

Writing for the web: principles and guidelines

Introduction

Changes in uOttawa.ca design and strategy, which have been rolling out since November 2013, are helping the University attract new visitors and stay relevant to our current audiences.

- If you are a communications officer or a web content provider, or if you represent your area of the University to the public or the campus at large, you should familiarize yourself with these principles and guidelines.
- If you are responsible for writing or maintaining content on any uOttawa site, this guide will be your best friend.

“Good web writing – why is it important for uOttawa?”

This guide will remind you of the fundamentals to communicating via the web. It also offers best practices and tips to help you write effective content about your program or service, to attract and engage your online audiences.

Getting to know your audiences

It's critical that you identify who your audiences are for your particular content or web transactions. Take a moment to think about the answers that the following groups of people might be looking for in the brief moment they land on your web page, and how they might want to receive them.

Here are some of the key audiences that visit the main pages of uOttawa.ca. The audiences your specific site reaches may only include some of these groups, or perhaps others.

Primary audiences for uOttawa.ca

- future students, here and abroad, and their parents or families
- new uOttawa students
- current students (graduate and undergraduate)
- alumni
- research chairs
- other academic institutions
- faculty and experts on call
- support staff

Secondary audiences for uOttawa.ca

- donors
- funding agencies
- news media (anything placed on the public-facing site can be quoted in the media, so always keep this group in mind)

Other considerations

According to recent uOttawa.ca use data, users are primarily anglophone (78%) and francophone (11%). While the University does strive to reach an international audience, the majority of users access the site from Canada. This should determine how you write your website content.

Web communication principles

The University has key ideas about how to build and maintain a web presence. These web principles should always apply when we write web copy.

User-centric and data-driven design

Being user-centric means you are focused on your users, the people who are visiting your web pages. You want to deliver information based on how your audience wants to consume it.

Knowing more about users is the central concept behind being data-driven. Data-driven design optimizes web environments through principles such as user data analysis.

Make your content as data-driven as possible by relying on information about your user. The most practical way to do this is through web analytics (see “Google Analytics” on the [Web professionals wiki](#)).

Traffic analysis

Study which hyperlinks your users are clicking on the most. Compile the results based on the total number of visits to your web page. Consider the percentage of users who click through to your link destinations. Ask yourself why these click rates are happening. Traffic patterns might exist on your page. Think about why, and what it might mean for your various types of content.

Mobile responsiveness

Being mobile responsive is a natural follow-up to being user-centric. In Canada, mobile usage varies by age, peaking in the 18-44 year old range. At uOttawa, we know that more students are using mobile devices and tablets to visit the website than ever before.

The new uOttawa.ca website responds to smaller browser windows that view it by automatically re-deploying pages in mobile and tablet versions. Explore uOttawa.ca on a mobile device or tablet — it is a good way to understand the mobile responsive experience.

Reduced scrolling

Users of smart phones or tablets are typically engaged in another activity when visiting our website (unlike desktop users, who aren't walking or waiting in line, for instance). Mobile users are less likely to have the focus required to go through a large amount of text.

Mobile users navigate with thumbs or a few fingers; for them, excessive scrolling through a web page with a lot of text can be awkward.

Less is more

Users are expecting to find ever-smaller nuggets of text that can be read and absorbed in the shorter amount of time. Succinct content is quality content. Without eliminating essential information, do your best to present it as concisely as possible.

Telling uOttawa's story

Think of our university as a place where great things happen, and where there are more cool and interesting stories going on than our generic profile information can illustrate. Think of the unique stories in your area or department.

While statistics and “quick facts” (like those below) are important in some contexts, don’t limit yourself to them:

About the University of Ottawa:

- *Location: the University of Ottawa is located in the Canada’s capital city.*
- *Student population: The institution boasts the title of largest bilingual university in the world. More than 40,000 students attend the University.*
- *Reputation: uOttawa holds a long-standing positive reputation. Graduates of uOttawa report a 97% employment rate.*
- *Research and programs: uOttawa is known internationally for its research breakthroughs. Through 10 faculties, it offers more than 450 programs.*

uOttawa core values

The core values of the University directly relate to and have an impact on the campus culture. They should be effectively reflected in the content published on our public-facing site.

According to uOttawa’s *Destination 2020* strategic plan, the core values are:

- Putting students at the centre of our educational mission
- Enabling our staff to grow as individuals and as a group
- Creating and sharing knowledge
- Promoting bilingualism and strengthening Francophone communities
- Practicing and promoting an ethic of service and civic responsibility

uOttawa’s strategic focus

The University has identified four main areas of strategic focus:

- The student experience
- Research excellence
- Bilingualism
- Internationalization

Writing quality content

Writing for the web is different than writing document briefs or reports, because people don’t read the same way on the web as on paper. The following guidelines can ensure that your pages are web-ready and accessible.

- Write **user-centric content**
- Use the **inverted pyramid of information**
- Ensure **readability** by writing at reading levels that match your audience
- Write in an **active voice**
- Stay in the **present tense**
- Follow accepted uOttawa terminology and style for **consistency**

- Keep language free of jargon for **simplicity**
- **Remove repetitive or redundant language** in your content

User-centric content

Simply put: it is not about you. Content is consumed by website users. Give them the content product they want.

Think of a first-time visitor to your site searching for information.

