



Eastern
Mennonite
University

Writing for the Web

The web is information-based, and our minds have become attuned to the mixture of text, images, sounds, and video that compete for our attention as readers and users. We are constantly learning how to better process this information. For example, we don't **read** web pages, we **scan** web pages. And the more we work with the web, the faster we scan. Here are some writing tips to best get your message across when working with web content.¹

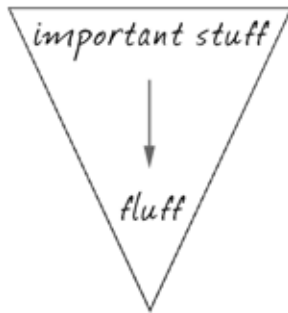
The basics

Make sure your information is always up-to-date.

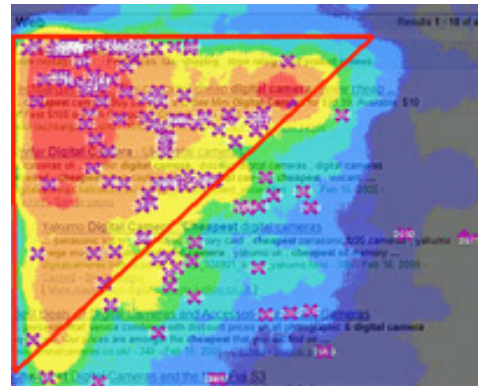
Web content has to be necessary, meaningful, and kept up-to-date. Prospective students will quickly drop a school from their list if information is outdated or hard to find or review! Dump outdated content if you can't keep up with it.

Put the most important info at the top of your page

If readers don't notice relevant content, they'll quickly move on to another page, or even exit the site. Use the inverted pyramid method. The first two paragraphs of your page must succinctly state the most important information.



Don't forget the top left portion of your web page is incredibly valuable. Eye-tracking studies confirm the



dominant reading pattern is F-shaped.² A similar pattern is described as the "Google Golden Triangle."³ (So far this is holding true but as more and more web users shift to mobile devices we may see this change to a strictly vertical alignment in the near future.)

Make each page easy to scan.

On primary pages, paragraphs should only be about two to three sentences – 70 words total! Go over your text several times, removing extra words each time to tighten it up. Readers rarely want prose... they want to get info or complete an action and move on.

If you've got content below the fold, provide visual cues, like meaningful headlines (h3) that intro your paragraphs. Pay extra attention to the first two words of your headlines – usability expert [Jakob Nielsen](#) says this "nanocontent" – the first 11 characters in a headline – is key.^{#4}

Use the EMU [brand vocabulary list](#).

These words are part of the EMU identity and all of our main marketing messages. Use these words to keep the style and tone of our website consistent, and to increase our findability and search rankings in Google.

Use bulleted lists or tables.

More than three items to list? Bulleted or numbered lists work well. Tables are great, too, for stats and other grid info.

Audience and style guidelines

Identify your audience.

The primary audiences of most pages on our public website are prospective students (ages 14-17), their parents, and their guidance counselors. Secondary audiences include adult learners, alumni, prospective graduate students, athletics fans, and community members. Identify your audiences before you start writing, and make sure your content speaks to each.

Write in a conversational tone, in an active voice.

What you write on our website is often the beginning of a conversation between EMU and a prospective student, and the active voice is clearer and more engaging than the passive voice. It's okay to speak directly to prospective students by using "you."

Write at a high-school grade level, using common language.

Unless your content is relatively deep within the site, you must write sparingly and resist those big academic words! It's essential for findability and search engine optimization (SEO) that we use the same words and phrases our readers use. Use the EMU [editorial style guide](#) and the brand vocabulary list to ensure consistency.

What not to do

- **DON'T use all caps in your writing.** That's what italics or bold is for.
- **Don't put whole paragraphs in bold or italics.** If you must, use a blockquote.
- **Don't say "click here."** Be descriptive within your links – say [an article on bees](#) or the [library catalog](#).⁵ Descriptive links make it easier for students with disabilities to access our website in a meaningful way.
- **Don't write out instructions.** Don't say, "go to the [registrar's page](#) and click 'Transcripts'." Instead say, "You get transcripts from [the registrar](#)" and link directly to the transcripts page.

Updated March 4, 2014.

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1. [10 Steps To Writing Better Web Content](#) Springboard SEO Internet Marketing blog. March 2, 2011.
 2. [F-Shaped Pattern For Reading Web Content](#) useit.com: Jakob Nielsen's Website. April 17, 2006.
 3. [Google Search's Golden Triangle](#) Google Eye Tracking Report, Enquiro Eyetools and DidIt. July, 2005.
 4. [First 2 Words: A Signal for the Scanning Eye](#) useit.com: Jakob Nielsen's Website. April 6, 2009.
 5. [Editorial Style for Inline Links](#) Meet Content higher ed web writing/design blog. June 1, 2011.