

Being digital

Writing online

1: Introduction

There are many different places you can write online, and a wealth of different tools for doing so.

Different online spaces require different approaches to communicating. In this activity we are going to focus on how you write in order to ensure your communications are effective.

Learning outcome

By the end of this activity you should be aware of the general principles for writing online.

Do you use email, forums, Facebook, Twitter, blogs or Wikis?

- Think about which of these you use, what you use them for and what the writing style is like. If you do not use any of them yet, spend a moment recalling what you know about them.
- Read the feedback below on the next page.

Feedback

Most people use email at work, and the majority probably have an email account for personal use. The style can vary depending on whether you are using it for formal or informal communication.

If you are an OU student, or you have an interest or hobby, it is likely you have experienced using online forums. These are places where you can interact with others who have a common interest. The writing style is generally informal, although when discussing academic subject matter, more formal and specialised language may be used.

Facebook and Twitter are used by many people to stay up-to-date with friends or the latest breaking news. Twitter communications in particular are very short (140 characters or less).

Many people use Wikipedia to look things up, but far fewer ever edit it. Its writing style is informative, though quality can vary. Similarly, you are more likely to read other people's blogs than to keep one yourself. Blogs can be informative or reflective, and the style of writing is often quite informal.

Communication in all these online places benefits from being clear, concise and focused.

2: Examples of online writing

Below are examples of different kinds of online writing: a blog, some examples of Twitter posts and an article from the BBC website.

Select the link to each one, read it and make some notes on:

- any similarities and differences between them
- who you think they are aimed at
- the writing style.

Examples

[Blog: The Unicyclist](#)

[Twitter feed: Orkney Library](#)

[Web page: 'Sleep lessons' aim to sharpen up grumpy teenagers](#)

3: Common features of online writing

In the previous exercise you looked at three examples of online writing. The audience for any of them could be very diverse. However, by being online, these pieces of writing can be read by anyone who comes across them, enabling people to make new connections that might not otherwise be possible.

Although clearly different to each other, they do have some things in common:

- They are **written to be read online**. The way people read online is different to the way they read printed documents. For example, they tend to scan and skim the page to get the key information quickly.
- In each of the three examples, the writer draws the reader in by making the **key information clear straight away**. The 140-character limit in Twitter means that you have to get your point across in as few words as possible - like writing a newspaper headline.
- Each example uses **hyperlinks** to direct the user to other relevant places on the web.
- Both the blog and the BBC article use images to illustrate the points being made, and to give the pieces **visual appeal**.
- In all cases, they can be **shared with others**, for example, by posting a link to Twitter or Facebook. Both the blog and the Twitter posts allow other people to respond. This enables a conversation to take place, and the writer might provide additional information, or even modify their views as a result of engaging with others.
- The writing style is generally quite **relaxed and informal**.

4: Principles of writing online

Purpose

- Why are you writing?
- What are the key points you want to get across?

Audience

- Who are you writing for?
- What will interest them?
- What style of writing is appropriate?

Format

- What is the best medium to use?
- How will your readers want to read and interact with what you write? For example, will they be using a mobile phone, iPad or computer?
- Think about how you can use your chosen medium to best advantage, for example, choosing a clear layout, using headings and bullet points.

Language

- Keep it simple and use plain English.
- Summarise wherever possible.
- Use short sentences.

You might find it useful to print this page out, as it is a handy checklist that may come in useful when you are writing online.

5: Summary and reflection

In this activity you have thought about some of the places online where people commonly communicate. You have looked at some examples of online writing and considered their similarities and differences. Finally you have been introduced to some principles for effective online writing.

Putting it into practice

Are there any changes you want to make to the way you write online? For example, thinking more carefully about who you are writing for, or ensuring your communications are short and to the point? Or maybe there are online spaces for communicating with others you would like to try?

References

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