- Use a conversational style to introduce the topic at hand.
- Remember that the user may not have the same knowledge as you, the content expert.
- Explain without too many details to make reading easy.

Inverted pyramid of information

Journalists and web developers alike often use a model called an inverted pyramid, in which the most important, interesting and relevant information is offered first. Typically, the first sentence in the top block of text answers four “W’s”: who, what, where and when. Further information is then presented in order of diminishing importance.

Keep in mind that the web page title and subsite name will already make at least two W’s clear. Information that answers the “why,” such as background, should be placed in a second or third block of text, if published at all.

This structure of writing matches the behaviour of a web reader, who typically scans a page from top to bottom. If web readers do not find the relevant information in the first block of text, they will click out.

Readability

Readability refers to the academic reading level of a website’s content. There are numerous tests designed to determine the readability level of content. Focus strictly on web readability in a uOttawa context.

uOttawa readability level

Global best practices generally call for content that is understood at a Grade 8 to 11 reading level. The level varies depending on audience. The uOttawa.ca users are academics and support staff, along with students, potential students (in Canada and abroad) and their families. Adapt your writing to your audience’s reading level.

Keeping it simple

When in doubt, leave it out! The moment you think that your writing style might be too elevated, too heavy or too formal, reconsider what you’ve written. So many factors compete for your user’s attention online. Straining the comprehension limits of your reader is a sure-fire way to lose part of your audience.

Active voice

Generally speaking, write in an active voice (“Select your courses,” not “Your courses must be selected”), and address the reader in the second person (“you must select your courses” or “select your courses,” not “students must select their courses”). This makes the reader feel more engaged.

- Active voice helps make shorter, punchier sentences.
- Second person lets your text explain information from the point of the view of the user.

Present tense

Text should not refer to the future, as it raises the risk of content expiring. Expired information chips away at the credibility of content. Efforts should be made to avoid the past tense as it can clash with other contextual information and cause confusion.

Consistency of language

Content authors are experts in their own field, with their own vocabulary. To keep text consistent across the whole site, use accepted uOttawa terminology and style, some of which can be found in [Language Services' writing guide](#).

Simple language

Avoid using ambiguous terms, uncommon words and unexplained acronyms or abbreviations. Use language your readers already understand.

Removing repetition and redundancy

Too much content can make a site less accessible and readable. Reusing text on more than one section of the site, whether on the same page or separate pages, is repetitive.

Archive redundant content. Web content should always reflect current uOttawa programs, initiatives and policies.

Content quality checklist

- Readability level: Does your content contain any idioms, jargon or unexplained acronyms? Generally, keep the language informal and casual.
- Inverted pyramid: Is your content written with the web reader who scans the page in mind? Do you put priority content in the first block of text?
- Length of content: Are you using succinct sentences? Try to keep your sentences to 80 characters. (The text of this bulleted point is 123 characters.)
- Tense and tone: Have you written most of your content in an active voice?
- Consistent language: Are you using the words and terms that your readers will understand and are used to? The [Language Services Writing Guide](#) may be of some help.
- Redundant and repetitive language: Do your content updates make other text repetitive or redundant?

Using search engine optimization (SEO) and metadata

What is SEO?

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) refers to how easily a user can find uOttawa.ca pages through a search engine, your “findability.”

How do I optimize my findability?

You can optimize your content’s findability by using keywords when you create web content. If these keywords are prominent on your site, you increase your exposure and help uOttawa.ca attract new web visitors.

What is metadata?

Metadata, in its most basic form, refers to a website’s syntax, labelling and cataloging. It does not appear as public-facing content on the website but instead acts as supportive text that enables information discovery tasks such as searching. Keywords and metadata go hand-in-hand. Generation of metadata should be the role of the content author. Given the bilingual nature of uOttawa.ca, metadata must be provided to support both the English and French text. Meta description is the content displayed as the page description in search engine results.

Writing for social media

The University of Ottawa has established guidelines on how to create good content for social media, including important best practices on how and when to write for web applications such as Facebook and Twitter.

Please read [How to create content for social media](#) (documentation on the Web professionals wiki, which requires remote access via VPN when not accessing it from campus).

Complying with accessibility standards

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 is a widely adopted international accessibility standard. WCAG 2.0 raises the bar internationally on content quality and provides advice on how to achieve these expectations. It calls for content that can be easily read and understood by all users, no matter their level of ability to consume the text or images.

WCAG 2.0 Level A

The University of Ottawa meets WCAG 2.0 accessibility standards to Level A. Drupal 7, the content management system chosen for uOttawa.ca, enhances the University’s ability to maintain the Level A accessibility targets. Here are some key success criteria:

- Alternative text is available for non-text content
- Text transcripts exist for video and audio media
- Videos include captions
- Web pages are formatted in proper order
- Web pages are readable in a meaningful sequence
- Titles are effective and helpful

Please contact the office of the senior policy officer, accessibility, if you need specific training or instruction on accessibility issues.

NOTE:

The University of Ottawa's [Computing Help Centre](#) is offers technical support for issues related to accessibility and custom made solutions for uOttawa departments and services. You can make a request for assistance using the [online assistance request](#) or by phone (ext. 6555). This bilingual service is complementary to the current [online tutorials for creating accessible documents](#) and the [tools for professors and other educators for implementing accessible courses](#).