dataset detailing 59,573 page views. From this data, I removed the following records:

- 10,163 page views (17%) that lasted less than 4 seconds. In such brief "visits," users clearly bounced right out without truly "using" the page.
- 2,615 page views (4%) that lasted more than 10 minutes. In these cases, users almost certainly left the browser open while doing something else.
How Little Do Users Read?

- 20 - 28% of the words
- 17% of page views lasted < 4 seconds
- only 4% of page views lasted > 10 minutes
How Users Read on the Web

by JAKOB NIelsen on October 1, 1997

Topics:  Writing for the Web

**Summary:** They don’t. People rarely read Web pages word by word; instead, they scan the page, picking out individual words and sentences.

In research on how people read websites we found that 79 percent of our test users always scanned any new page they came across; only 16 percent read word-by-word. (Update: a newer study found that users read email newsletters even more abruptly than they read websites.)

As a result, Web pages have to employ **scannable text**, using:

- highlighted **keywords** (hypertext links serve as one form of highlighting; typeface variations and color are others)
- meaningful **sub-headings** (not "clever" ones)
- bulleted **lists**
- one **idea** per paragraph (users will skip over any additional ideas if they are not caught by the first few words in the paragraph)
- the **inverted pyramid** style, starting with the conclusion
- half the word count (or less) than conventional writing

We found that **credibility is important** for Web users, since it is unclear who is behind information on the Web and whether a page can be trusted. Credibility can be increased by high-quality graphics, good writing, and use of **outbound hypertext links**. Links to other sites show that the authors have done their homework and are not afraid to let readers visit other sites.

Users detested "marketese": the promotional writing style with boastful subjective claims ("hottest ever") that currently is prevalent on the Web. Web users are busy: they want to get the straight facts. Also, credibility suffers when users clearly see that the site exaggerates.

**Measuring the Effect of Improved Web Writing**

To measure the effect of some of the content guidelines we had identified, we developed five different versions of the same website (same basic information; different wording; same site navigation). We then had users perform the same tasks with the different sites. As shown in the table, measured **usability** was dramatically higher for the concise version (58% better) and for the scannable version (47% better). And when we combined three ideas for improved writing style into a single site, the result was truly stellar: 124% better **usability**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site Version</th>
<th>Sample Paragraph</th>
<th>Usability Improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
How Users Read on the Web?

They don’t.

Instead, they scan the page, picking out words and sentences.
Writing for the web in the post-literate age

Write (and design) scannable text

- highlight keywords
- create meaningful subheadings
- convert text to bulleted lists
- use one idea per paragraph
- use inverted pyramid style (start with the conclusion)
- halve the word count
  (and use high-quality graphics)
- short, descriptive photo captions (newspaper scan)
Know who you are writing for

- Who is your ideal audience? Judge your pages from their point of view

- What are your department’s goals for the website?

- Brainstorm content (photo, video, audio, text)

- *Can you turn it into a story?*
We are visual creatures

Goal = One graphic per page

• dollarphotoclub.com
• dreamstime.com
• OPAC image collection (Michael Marsland images)
The Yale Imprint

A “frame of reference—not a script—.”

• character
  connected
  joyful
  creative
  open
  global
  leadership
The Yale Imprint

• values
  inspiration and tradition
  wisdom and knowledge
  service and achievement
  kinship and community
  character and reputation
  a way of life and a way of learning

• communication themes
  how we learn is important
  we seek to shape a better world
  ours is a community of belonging
  and respect
Disclaimer and Obstacles

Nudge, suggest and pick your battles

- Stakeholders
- Other people’s copy
- Too big a site
About Us

Since the Yale School of Public Health was founded in 1915, its exceptional and multidisciplinary faculty have conducted innovative and important research and policy analysis and have trained researchers, practitioners, administrators and educators who have had a positive impact on the health of populations.

In recent years, there have been exciting developments in the scientific and academic activities at the School. Our faculty are world leaders in a wide range of areas, including the effects of air pollution on respiratory health, parasitic and vector-borne diseases, HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, cancer prevention, global health governance, genomic and proteomic research on multiple diseases, health behavior and health care policy and management. In addition to being eminent researchers, our faculty are committed to providing the best possible education to the next generations of public health professionals.

