Copywriting for Websites:
Best practice guidelines

Version 1.0

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This document forms part of The Open University’s suite of web standards, available online at www.open.ac.uk/about/web-standards.
This document sets out the overarching principles and important points to take into account when writing copy for all Open University websites. It is intended to be a starting point for guidance, and does not replace any existing OU style guides. You will need to refer to the style guide for your unit for full details of correct terminology, punctuation and so on.

1. **Before you begin…**

   1.1. Does the content you are planning on writing fall within your or your department’s responsibilities? Some web content, such as information on the curriculum and fees structure, must only be written or edited by the unit whose remit it falls under. If in doubt, contact the Digital Engagement team (digital-engagement@open.ac.uk) in the Communications unit for advice.

   1.2. Check whether the content on your web page is unique. Make sure that you are not duplicating content written elsewhere, or worse, contradicting information on other OU sites.

   1.3. Define the purpose of the page: what is the business need that it is looking to satisfy?

2. **Reference sources**

   2.1. Refer to a style guide for advice on grammatical conventions. There are a number of different style guides in use across the OU. We recommend you refer to your unit's specific style guide first for advice, or in the absence of an approved style guide, the online [OU House Style](#) as published by LTS.

   2.2. Use standard editorial reference sources, such as *The New Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors*. A full list is provided in Section 1 of the [OU House Style](#) and a number of these resources are available electronically from the 'Oxford Dictionaries Pro' website.

3. **Terminology and exceptions**

   3.1. Use correct OU terminology. Refer to the [OU House Style](#) for details.

4. **Tone of voice and audience**

   4.1. Take into account the OU’s overarching common purpose and its core values of being open to people, places, methods and ideas. Think about how this relates to your content and what you are trying to convey, as well as the tone of voice you will use to best get your message across. You can refer to the OU’s [equality and diversity guidelines](#) for more information.

   4.2. Think about who you are writing for - different audiences require different writing styles. If you are writing module materials the tone is likely to be formal, whereas
if writing for OpenLearn or Platform it should be more engaging and conversational. Check with LTS or your faculty/unit to see whether there is an approved tone of voice you should be using.

4.3. Use UK English and follow Plain English guidelines wherever possible. Subject-related jargon can be acceptable on learning sites, where the audience may expect it, but is unhelpful and off-putting on informal sites when you want to engage with the reader.

5. **Structure**

5.1. Make sure you grab the audience’s attention from the very first sentence; people tend to scan web pages, rather than read them.

5.2. Left-align content, in particular lists, as readers scan text from left to right and down in an F-shaped pattern (Nielsen, 2006). Exceptions to this are languages that are read from right to left, or where the formatting contributes to the meaning of the text, such as poetry.

5.3. Structure your content using the ‘inverted pyramid’ principle (Nielsen, 2006). Put your conclusion, or the main point of your article, at the top of the page and then use the rest of the page to provide supporting information.

5.4. Break text up into plenty of short paragraphs (even as short as 1-2 sentences), allowing for one idea per paragraph.

5.5. Indicate clearly any ‘calls to action’ using link text; that is, if you want the reader to complete an action at the end of reading the page (sign up for a qualification, read more) then give them clear signposts on how to do it.

5.6. **Headings**

5.6.1. Use only one heading in ‘heading 1’ style per page: this is used as the title of your web page. As these titles frequently appear out of context (such as in search engine results pages) they must be descriptive so that people understand what the page content is about. Put the most important words at the beginning.

5.6.2. Use heading styles in the correct hierarchical order; that is, you must not jump from a ‘heading 2’ to a ‘heading 4’ without there being a ‘heading 3’ in between. This is important for screen-reader users, who use headings to gain an understanding of a page’s structure. If your current design does not follow the hierarchical structure then you must alter your heading styles to ensure that they are applied in the correct order.
6. **Content**

6.1. Keep sentences concise, and simple in their construction. It is easier to read and understand two short sentences on screen than one long, complex sentence with lots of punctuation and numerous clauses.

6.2. **Length**

6.2.1. Be succinct when writing for the web. People read online content 25% slower than printed materials, and therefore copy needs to be about 50% shorter than its printed equivalent.

6.2.2. Tailor the length of your web page depending on the type of content you are writing, and why your audience is reading it. Have they arrived there to complete a task, or are they looking for information? People reading in-depth articles or study materials are prepared to scroll down a page to read the complete content. A process- or task-driven reader wants to complete their task as quickly as possible so keep pages short and focus your content on helping them complete the task.

6.2.3. Think about whether you could split the content of long pages across multiple pages. If you can’t then include a table of contents at the top of the page with links to the different sections within the content. You can also add ‘back to top’ links through the copy that return readers to the top of the main content so they can navigate through sections quickly.

6.2.4. Where you need to provide supplementary information on a page you can use techniques such as expanding and collapsing paragraphs of text, or text overlays (text that appears in a box over the current web page when a user clicks on a link to it). This makes it easier for readers to navigate through large amounts of content.

6.3. Make sure every content item (that is, every web page and linked document) has an owner, whether that is an individual or a team. This is to ensure that someone can be contacted if there are any queries about the content.

6.4. **Formatting and links**

6.4.1. Use bulleted lists to break up text or long paragraphs. It is easier for audiences to read and comprehend short pieces of information rather than large chunks of text. Only use numbered lists if the order of the items is important.

6.4.2. Avoid excessive use of italics when formatting text as they can be difficult to read online. You may use bold to highlight particular points or words throughout the text; however, as bold is also generally used for headings avoid using it too much as it may detract from their impact.

6.4.3. Don't use underlining when formatting text – underlining is associated with links and confuses the reader if used for other purposes.
6.4.4. Make sure any link text is part of a sentence; for example, use ‘The OpenLearn website contains lots of free learning resources’, not ‘Click here to see our free learning resources on the OpenLearn website’. Screen reader users can choose to have all the links on a page read out before they listen to the main body of the page, so using descriptive link text helps them understand where the links are going to.

7. Maintenance and archiving

7.1. Follow your unit’s maintenance procedures. If they don’t have any, we recommend that you (or the designated content owner) aim to review your pages every 6 months.

7.2. Avoid using time-bound examples in your content, or dates, unless your pages are updated frequently (such as news sites) as they can quickly make pages look out of date. For example, avoid references to current news stories unless they are integral to the content on the page.

8. Indexing content

8.1. Think about whether your page content would make sense out of context. If a reader came across it from a search engine results page would they understand the content or would they need to read the content further up the page hierarchy first? If so, you may want to set it to not be indexed by internal or external search engines. Contact IT for advice: email it-co-co@open.ac.uk.

9. Document control

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