

Writing copy to make your website work harder.

1 Introduction

The World Wide Web is a law unto itself when it comes to writing. Simple language rules that have applied for a long time have needed to be refined as we have learned how people read the content of web pages. Seeing something on a rectangular screen is different to seeing it in a newspaper, book, magazine, or on a poster, and whilst there are some basic rules about communicating we always need to follow (such as using simple, clear English that is appropriate to the intended reader), writing copy for websites has its own rules.

These rules are made more complex now that we're all slowly getting used to optimising the content of our pages to enable people to find us through search engines. Using key phrases in documents imposes restraints that can take a while to get used to – but learning the right approach is worth putting your time into – remember that optimised content is content that brings people to you.

2 A quick reminder about Search Engine Optimisation (SEO).

People look for their content - not your content. If you grasp this, then you grasp how important SEO is.

In 2000, very few of us 'Googled' what we were looking for, today it's just part of what we do when we need something – and, hey – it even has its own verb! Talk to any SEO consultant and they will tell you that the mantra is "content is king". There is a good, logical explanation for this; the search engines are there to help their users find what they're looking for, and so they 'crawl' the web, indexing what they see to be the content of your site. If you have content rife with the words that people are searching for, then the search engines think your site is important to their search, so it 'ranks' higher.

Using keywords and key phrases in strategic ways helps you to gain and to retain these rankings. They're not an issue that you can tag onto your website; those keywords and key phrases must under-pin your content and site structure. We'll come on to that a bit later, but first, let's remember some of those all-important rules about writing good, sensible English!

3 The basics of writing in SEO language and the basics of writing for the World Wide Web.

3.1 Keywords and key phrases

Keywords are the core content of your site and you should know your keywords. If you're responsible for writing and updating your web site and don't know your organisations keywords, then you should make it your first priority. They should also be reviewed regularly as your business develops through time. Keyword suggestion tools exist on the web – sometimes they can be useful, but some are better than others. One of the original and best ways of defining your keywords is to 'brainstorm' your own staff - and sometimes your clients too.

If you have access to your website statistics, you can see what search results may have already brought people into your website, too. This can be handy for helping you to build on good keywords, and also to identify new ones if they're part of a longer search phrase.

The content area of your page should be around 300 words, and be rich in keywords.

Key phrases

Key phrases should be used too, wherever possible. Key phrases are groups of two, three or four words in the order of how you anticipate people might put them into a search engine. For example, “Our site is packed with loads of London design jobs, updated daily” is capturing the three key words “London”, “design”, and “jobs” as a key phrase that someone is likely to type into a search engine, i.e., “London Design Jobs”

Keyword saturation

Keyword saturation is important. We'll wager that your content doesn't currently contain enough keyword saturation. Of your 300 words, at least 6% should be keywords, and not more than 10% should be keywords. That's 18 to 30 keywords in a 300 word body of text. Be careful not to go over 10% though with keywords. It's likely that search engines will penalise you in their rankings for keyword spamming. They're not doing this to be awkward – remember that their job is to find good results for the searcher, and they wouldn't be doing their searchers any favours by taking them to a page with “London Design Jobs” written a hundred times on a page.

The word 'keyword' was used eight times in the 116 word paragraph above. Maybe you noticed it, maybe you didn't. The search engines would do, luckily. It was also used in the paragraph's heading. Even better.

Relevant keywords to your readers

Sorry if I'm repeating myself but this so important. They won't come to you if you use bland, general keywords. For example, Google™ currently returns the following search engine results for these searches:

Google™ Search Term	Results found
Design Jobs	307,000,000
London Design Jobs	43,000,000
London Graphic Design Jobs	3,000,000
South London Graphic Design Jobs	1,300,000
Wandsworth London Graphic Design Jobs	29,800
SW17 South London Graphic Design Jobs	368

Not many people might search on “SW17 South London Graphic Design Jobs”, but if you're in the SW17 postcode area, it's worth putting that into your keywords and your body text as well as “Wandsworth”.

