"Is Anybody Reading This"? Writing for the Web [Webinar Transcript]

Editor's note: The main presenter's speech is in normal text, with the co-host's in italics.

Well this is actually my first time to do a webinar. I'm most comfortable with people staring me in the face and giving me funny looks, and none of you can do that. But I'll pretend you're giving me funny looks and that encourages me.

So the first thing that we want to do is a quick little pop quiz. If you're in the Texas area, one of these will apply to you, and if you're elsewhere in the country, I have one that's more generic.

We're here to talk about writing for the web, so here is the first writing sample. And this is an example of a style of writing, and I'm wondering if you can figure out where this is. And as soon as you know, go ahead and type it in the chat pane.

Anybody got any guesses? Andrew says New Orleans.

Ah, that's actually really close...in theme.

Not geographically. Los Angeles, closer...Las Vegas! Jennifer, ding ding ding!

This is Vegas. This is your town, this is your stage. Our next one: "Open 24 hours a day, festooned with Christmas lights year-round, this is a little loco and a lot of fun. We've got strolling musicians, a huge selection of Tex-Mex dishes, and the coldest beer in the Mercado." Any San Antonio native or nearby area people know about the Mercado?

Melanie says she's been there, but she doesn't know the name of any restaurants. This is a big one with San Antonio natives.

And I won't make you keep thinking. It's Mi Tierra. The restaurant has this theme all year long; they're...just the words that they chose gives the feeling of "it's festooned with Christmas lights...a little loco and a lot of fun," this is the way they talk, in their printed communication, their web communication, all carries through this theme.

So today we're going to talk about writing for the web, and characteristics of writing for the web.

Number one, writing for the web needs to be welcoming, with little to no insider language—and we'll unpack that in a second—upfront about focus and strengths, conversational and easy to read.

It's actually kind of funny. People tend to anthropomorphize their computer; in other words, they talk to it like it's a him or a her, and some people even give it a name — so it's this conversation that's happening between the computer and the person that's visiting your website. So in that nature you want to shy away from a more formal writing style.

Also, be brief and succinct, and I'll give you an example to put in your heads when you're writing for the web down the road. Here are our top ten writing tips.

Number 10...know your audience, and focus on their needs. What are they looking for? What steps do they want to take? What links do they need? In our culture there is an amazing amount of noise; there's background, there's visual, there's auditory, there's a lot of noise in our culture.

Imagine yourself holding a crying baby, and looking at the web page that you just wrote. Can you actually get the message? You know, are there big headings, and other things we're going to talk about in just a second. So I always imagine, you know, holding a crying baby, can I still get the message that you're saying? And I find that very helpful when writing for the web.

Number nine...say less. Half or fewer words than you would put on a printed piece. Use very short paragraphs. One, two, three sentences is fine. Forget what your English teacher taught you with a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a closing. It just doesn't work that way — no one has patience to read it. Meaningful headlines. Whenever possible, bullet. Preferably not gigantic sentences in each bullet, but, you know, a bullet point, even if it doesn't increase the readability that much, there are studies that show that if you increase the perception of readability...if I perceive in my head that it's going to be easy, then it will be easier. So, say less.

Number eight...most important information first. Use strong verbs, descriptive words. You know, avoid the passive tense. Don't say things like, "The product is blank, blank, blank." Start with, "You will," or "This will make a difference for you."

The "keywords in your headings and subheadings"...Search engine optimization is a topic for another day, but you need to ensure...this is one of the steps in good search placement in Google...so if you want to be found for the fact that you sell a great little black dress, those keywords need to be in your copy and in the headings.

"Scrolling is bad...sometimes." Here's the thing: the world has changed. In the past you would hear people talk about the fold, or "try to avoid scrolling." That world is really going away, because of this explosion of devices. With the iPad, people scroll all the time. There are studies that have been conducted over the last few years that actually show that scrolling is completely irrelevant, and people don't mind — if there's something of value to scroll for.

The other aspect of scrolling and the amount of copy, is to think of your website in terms of wading into the ocean. You want to start really light. So the homepage needs to be really strong, really active, and as I click, every click that I give you as a user, I'm giving you my time. I click, and I'm giving you a little more permission to talk to me; I click again, I've given you a little more permission. So if I come down to a page called "The history of our organization," I've given you permission to give me extra information — I want to read a little more detail. But if you're going to give me that detail on the homepage, I'm going to glance and be overwhelmed.

Number seven...make the page easy to scan. Again, crying baby in my arms. Headlines and subheads should summarize the content. Make links to other pages obvious. One thing I will

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hear people say is, "Oh, well that's link is in the navigation." Then as a user I have to break my chain of thought, go up to the navigation, and find it. If there's something that you want users to do next, make a link to it in the copy. Make a bullet point and say, "Now read this."

That's part of the next point: "Make next steps obvious." Don't assume that they're now going to buy your product — always put some sort of call to action there. They've given you a few seconds of their time, do something with it. Make it very clear: click here, do this, buy this.

Blogging has introduced a new style that...where one sentence of each paragraph...if I bold the most salient point in each paragraph, if I take the whole sentence and bold it, it's not grammatically accurate as far as your English teacher in concerned, but it makes the page scan-able. So if I don't have time to read the three paragraphs, but I can commit to reading these three sentences, then I've gotten the point from your post.

