

# Introduction

*Who is this style guide for?*

You!

Well, to be more specific, it's for anyone interested in learning more about web writing. It's not intended to be a general book about writing—we're focused here on the type of writing people do in social media sites such as blogs, wikis, Twitter, and more. We also have a section about the issues you face when you create web pages, whether on your blog, your wiki, or your own website. We're tailoring it for college students, so we're not using terms like “deconstruction” or “hybrid narrative” here. Nor will we tell you much about how to do things with software. Our focus is on the rhetoric of writing on the web—how to write things that people will actually want to read. We had fun writing this, and we hope you'll have fun reading it. Enjoy!

## **I KNOW HOW TO WRITE PAPERS. DOES ANY OF THAT STUFF APPLY ONLINE?**

*Oh, my God! Are all my English and composition classes now worthless?*

Yup. Prepare to un-learn everything you know about writing.

Not! LOL!

Contrary to doomsayers and web-critical pundits, most people who read things online still appreciate good writing and editing. Although we often hear scary predictions about the dumbing down of our culture by texting and “internet speak,” there will always be a demand for skilled writers who clearly communicate their thoughts. Beyond that, even if you're just sending short text messages, the rhetorical concepts you learned in college will help you craft better messages, communicate more effectively, and be more persuasive. Finally, people will take you more seriously, even on public message boards, if you write with good syntax, present clear ideas, and take care to acknowledge your sources of information.

Let's take a look at how writing for the Web compares to writing for print.

### WHAT'S THE SAME WHEN WRITING FOR THE WEB?

Coherence, organization, grammar, mechanics, punctuation, and spelling. Just like any game you play, these are the rules by which you are expected to play. Although people might tell you that nobody cares about this stuff online, unless you're talking to your closest friends and family, your audience will expect or at least appreciate it if you put some effort into your writing.

Think of it this way: it takes time for someone to read what you write. Why not respect your readers' time and intelligence by making sure your text is clear and free of obvious errors? You will look smarter, worth taking seriously. It's your **ethos**, (your English teacher/professor might have told you about this), the way you come across to your reader, the face you put forward to the virtual world. Better good than bad. Better thoughtful than thoughtless.

If readers know that you respect their time and attention, they'll be a lot more likely to read your stuff carefully and respond to it. Don't waste their time, and they'll be more likely to give it to you.

### WRITING FOR THE WEB: WHAT'S DIFFERENT?

When writing for the web, focus on the things that the web does better than print:

Use **links** to direct readers to related articles, background information, and the source of your information. Why settle for including only a small quotation when you can send your readers to the entire article? Clicking a link is a lot easier than driving down to the library to find the book or article in question. You can also use internal links, which make it easier to move through a single document or connect to other pages within your website. Google Docs, for instance, has a table of contents feature that will link together all the parts of your doc. If you have a blog, you can link to earlier posts that are relevant to what you're talking about.

Writing for the web means thinking about all of the different contexts in which your stuff can be found. That's why it's important to

always **title** your work. In addition, once people arrive at your pages, you have broken big chunks of text into smaller sections, with section headings, so they can find what they want quickly. Anything that takes longer than 10 minutes for the average person to read should be broken up into multiple posts or sections. Instead of thinking in terms of articles or essays, try to think more about paragraphs (**blogs**) and sentences (**tweets**).

Writing for the web also means that you are part of an information ecology. Other people may find your writing through a search engine or an RSS feed. They can easily **search** your text for keywords or zip instantly to a chapter or section.

Writing for the web also has built-in **community features**—it's a lot faster and easier to get feedback from your readers and have discussions about your texts when you put them online. Communities are what make writing for the web so much fun! Before, authors had to wait weeks, if not months (or even years!), to get feedback on their work. By that time it was old news. Now writers can post a blog and get comments in only a few hours or less. Interacting with your audience will help you tailor your writing style and topics to better suit them, so pay attention to what they say.

Writing for the web also means writing with media. You can include **color, images, and videos** with your texts. You can include animation and sound. You can write with the white space around words and play with designs to better show off your stuff. You are no longer turning in grey pages of text to a professor; you are writing to a real audience, and you need to use all the tools available to connect with that audience and show them that you share their values.

In addition, the web is no longer accessed only on desktop computers and laptops. Visitors to your site may be using a mobile phone's smaller screen, which means they will have different needs than readers using a full-size monitor. Conversely, Internet TVs are becoming more common, and before long, many people will use iPads or Android tablets as their primary device for reading the web. With such variety in screen sizes and resolution, the challenge becomes making sure your content looks good across multiple web browsers, platforms, and devices. Since you can't be sure how people will access your stuff, keep the design elements simple so that browsers can accommodate it. Flash movies, for instance, once the standard for animations on the Internet, are not compatible with iPhones and iPads.

## WHAT WILL I FIND IN THIS GUIDE?

The Writing Spaces *Web Writing Style Guide* is organized into two sections.

The first section “Writing in the Genres of the Web” is about the various places and communities in which you may find yourself writing on the web. These genres include blogs, wikis, and Twitter. Each genre has its own spaces, its own expectations, and its own communities. In the articles in this section you will find information about these various genres and advice about the best ways to write within them.

The second section, “The Rhetoric of Web Pages,” looks at the rhetorical issues that surround writing for the web. Whether you are writing blog entries, wiki pages, or creating your own personal portfolio web site, you are creating web pages, and you will want to do more with these pages than slap up grey walls of text. This section contains advice about various rhetorical issues such as: managing your hyperlinks; using headlines to organize your pages; attending to visual issues such as layout, fonts, and graphics; understanding copyright issues; and a primer to HTML coding.