

Usability doesn't stop when you write the content

By Whitney Quesenbery

Published: May 5, 2008

Think about the last web site you worked on. You probably did card sorting for the information architecture. You created paper prototypes to try out different page layouts. You ran iterative usability tests to make sure people could use the site. But what about the information on the site?

Too often, user-centered design stops where the content begins.

That's too bad because the words on the page are just as much a part of the success of the site as the rest of the design, whether people come to your site for information, or need information to use the features of your site.

As usability guru [Ginny Redish](#) put it, "Good writing for the web is about creating communications in which people can **find** what they need, **understand** what they find, and **act** appropriately on that understanding in the time and effort that they think it is worth. Plain language is part of user-centered design."

Plain language does more than just make text easy to read. It makes content usable. And that helps everyone do what they want to do more easily, more accurately and with less frustration.

Easy-to-read content makes your site more accessible. It helps people who are reading in a second language, who don't read very well, or who have a reading disability like dyslexia. Easy-to-read content also helps excellent readers when they are very busy and just trying to get what they need quickly from the web.

One of Ginny's projects was to mentor the team rewriting the safety rules for [State of Washington businesses](#). When the new rules went into effect, the agency received calls from people who thanked them for finally writing rules that they could understand. If we can make legal rules clear and understandable, we can do the same for any content.

Take a look at your own web site? Does it communicate clearly?

Here are 10 guidelines to help you make the content on your web site easy to read:

1. Make information easy to find with clear headings.
2. Break up the information into manageable pieces.
3. Put the pieces in a logical order for your readers
4. Keep your sentences and paragraphs short.
5. Set the context first. Put information in a logical order for your readers.
6. Talk to your readers. Use "you".
7. Write in the active voice (most of the time).
8. Put the action in the verb, not in the nouns.

9. Use your readers' words.
10. Use bulleted lists where appropriate – for a list of items and for parallel "if, then" sentences.

Want to know more?

- Ginny's new book is [Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works](#).
- [Center for Plain Language](#)
- [Recommendations for Making Web Content Accessible to People with Cognitive Disabilities](#)
- [Webinar: Why Plain Language is Critical for Standards](#)