Number six...simplify punctuation. We don't want to use call caps because the more we yell, the less we're heard, and once we've lost that chance to give emphasis, then we've lost it forever. Never underline, because people like me try to click it, and wonder why in the world I can't. Bold only when appropriate, especially because you may not even be able to tell that I have that text bolded. It's a little difficult to see online; and even when it is easy to see, you run across the same issue of, if you use bold too much, it loses its impact. Rarely or never use italics on the web. This has to do with the resolution of your computer screen, and the device I'm using. Many times italics cannot be seen or easily perceived like they can in print, so we recommend using quotations rather than italics. None of these are hard and fast rules, but they are general guidelines.

Number five—I see this all the time—re-write, don't re-purpose. It is very common to take a press release done that's going to go on PR Newswire or some kind of service, and there's a very, very specific format for PR. But that format doesn't play very well on the web. That format was designed to give the points to a reporter, not to the general consumer on the website. It breaks the rule of conversational, it breaks the rule of easy to read because it's not easy for the average reader to understand. So we recommend, every time, that you re-write it for the medium. If I'm writing for print, if I'm writing for the web, if I'm writing for mobile phones...whatever I'm writing for, I need to adapt my message for that medium.

Number four...lose insider language. Write with the prospect in mind. Acronyms and hard-to-understand terms are sometimes necessary, but whenever you use them you have to explain them, especially the first time they're used. So for example, I have a client that has on their website, "This product lowers DSO." And I would be willing to bet that not every one of their prospects understands what "DSO" stands for — it's Days Sales Outstanding. So why not say, "This product is great at lowering the number of outstanding sales you have every day"? You don't want to miss the opportunity to connect with your audience, so don't use acronyms if at all possible. Sometimes they're necessary, but you need to explain them.

Number three...keep it current. Outdated content is not only frustrating and reflects poorly on you, it also makes me immediately not believe anything that I've just seen. So if I see something that was an event from last month and it's written as if it's coming up next week, I'm going to look at that and think, "What else have I just read...what if the price is no longer true? What if the product is no longer offered?" It's very important to keep your site updated, and at Digett we highly recommend using a Content Management System so that the software can do that for

you; there's no need for me to remember to take something offline — you should have software that can handle that for you.

Number two...edit and proof carefully. Some people, like me, have an illness where if I see a typo, I am so distracted; and I try to say, "Well, we all make typos, I make typos, it's not a big deal," but for some reason it just distracts me like crazy, and I know there are other people like that out there as well. So edit and proof carefully — not just for spelling, but also for grammar, because spell checkers can't catch things like there/their/they're...so whenever possible, run a grammar check. This is always an issue on the web, because many times information or content is being placed directly into the Content Management System, which don't usually have grammar checks. So what I'll do is take these paragraphs, put them into a tool like Word, and run a grammar check.

Number one...If you can't use a spell check or grammar tool, work with a team. Whether you have a marketing team or web team, or someone sitting in the cubicle or office next to you...I cannot see my own errors, as much as I wish I could. But if I give them to Amy, she'll say, "Oh, look at the headline." And the same is true for her: I can look and say, "Oh, look at your headline." We're all blind to our own errors, so work with a team whenever possible.

The last point, which is about creating a style guide, that has to do with creating a document that says, this is how our organization is going to communicate on the web. And even if you're a small business with two employees, it's still helpful to have this one page of bullet points that says, "When we refer to our business, we say this," and "When we refer to our product we say this, we type it like this." I've worked with a lot of non-profits, and this is critical to them, so that they all communicate with the same voice, and so the audience has maybe one piece of jargon, instead of five or six.

You don't have to read this whole slide, but I just wanted to show you how we can take the same paragraph, and the exact same information is available on the right, but I didn't need to add all those extra words in order to accomplish my goal.

Real quick, I wanted to give you a couple resources. My second favorite is the AP Stylebook. I learned, as many did, MLA format or Chicago style, but I have completely converted to AP Stylebook. What in the world does this mean, some people may say. The Associated Press has a set of rules, and they've documented them in a book. It's a great stylebook of modern writing style, so I highly recommend it. If you're wondering, "Should I have a comma here," this is the kind of resource you'll find helpful.

The second one is one of my favorite podcasts, and one of my favorite books. It's not very exciting to read a book about grammar, but Grammar Girl has a great book that has a lot of references, and is actually very readable. It's talking about modern writing from the perspective of modern readers. She also has a good website, and we've included the link there.

And lastly, the Digett blog. We do talk about technical things from time to time, but we also talk about things like marketing and SEO and writing.

Alright, well, that is the end of the official part of the webinar. I think there's one question that we didn't answer, and it's from Melanie. She asks, "Do you have any studies or data about using italics? We use those at work frequently." Correct me if I'm wrong, Melanie, but I think what she

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means is, is there any research on whether people don't really notice italics, or it's bothersome to them?

This was actually from probably about ten years ago, so I don't have the link anymore, so I sound like I'm just making it up. But Jakob Nielson, one of the gurus of usability, had—and of course this is before screens were as high-resolution as they are now—but one of the things he had talked about was the fact that italics are not usually distinguishable on a computer screen, and to use the quote format instead.

There are some typefaces that maybe your website looks just fine, and italics are okay — it's just kind of a general guideline that if you really want to create emphasis, there are perhaps other ways to consider other than italics, because italics are difficult to perceive.

I don't see any more questions coming in, so we're done for the day. Thank you so much for spending a half-hour with us, and we hope that it was helpful, and we will see you around. Thanks, and have a good holiday!