The School offers an exciting range of programs in addition to our two-year MPH program. These include an advanced professional MPH program for persons with a health-related degree, a joint MD/MPH program for Yale medical students, a BA-BS/MPH program for Yale College undergraduates and joint degree programs with many other professional schools at Yale. Through the Yale Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, we grant Ph.D degrees in Biostatistics, Chronic Disease Epidemiology, Environmental Health Sciences, the Epidemiology of Microbial Diseases and Health Policy and Administration. We also offer an MS in Epidemiology and Public Health with an emphasis in either Biostatistics or Chronic Disease Epidemiology.

The School of Public Health houses numerous interdisciplinary centers and programs that give our students the opportunity to collaborate with some of the world’s foremost experts in their area and apply the knowledge they gain in the classroom. Many research, education and public health practice activities are conducted in collaboration with other faculty and students throughout the Yale community, as well as with other U.S. and international institutions. Faculty, students and alumni also participate in a wide array of important community activities in New Haven, Connecticut, and other parts of the country and the world.

Although the past achievements of our faculty and students are impressive, we currently are implementing a five-year Revitalization Plan to build on our recent growth and development. The Revitalization activities will focus on continuing to increase our research excellence, enhancing the student experience and strengthening community-based activities.

If you are interested in being on the forefront of addressing the health challenges facing the global community, I encourage you to carefully consider Yale. It is one of the most exciting places in the country to study the factors affecting health and to develop the expertise necessary to improve the health of populations, whether in your neighborhood or around the globe.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
History

The Yale School of Public Health is one of the oldest nationally accredited schools of public health in the country having achieved this inaugural status along with seven other schools in 1946, though its origins date back three decades prior as a department in the Yale School of Medicine; a status it still maintains.

In 1914, Yale University received an endowment from the Anna M.R. Lauder family to establish a chair in public health in the Medical School. This chair was filled in 1915 by Charles-Edward Amory Winslow, who was to be a central figure in the development of public health at Yale.

In its early years Winslow’s Department of Public Health at Yale was a catalyst for public health reform in Connecticut, and the health surveys prepared by him and his faculty and students led to considerable improvements in public health organization. He also successfully campaigned to improve health laws in Connecticut and for the passage of a bill that created the State Department of Public Health.

Drawing on principles and expertise in existing departments at the School of Medicine to supplement public health courses, Winslow focused on educating undergraduate medical students in the context of preventive medicine. He established a one-year program leading to a Certificate in Public Health and a comprehensive non-medical program that graduated eighteen students with a Certificate in Public Health, ten with a Ph.D., and four with a Dr.P.H. by 1925. His students specialized in administration, bacteriology, or statistics. Due to three decades of Winslow’s leadership and innovative foresight and commitment to interdisciplinary education, the department’s academic programs earned recognition as a nationally accredited School of Public Health in 1946.

In the 1960’s the Yale Department of Public Health merged with the Section of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, a unit within the Department of Internal Medicine at the Medical School, resulting in the Department of Epidemiology and Public Health (EPH). In 1964, EPH moved into its own building, the Laboratory of Epidemiology and Public Health (LEPH), which was designed by Philip Johnson and continues as the primary location for teaching and research.

The Yale School of Public Health community benefits greatly from its dual roles of providing a world-class education as an accredited, fully functioning school, and by conducting cutting-edge, interdisciplinary research through its collaborative departmental partnerships at the School of Medicine and across the Yale campus. Through rigorous academic and scientific pursuits, our students and faculty continue to honor Winslow’s commitment to improving the health of the community through the practice of public health.

From the Archives

Winslow and the Early Years of Public Health at Yale

Winslow and the Later Years of Public Health at Yale

The Past, Present and Future of the Yale School of Medicine & Affiliated Clinical Institutions (1922)

Yale Tercentennial Exhibit

- Public Health at Yale, 1880s-1960
- Epidemiology at Yale, 1930s-1960
- Epidemiology and Public Health, 1960-2001
"The YSPH Workplace Survey Committee (WPSC) works to identify actions to improve employee experience measured by the Yale University Workplace Survey. Following the 2012 Survey, the group identified employee recognition as one area for improvement at YSPH (a complete list of the Committee's preliminary recommendations can be found at [link to report?]). To facilitate more regular recognition of staff and team accomplishments, this page will offer a growing list of best practice tips, examples and resources for managers and peers for ongoing, informal recognition and support. We hope that by engaging in some of these activities we can help foster stronger professional relationships, build a culture of respect and teamwork, increase support for staff development and unity in our service to the mission of YSPH.

