VANDERBILT
Communications
and Marketing

BEST PRACTICES

Writing for the Web

Digital Strategies • Summer 2024

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Writing for Your Audience 👋

User Journeys

Who Are They & What Do They Want

• Your primary and secondary audiences likely have different qualities and motivations.

• Define both audiences and keep them top of mind as you write your website content.

Meet Them Where They're At

• Your audience is on a journey to find something.

• Write for what they need to know, <u>not</u> what you want to tell them

• Make your content relatable. Don't just include the features of your services; include the benefits and showcase how your program will help them.

Why Content is King 👑

Content and Website Performance Go Hand-in-Hand

Write for the User <u>and</u> Google

- The quality of your content is the biggest factor in search engine performance.
- Google values the same things your users do: **well-structured, specific, and connected content.**
- [See our top SEO tactics](#)

People Read Online Differently Than They Read Print, Adjust Accordingly.

- People are not reading as much online as you would hope. They are often skimming or looking for something specific.
- Your word, structure, and formatting choices determine how much they dig into the content and how quickly they can find what they need.
- Prioritize creating content that's **meant to be skimmed.**

General Guidelines 📋

Choosing and Formatting Your Words

Stay On Brand

- Consult the Vanderbilt Editorial Style Guide but break the rules when appropriate.

Don't use ALL CAPS

- There are certain places where a few words in all caps work well and these are built into our design system (for example, H4 transforms your text into all caps by default).

Avoid Jargon

- Examine internal language and ask yourself if someone outside the university or even your department would know what you mean.
- Whenever an acronym is necessary, write it out the first time it's used on a new page, followed by the acronym in parentheses.

At Most, Write at a High School Reading Level

- Prospective students won't yet have completed high school. They won't be familiar with discipline-specific or institutional terms even a first-year student would know.

Headlines and Headings 🎩

Use Them to Your Advantage. Make Them **Structured, Skimmable & Meaningful.**

Headings are a critical part of a good SEO strategy.

- Headings teach Google what's important on the page.
- Use keywords in your headings but keep them as short as possible.

Headings organize your content for readers and search engines.

- Google likes structure and so does your reader. Don't be afraid to use all heading sizes.
    - Your page title will automatically become your page's H1.
    - Use an H2 for every major section of your page. H3s should divide up the sections marked by H2s, H4s should divide sections marked by an H3, and so on.
    - Using H3-H6 will make your content more skimmable and highlight important info for your readers. They are a natural spot to include variations of your main keywords.
- Users should be able to read only the headings to know what's included on the page.
- Instead of using "What Makes Us Unique" as a heading, try saying what makes your school or department unique like, "Collaboration Breeds Innovation."

CTAs, Buttons & Links 🔗

Calls to Action Should Be: **Descriptive, Actionable, and Specific**.

Do's and Don'ts

- Include an action verb: register, join, apply, request, etc.
- Include imperative words like "now" if applicable.
- Never only link "here," "learn more," or "click here."
  - ALWAYS include context about what the user will be learning more about. It helps users and your search engine performance!
  - Most of the time there's a better action than "learn more."
  - If you must use "learn more" on its own, limit it to once per page.
  - Read this article to learn more about the "Learn More" problem.

Specific Formatting Recommendations

Buttons

- Limit to 2-4 words whenever possible
- Title Case
- No punctuation

Text Links

- 5-7 words is a good rule of thumb.
- Sentence or title case depending on context.
- Include punctuation if the link ends a sentence.

BAD:
Learn more

BETTER:
Learn more about application requirements.

BEST:
View Application Requirements

Break the Rules 🚨

The Internet is a beast. Tame it by following these rule-breaking norms.

Title Case vs. Sentence Case

- [Research supports](#) using Title Case for H1-H3. In our system, H4 is automatically in all caps. Feel free to use sentence case if desired for any H5-H6.

Don't Spell Out Numbers Under 10

- Based on [eye-tracking data](#), we know that humans are fixated on numerals. It's perfectly okay to use figures for 1-9 in skimmable content like lists and to highlight what you want to show off!

Don't Always Punctuate Bulleted Lists

- Don't end a bulleted point with a comma or semi-colon.
- Only use a period at the end of a bullet if one or more items in the list are complete sentences.

