

Writing Style for Print vs. Web

I've spent many columns explicating the differences between the Web and television, which can be summarized as **lean-forward vs. lean-back**:

- On the **Web**, users are engaged and want to go places and get things done. The Web is an **active** medium.
- While watching **TV**, viewers want to be entertained. They are in relaxation mode and vegging out; they don't want to make choices. TV is a **passive** medium.

This doesn't mean that you can't have entertaining websites or informative TV shows. But it does mean that the two media's contrasting styles require different approaches to entertainment and education.

The differences between print and the Web may not seem as strong, but to achieve optimal results, each requires a distinct content style.

Example: Tall Travelers

I recently read an article in *The New York Times* about tall people's travails on the road: "Coping With the Tall Traveler's Curse." The **headline** itself is actually an example of the differences between print and online content style:

- In print, a phrase like "tall traveler's curse" is a bit enticing and might draw readers in. Because the article featured a photo of a tall guy crunched in the back of a taxi, the article's content was clear to anybody glancing at that page in the newspaper.
- In contrast, putting the same headline online would fail several guidelines for writing for the Web:
 - The first 3 words have **no information-carrying content**. On the Web, you must start with words like "tall traveler" because users often scan down the left part of a list of items. They never see the last words in a link unless the first few words attract their attention.
 - The headline **lacks keywords** — such as "airline seat" and "hotel bed" — that are important for search engine optimization (SEO). No one will search "curse" when trying to find out which hotel chains offer extra-long beds or which airline seats are the least unpleasant for long-legged travelers.
 - The words "tall traveler's curse" are **insufficiently specific** to tell users what the story is about. Because headlines are often presented as plain links removed from the article itself, the photo of the poor guy in the cab won't be there to explain the story's content.

Online, the headline alone must provide enough information scent to let users predict what they'll get if they follow the link.

Even though I'm not particularly tall myself, I read the entire article in the printed newspaper. Why? Because it was well written and contained several interesting anecdotes about tall business travelers, ending with the story of a tall woman executive having to bend down to use a hotel room makeup mirror.

I would never have read that same article on nytimes.com, because the story lacks both immediacy and utility. Even though the article surely attracted some pageviews online, its style is not optimal for presenting information on the Web.

The Web rewards **comprehensive coverage** that's more **specific** than print content. On the Web, content for tall travelers should feature ratings of airline seats and hotel beds for all the major airlines and hotel chains, respectively. Even better would be to differentiate coverage for tall men vs. tall women and for somewhat tall vs. gigantically tall people.

This more detailed approach works online because the content is searchable and you can sort and present it in personalized views for each user. Say, for example, you're 6-foot-8 (2.03 m) like the guy in the article photo, and you're flying United Airlines from San Francisco to Chicago. A good site will tell you which departing plane has the best seat configuration for you, and which seat you should book.

Narrative vs. Actionable Content

Print publications — from newspaper articles to marketing brochures — contain linear content that's often consumed in a more relaxed setting and manner than the solution-hunting behavior that characterizes most high-value Web use.

In print, you can spice up linear narrative with anecdotes and individual examples that support a **storytelling** approach to exposition. On the Web, such content often feels like filler; it slows down users and stands in the way of their getting to the point.

For example, in print, discussing the tall-friendly rooms in the Palms Casino Resort in Las Vegas feels somewhat interesting. That's not the case online when a user is looking for tall-friendly rooms in Chicago (or wherever he or she is going next week).

Web content must be brief and get to the point quickly, because users are likely to be on a specific mission. In many cases, they've pulled up the page through search. Web users want **actionable** content; they don't want to fritter away their time on (otherwise enjoyable) stories that are tangential to their current goals.

Instead of a predefined narrative, websites must **support the user's personal story** by condensing and combining vast stores of information into something that specifically meets the user's immediate needs. Thus, instead of an author-driven narrative, Web content becomes a user-driven narrative.

Print's narrative exposition calls for well-crafted, **complete sentences**. Online, less so. **Fragments** often let you pull information-carrying keywords to the front, while also reducing froufrou word count. Because Web users read only 18% of added verbiage, cutting words is well worth the accusing squiggles that MS Word will throw at your sentence fragments.

E-Learning: An Oxymoron?

I continue to believe in the **linear, author-driven narrative** for educational purposes. I just don't believe the Web is optimal for delivering this experience. Instead, let's praise old narrative forms like books and sitting around a flickering campfire — or its modern day counterpart, the PowerPoint projector — which have been around for 500 and 32,000 years, respectively.

I continue to write books, and I continue to develop training seminars, because I believe these media are best for deep learning of new concepts.

We should accept that the **Web is too fast-paced for big-picture learning**. No problem; we have other media, and each has its strengths. At the same time, the Web is perfect for narrow, **just-in-time learning** of information nuggets — so long as the learner already has the conceptual framework in place to make sense of the facts.

For example, I date “learning around the campfire” to 32,000 years ago to coincide with the emergence of high culture and the Cro-Magnons. Not that the Neanderthals didn't have campfires — they simply didn't have the cultural depth of modern humans, so I don't think their storytelling was equal to my seminars. So, did I actually remember that Cro-Magnon culture started 32,000 years ago with the Lascaux cave paintings? No, I looked that little fact up online.

Writing for Selfish Readers

In linear media — such as print and TV — people expect **you to construct their experience** for them. Readers are willing to follow the author's lead.

In non-linear hypertext, the rules reverse. Users want to **construct their own experience** by piecing together content from multiple sources, emphasizing their desires in the current moment. People arrive at a website with a goal in mind, and they are ruthless in pursuing their own interest and in **rejecting whatever the site is trying to push**. Banner blindness is only the most extreme manifestation of this selfishness.

Particularly on commercial sites — whether they're B2C e-commerce or specialized B-to-B sites — users cherry-pick the information and concentrate narrowly on what they want. If you're smart, you'll write accordingly: make your content **actionable** and focused on user **needs**.