[Link to best practice ideas and invite additional ideas - these could be suggested through existing suggestion box?]

There are many inspiring stories of staff members making unique and important contributions to YSPH's success. In addition to encouraging day to day recognition of the role of our staff, each year these contributions will be recognized alongside faculty and student honorees through an annual staff award for Outstanding Service to YSPH. Please join us in celebrating the contributions of our staff by nominating an individual or team [link to nomination page - per Salovey's] at YSPH for their exceptional contribution to the mission of the School. The nomination period is open until [date] and we expect to announce the recipient at the end of December 2014."
Staff Development and Recognition

Following the 2012 Yale Workplace Survey, staff development and employee recognition were identified as priority areas for improvement at YSPH by the YSPH Workplace Survey Committee. During the 2014-15 academic year several initiatives for each area will be implemented.

Employee Recognition

**Best Practices:** "Innovation through collaboration" embodies a culture of diversity, inclusion and teamwork to further the educational, research and practice missions of the school. The staff is an integral, if sometimes overlooked, part of the team. These **best practices** are designed to strengthen our culture and morale, foster stronger professional relationships, build a culture of respect and teamwork, increase support for staff development and unity in our service to the mission of YSPH.

**Staff Award:**
Staff members make unique and important contributions to YSPH’s success. Each year these contributions will be recognized alongside faculty and student honorees through an annual Staff Award for Outstanding Service to YSPH. The criteria for this award are derived from the Yale University staff award. Please join us in celebrating the contributions of our staff by nominating an individual or team at YSPH for their exceptional contribution to the mission of the School. The nomination period is open until **November 28** and we expect to announce the recipient at the end of December 2014. Click here for the [nomination form](#).

Career Development

Information on these initiatives are forthcoming.
Active verbs
  has been considering = considers
  is working = works
Send the message, minimize the background
Rewrite academic language
Avoid promotional language (delete the flowery adjectives)
Why Academics Stink at Writing

By Steven Pinker

Together with wearing earth tones, driving Priuses, and having a foreign policy, the most conspicuous trait of the American professoriate may be the prose style called academese. An editorial cartoon by Tom Toles shows a bearded academic at his desk offering the following explanation of why SAT verbal scores are at an all-time low: "Incomplete implementation of strategized programatics designated to maximize acquisition of awareness and utilization of communications skills pursuant to standardized review and assessment of languaginal development." In a similar vein, Bill Watterson has the 6-year-old Calvin titling his homework assignment "The Dynamics of Interbeing and Monological Imperatives in Dick and Jane: A Study in Psychic Transrelational Gender Modes," and exclaiming to Hobbes, his tiger companion, "Academia, here I come!"
In recent years, an increasing number of psychologists and linguists have turned their attention to the problem of child language acquisition. In this article, recent research on this process will be reviewed.

No offense, but few people are interested in how professors spend their time. Classic style ignores the hired help and looks directly at what they are being paid to study:

All children acquire the ability to speak a language without explicit lessons. How do they accomplish this feat?

Steven Pinker, *Chronicle of Higher Education*
Before:
Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), Carhenge (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).

After:
In 1996, six of the most-visited places in Nebraska were:
• Fort Robinson State Park
• Scotts Bluff National Monument
• Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum
• Carhenge
• Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer
• Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park

Nielsen
Inverted Pyramid Style

Academic paper with conclusions at end

vs.

Newspaper article that starts with the conclusion hyperlink to extra material and background

Nielsen
CAPITALIZE ON CONTENT - 10 SEO TIPS FOR CONTENT WRITERS

It’s no secret that SEO and content go hand-in-hand.

After all, without SEO your content may be lost somewhere on page 50 of the search results; and we all know traffic on those pages is less than satisfactory. Likewise, your first page ranking can only do so much if your content post-click is crummy. That’s why a good relationship between SEO and great content is essential! Here are 10 tips to make your content go further and enhance your SEO efforts at the same time.

SEO Tips to Make Your Content Go Further

1. Write for your audience first
Relevant points:

- Write for your audience
- Effective headlines
- Use keywords
- Structure your content
  e.g. short paragraphs with subheads

**Sound familiar?**
5 WAYS TO WRITE A Damn Good Sentence