Writing for Our Specific WordPress Modules ✏️

Recommendations for Popular Modules – Make Every Character Count!

Area/Item	Recommended Character Count (including spaces)
Page Title	40 maximum
Introduction Sentences (used in Toppers)	100-150
Headings (H1-H6)	35-45, depending on section width
General Paragraphs	About 250 maximum for readability
Story Teases	150 maximum
Feature Module | Description Sentence	175
Card Module | Heading	25 maximum for 2 lines
Card Module | Description Sentence	125

Top SEO Tactics 💁‍♀️

Remember, Google rewards content that is **well-structured, specific, and connected.**

There's no way to ensure you rank #1 on Google, but focusing on these things will help.

Target Specific Keywords
Content that is more likely to answer users' questions is prioritized in search results.

Have a Killer Heading Structure
Headings teach Google what's important on the page and increase user engagement.

Link Like a Boss
Links are the glue that holds the internet together. High-quality links show Google that you're relevant.

Keep Your Content Fresh
Recently published content typically appears higher on Google. Blogs are a great way to do this.

Enhance Your SERP Snippet
By improving how your page looks in search results, you increase the likelihood of getting clicked!

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Targeting Specific Keywords 🎯

Keep It **Natural and Relevant.**

Answer Questions

- Search engines are really answer engines. Your content should exist to answer questions.
  - Content that is more likely to answer users' questions is prioritized in search results.
- Identify what questions your content answers or could answer with optimization. Find general questions the market is asking at Answer the Public.

Play the Match Game

- While AI is changing how search engines work, they still rely on keyword matching.
- Add keywords and phrases on the page in a natural way and avoid keyword stuffing.
  - Write your content first and then go back and integrate your keywords / phrases.
  - Keyword stuffing is bad for readability, and Google senses when phrases aren't worded naturally and ranks your content lower because of it.

Find Your Starting Point

- What queries do you already rank for? Explore your site in Google Search Console, then brainstorm related keywords and phrases.

Link Like a Boss

It's About **Quantity and Quality**.

Link Text Matters

- Search engines use linked text to help determine what a page is about.
  - Follow our [recommendations for calls to action](#) and use specific, natural, easy-to-read language to provide context about what you're linking to.
  - A good rule of thumb is that each piece of content you create should link to 2 to 3 other pages.

Most Links are Good Links, But…

- If dozens of links point to a page with a variation of a word or phrase, the page has a higher likelihood of ranking well for those types of phrases.
  - Proceed with caution: Too many links with the same anchor text could indicate to search engines that you're trying to manipulate your site's ranking in search results.
- The more popular and important a site is, the more weight the links from that site carry.

Enhancing Your Search Engine Results Page (SERP) Snippet 💅

Improve Your Website's Google Preview to Increase Clicks

If you don't fill in these things on the backend of WordPress, Google will decide on its own what to share with searchers about your page.

Page Title:

- The clickable title on the SERP is set in our version of WordPress as the Page Title.

Meta Description (called Excerpt in our version of WordPress):

- This is the snippet of information that appears within the SERP. It should tell searchers what to expect from your web page.
  - If this is not filled in, Google will usually display the first few sentences of your page – BUT it can select other content on the page that it views as more important (for example, Google may perceive a call to action with high engagement as more important than the first sentence of your page and therefore displays that on Google Search Results.)

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Vanderbilt Giving: DARE TO GROW

In our 150th year, **Vanderbilt** continues to Dare to Grow. Join us in our quest to drive bold new levels of growth through a $3.2B **giving** campaign that supports ...

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Free Expression | Dialogue Vanderbilt

Our Commitment Free expression is essential to a university's very purpose. Transformative education, pathbreaking research and the timeless search for ...

Recommended Reading 📖

A Few of Our Favorite Resources and Articles

- [Headline Capitalization for UX: Title Case vs. Sentence Case](#)

- ["Learn More" Links: You Can Do Better](#)

- [Headings Are Pick-Up Lines: 5 Tips for Writing Headlines That Convert](#)

- [UX Writing: Study Guide](#)

- [Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Starter Guide](#)

- [The Importance of Content in SEO: Why It Matters + How to Create It](#)