Longer keyword phrases often mean higher intent. For example, “design jobs” is window shopping or browsing type search – it may be considering a career change - but someone searching for “SW17 South London Graphic Design Jobs” most likely has a high intent to “buy” (or in this case find a new job). With this longer keyword phrase, you'd get less visits from the search engines, but more chance of conversion into business.

Break into bitesize chunks

When the phrases get too long, it is often best to break them up. Search engines don't pay attention to standard punctuation marks or line breaks. They read right through full stops, semi-colons, hyphens, commas without hesitation. That means you have a lot more flexibility than you might think.

For example, if the key phrase you wanted to use was "design and architecture recruitment London", it might be cumbersome or even impossible to make this readable in a normal body of text. By breaking it up with some punctuation, it can sound perfectly natural.

“.... our website hosts the very latest [design and architecture jobs](#). London's got so much to offer talented designers”

How special are you?

As well as geographical constraints where they affect your work, you should pick keywords that people will search that enable your business to stand out. If there are any niches you occupy, make sure you write it down and keep writing it down! Don't try to compete with basic keywords on their own – you won't get on top of Google's search results for a search like “Jobs”, but you might get nearer for niche searches like “Architecture Jobs in Wandsworth”.

Using Page titles.

Search engines like page titles about ten words long. For example, if you're a recruitment agency with a job board, don't use the title 'Jobs' for all of your jobs pages. Make all of your jobs in your database have their own page, and make those pages have their own (keyword rich) title. "Permanent Contract Graphic Designer vacancy in Wandsworth, London" is full to bursting point with keywords, and makes good sense.

Don't necessarily waste this title space using non-keywords such as your company name (unless of course it is a brand name that people are searching for), or common web words like 'About'. Use things like "About our Design Jobs".

Using headings.

Keyword-rich, naturally. Make use of sub headers above each paragraph (using <h1>, <h2>, <h3> tags, etc. – see below) Header tags are seen to define a page's content to a search engine, so they're of much more search engine value than the body of your text.

Using links

Like headings, links have more 'value' to search engine results, so use keywords in your link to link to pages rich in those key words. "Click here" is next to useless to take you to your shop page on an e-commerce site. "Shop" is better, "Buy toy Batman cars in the UK's only specialist Batman memorabilia shop" is even better as link text, if that's what you think people might be searching on. It also helps the search engines understand what the page on the end of that link is about.

Keyword innovation

Once you start thinking in a SEO way, you'll soon become savvy about how to get results in. Some people even use deliberate mis-spelling, which sounds like a sin in a writing guide, but could help double up keywords – but be careful where you use them. An example might be in a commonly mis-spelt word – like occasionally using "Chauffer" on your site as well as "Chauffeur". Be careful where you put it though... you don't want to sound daft! Remember Amercanizms [sic] too, such as "color" if you intend to extend your market reach.

3.2 Keeping it plain

"We believe all the information we give to customers should be easy to understand, so we work hard to translate financial jargon into simple terms. Our goal is to write from the customer's point of view."

Kris Neal,

Vice President of Marketing Communications at NationsBank Corporation

No-one likes drivel. We won't name or shame anyone here, but there is a great deal of it about. If you're content's not relevant to your readers, they won't entertain reading it, but even if it is relevant, they can still be put off reading it if it's not easy to read.

Some simple rules:

- **Use short sentences** – It's obvious. People get tangled up in long ones!
- **Use active verbs** – not terms like "*two designers were recruited*" – just things like "*we recruited two designers*"
- **Careful with Jargon** – okay, some terms are appropriate for the reader, but think carefully all the time of who that reader is.
- **Be direct** – don't mess about with "*If you're interested, why not telephone us for further information on how to obtain a quote*", when "*Phone for a quote*" will do.
- **Try not to use nominalisations** – Nominalisations are abstract nouns made from verbs. (Okay, so that doesn't sound like plain English). I used one in this rule. I should have said 'Try not to nominalise' George Bush is famous for being terrible with nominalising verbs. Use things like "The project is complete" rather than, "The project has reached completion"
- **Use lists** - on a web page, lists break up content with all-important white space. They also help make tricky, long sentences easier to read. Research has shown people do not read vast amounts of text on web sites – bite size chunks will do. Structure your website so that you introduce larger pieces of text with a short paragraph and a "more>>" link so that only those who wish to read it (or print it) will see all of it.
- **Use 'we' and 'you'** – not '*our customers*' or '*the company*', etc.,

