

Crexendo Guidelines for Writing Copy for the Web

Writing effective advertising copy for the World Wide Web is a *delicate balance* between writing a message that is **pleasing to the reader** and also **pleasing to the search engines**. The instructions below are rough guidelines for how to write copy around a small handful of keyword phrases assigned for the page. Usually we assign between 5 to 8 keywords, which almost always will appear in common sense keyword phrases. For example, if we assigned:

Keywords: call, center, consulting, consultant, setup
Regional Keywords: Phoenix, AZ, Arizona

They would naturally combine in a dozen or so keyword phrases: phoenix call center setup, arizona call center consulting, call center consultant az, setup call center in phoenix, etc...

What Search Engines Want

More than anything search engines want a page to be *about something*, and to be about that something consistently from the *top of the page to the bottom*. From the point of view of search engines, if a page tries to be about lots of things, then it really ends up being about nothing, and pages about nothing generally don't rank well in search results. To that end, search engines want:

- **Keyword Positioning & Distribution** – The focus keywords should appear evenly distributed from top to bottom on the page, ideally in phrase combinations as often as possible. A page that talks about a particular keyword at the top half of a page, but not the bottom half, isn't *about* that keyword.
- **Keyword Density** – Each individual keyword should appear on the page with an overall density of between **2% and 4%**. The closer to 4% the better. Meaning if your text is 400 words long, each individual keyword should appear on the page between 8 and 16 times. The keywords should appear in keyword phrase combinations as often as possible. The exception to this is regional keywords. If any regional keywords are assigned, they can appear with less density, but should never drop below 1% of the total word count.
- **Word Count** – In order to perform well in search results, a page should have no less than 300 total words.

What Visitors Want

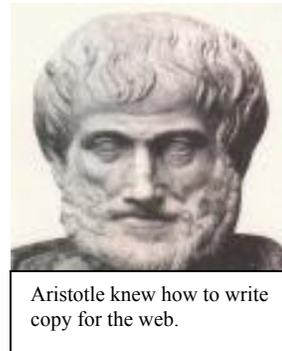
In order for a message to be truly effective, it must satisfy two separate aspects of good messaging for the web; what the words say & how the words are formatted.

What the Words Say

Below are some guidelines for writing strong messaging:

- **Be Direct** – Use straight forward, simple and direct language. The web is much more a direct response tool than it is a branding tool. Write clearly and to the point. Avoid jargon and industry insider lingo. If it is necessary to use such words, be sure you define the words parenthetically or in a sidebar, etc...
- **Focus on Value Proposition** – Why? Why should the reader conclude that your offering is worth their time to investigate further? What makes your company, offering, service, solution different or better than the competition? Highlight the core value props.
- **Write in the active voice** – *Our clients experience improved sound quality* is more powerful than; *improved sound quality is experienced by our clients*. The active voice is punchy, direct, powerful and communicates a stronger message with less words.
- **Don't overuse adjectives & adverbs** – Lazy writing often over-relies on adjectives and adverbs to strengthen the message. In fact, in many cases stronger verbs and nouns would do a better job and do it with fewer words. Which is stronger: *Clean*, or *Very Clean*? If you think about it, the word 'very' actually weakens the concept of clean. If something is clean, then it's clean. If it's *very clean*... then it must be just a little bit dirty... right?

- **Highlight Benefits** – Strong ad copy on the web doesn't just discuss features, it also discusses benefits. What's in it for your clients? What is the benefit to them? They buy because of benefits more so than just features.
- **Appeal To Emotion** – Aristotle taught that a great message has three elements, *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos*. In English those are: **credibility**, **logic** and **emotion**. (Note the use of some jargon there, but that it was defined...) Emotion is most often overlooked, and is occasionally difficult to weave into a message. Consider all three of Aristotle's messaging elements and especially work to find a way to get the reader to feel emotion. Candidates might include a sense of frustration, impatience, fear, envy, greed, annoyance, jealousy, etc. If that looks like a list of negative emotions, you are right. Buyers respond better if they feel their problem acutely and writing to highlight a negative emotion helps present your offering as a positive solution to their pain. *Shave 3 strokes off your golf score* is not nearly as powerful as *never again be the butt of golf jokes around the office*. The latter message is more powerful because it is an emotional appeal. Also consider that the former is really much more of a feature, and the latter actually a powerful benefit. Benefits and emotion often go hand in hand.
- **Include a Call to Action** – Be sure to tell the reader what you want them to do: register for a webinar, fill out a form to request more info, request a free quote, call, download a report, register for a class, etc... Make sure the call to action stands out and is clear.
- **Include Testimonials** – If possible, include a strong testimonial or two, maybe in a sidebar. Testimonials can add power and credibility (*ethos*) to your message.



How the Words Are Formatted

The most important principle of messaging for the web is **skimmability**. Most visitors to your site will be put off by messaging that appears long and is laid out in "a page out of *Moby Dick*" format. Good messaging is inviting, visually appealing and formatted to be easily and intuitively skimmed. Long messaging is completely fine as long as it is easily skimmed. By contrast, non-skimmable messaging, no matter how short, is less effective. Your web messaging should communicate your key message points almost subconsciously to a reader that glances at a page. Below are some tools you can use to help in formatting your message for the web:

- **Headlines & Sub-headlines** – Headlines and Sub-headlines naturally add skimmability and break up the message into digestible chunks.
- **Bold, Italic, Underline & Color** – Judicious use of these tools to highlight key concepts in the text add variety, make the messaging more interesting and **draw the eye** to the most important concepts on the page.
- **Bulleted or Numbered Lists** – Bullet points draw the eye like no other formatting tool in your arsenal. If you want a concept to get skimmed, then set it apart in a bullet point. Benefits are the most important part of your message, and as such make great candidates for bullet points.
- **Sidebars** – Sidebars might include a glossary, key points summary, testimonials, call to action, tips, etc... Sidebars draw the eye and tend to get skimmed. They also add variety and make the page more inviting.
- **Images & Captions** – Including images interspersed in the text breaks up the message and makes the page more appealing and inviting. Including a relevant image or two can do wonders. Use captions in your images, as they have a high probability of getting read. Most people can't resist reading a caption.
- **Links** – Where appropriate a [colored link](#) to another relevant page within your site also breaks up the page and improves site navigation. As an added **bonus**, search engines love to see websites with [lots of internal links](#) within the text of the site.

Case Study: If you need a case study of one possible way to format messaging that is highly skimmable, then look at the document you are holding. Notice that if you did nothing but skim the headlines, sub-headlines, bolded portions of the bullet points, and text that has been bolded or italicized, you can really get a feel for the messaging of this document. Indeed, if you skimmed nothing but the issues noted above, you would have read about 5% of the words on the page, but would have picked up 30 to 50% of the message. You as the reader are empowered and can choose what you want to read, and skip what you already know. Lastly, notice that you couldn't resist reading the caption under Aristotle's image.