- **Don't be afraid to repeat yourself** – if it helps you get your point across, and it's not too annoying to the reader, then you can use repetition. Keyword repetition is not optional, but essential! (see section 4).

Read on:

The Plain English campaign has an excellent series of guides on writing Plain English. See <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/guides.htm>

3.3 The right size, the right layout and the right place

On the web, we've all got an incredible short attention span. As we mentioned above, a good rule to try and follow is to put as near to 300 words in the content area of your page as you can.

On your site's front page it is essential to have good body content of at least 200 words. Search engines use hierarchy on your site so if you put all the best bits further 'down' your pages, you're missing a trick.

Split long paragraphs up into simple two or three sentence paragraphs. Make use of sub headers above each paragraph (using <h2>, <h3> tags, etc. Header tags are seen to define a page's content to a search engine, so they're of much more value than the body of your text.

Different browsers interpret the Header tags in different ways. The format for them is always the same though:
<h4>This is the Header</h4>

There are several different pre-set sizes for header text using tags. They range from H1, to H6. You should use them to highlight your chosen keywords, and try to avoid fluff words - remember, you are writing for people.

Read on:

Header tags are there to help you – w3schools are a great resource with simple guide to how these work http://www.w3schools.com/tags/tag_hn.asp

Use of bold to emphasize words – makes it both easier to read and there is evidence that emboldened words are given a higher relevance weighting by search engines.

3.4 Technical and syntax considerations

The search engines read and store website content in particular ways and there are some basic rules to adhere to.

Code Validation

A common error with sites is that the technology behind them is complex and aesthetics can sometimes come before functionality with some less responsible website developers. Make sure your site code is valid HTML. The chances are that if it isn't valid, the search engines will not be able to read parts or even all of the site. Not only that, your *existing* readers might not even be able to read it – are they using the same browser as you are? Valid code is valid in all the browsers!

Try it:

HTML validator: <http://validator.w3.org/>

Plurals

Don't worry too much about how the search engines read plurals. They don't. They see "Job" to be the same as "Jobs".

Off line updates

It's often good to write the bulk of your text in a simple text editor (like Windows 'notepad'). Best to think about using notepad – draft content should just be text anyway. Finessing and formatting should be done within the content management system itself (if you have one) – this includes building links and using header tags.

You should avoid using 'intelligent' word processors to prepare your text off-line. Microsoft Word, for example, will auto correct some things that shouldn't be auto corrected for the web! For example, "The Designer's Manual" is not the same as "The Designer's Manual". Look carefully at the quotation marks and the apostrophe. Search engines understand the apostrophe symbol ' but don't read the similar symbol '. It sounds picky, but there might be an important keyword to you with an apostrophe in it.

Hyphens and Underscores

Search engines like hyphens and just view them as spaces-between-words. They find underscores harder_to_understand and try to read them as one word – so don't use underscores.

4 To conclude

We know you're busy and we all love to remember a few golden rules. These are the golden rules to writing good SEO safe copy, as we at Reverse Delta see them.

Remember:

- Content is not for you – it's for the end user – give them what they want!
- No more than 300 words in any body of content
- 6% to 10% keyword saturation. No excuses: work them in to the text.
- Keywords for page titles, keywords in headings, keywords in links.
- Valid code helps search engines and websites.
- Use pages for discreet content items
- Remind yourself about plain English rules from time to time – it's easy to forget sometimes.