



Writing for Wooster's Website: Guidelines on Editorial Style and Content

January 26, 2009

I. Writing effective web content

Writing for the web is not the same as writing for a print publication — at least it shouldn't be — for one very simple reason:

People don't read web pages. They scan them.

They may scan in search of a specific piece of information, like **how to apply to financial aid**, or they may browse until some item of interest catches their attention. But they can't do either easily if they're presented with dense blocks of copy lifted verbatim from a print brochure. They'll just get aggravated and leave.

Some elements of writing effective web content do carry over from print:

- Lead with your main point; don't bury it.
- Write clear, concise prose.
- Avoid jargon.

Others are more specific to the web:

- Keep your sentences and paragraphs brief.
- Use subheadings to break up longer copy.
- Highlight **keywords**.
- Use bulleted lists where appropriate.
- Always focus on the audience's needs.

The deeper the page, the longer the copy

The distribution of content on a well-architected site should look like a pyramid. At the tip, the homepage presents the shortest, sharpest content of greatest relevance to the primary audience — in this case, prospective students — and a clear navigation scheme that allows the user to drill down quickly and efficiently to deeper levels of detail.

In keeping with this pyramid structure, the page templates for Wooster's new site accommodate more content the deeper you go: from 250 words on a standard Level 2 page (the first level down from the home page), to 800 words on a Level 3, 1,000 on Level 4, 1,200 on Level 5, and 1,400 on Level 6.

The logic is that as users drill deeper, they're seeking — and have the patience to read — more detail about increasingly more specific areas. However, that doesn't mean you have permission to try their patience by ignoring the basics of effective web writing once you reach Level 3. The fundamentals outlined above still apply.

Outdated, irrelevant content is worse than none at all

“On the web, nothing is more damaging to your organization’s reputation and brand than out of date content.”

So says Gerry McGovern, a widely read author, consultant, and expert on web content management. If that sounds like hyperbole, consider the case of UAL, parent company of United Air Lines.

On September 8, 2008, a newspaper in Florida added a story about a possible UAL bankruptcy to the “Most Viewed” link section on its homepage. The story was picked up by Google News, and within hours, UAL’s share price had dropped by 76 percent. Unfortunately, the story was six years old and UAL was not about to declare bankruptcy.

Of course, for most organizations, the damage done by outdated or inaccurate content is less dramatic, but the cumulative, corrosive impact is considerable.

People come to organizations’ websites to find answers and complete tasks. As often as not, they enter not through the homepage but an interior page that turned up in a Google search. To quote McGovern again:

“The more irrelevant and out of date pages you have, the greater the chances [your customers] will arrive on these pages. There is simply nothing worse than presenting a customer with useless content. It infuriates them, wastes their time, and drives them away from your website like a plague.”

Don’t just dump material on the website. Be certain there’s a clear purpose for putting it there — a purpose tied to site visitors’ needs. Write a first draft, then go back and try to rewrite it in half as many words. And don’t be afraid to remove content when it’s no longer needed.

Edit. Delete. Focus.

II. Telling Wooster's story

Of necessity, Wooster's website must serve many audiences and many purposes, but the single most important audience is prospective students. Why? Because of the way students conduct their college search today.

For each of the past several years, almost a third of our applicants have had no contact with the College until the point they submitted their application. These **“stealth applicants”** received none of our traditional print materials, had not visited campus, and had never met with an admissions counselor.

They'd rather investigate colleges on their own than respond to a direct mail or e-mail marketing campaign. And with the resources of the web at their fingertips, they can. So it's critical that Wooster's website present a picture of the college that is clear, vivid, accurate, and compelling.

But it must do even more than that.

A former president of the College was fond of saying that “Wooster has more tones than a piano.” This is, indeed, a diverse, multifaceted place. But plunking random keys on Wooster's piano is not enough. There needs to be a melody: a theme that ties what we say together into a coherent, compelling message.

Wooster's value proposition

A value proposition is one way to provide that melody. It's a clear statement of what an organization offers that differentiates it from its competitors. Like this:

The College of Wooster is the nation's premier liberal arts college for undergraduate research. Wooster offers an excellent, comprehensive liberal education, culminating in a rigorous, in-depth project of inquiry or creative expression. By working in partnership with a faculty member to conceive, organize and complete a significant project on a topic of the student's own choosing, every Wooster student develops abilities valued by employers and graduate schools alike: initiative, self-confidence, independent judgment, creative problem solving, and strong written and oral communication skills.

Wooster is a diverse, supportive, unpretentious community of learners where students can be themselves, discover and pursue their passion, and forge lifelong bonds with faculty, coaches, staff, and one another that enrich their college experience and sustain the college's tradition of excellence.

When creating content for the website, let the broad themes of the value proposition inform your work, and look for specific examples in your area that back up its claims.

III. Editorial style guide

It's important that any communication from the College, whether in print, e-mail, or on the web, be grammatically correct and follow a consistent editorial style.

For general questions of editorial style, including punctuation, abbreviation, and capitalization, please refer to *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th edition. (The exception to this rule is the Office of College Relations, which follows Associated Press style for all news releases and publications intended for the media.)

For guidance on a number of College-specific style questions, including some on which we deviate from Chicago, read on.

Academic and administrative titles

See titles

Academic courses

Capitalize proper names of courses, but do not capitalize discipline names used in a general sense: *History 106*; *Western Civilization to 1600*; *a history course*

Academic degrees

Capitalize the names of degrees when they are used in full, but not when they are referred to in general terms: *She earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from Pratt Institute*; *he holds a bachelor's degree in political science*

Academic departments and programs

Capitalize only when using the full, official name of the department or program: *the Department of Geology*; *the geology department*; *the Department of English*; *the English department*

Board of Trustees

Capitalize on first reference when referring to The College of Wooster's Board of Trustees. Do not capitalize "board" or "trustees" when used alone or on second reference: *The College of Wooster's Board of Trustees*; *the Board of Trustees*; *the board*; *the trustees*

Capitalization

Capitalize the full, official names of conferences, lecture series, prizes, etc.: *the Wooster Forum*; *the forum*; *the Karl T. Compton Scholarship*; *the Compton scholarship*

Names of seasons and academic periods generally are not capitalized: *fall semester*, *spring break*, *registration*

Formal names of these special events at the College are capitalized: *Convocation*; *Baccalaureate*; *Commencement*

Chairs and professorships

Capitalize the titles of named chairs and professorships, whether used alone or after an individual's name: *the James R. Wilson Chair in Business Economics*; *the Whitmore-Williams Professorship of Psychology*; *Carolyn A. Durham, the Inez K. Gaylord Professor of French Language and Literature*

The College of Wooster

Capitalize "The" when using the institution's full name. On second reference, either "the College" or "Wooster" is acceptable: *The College of Wooster*; *the College*; *Wooster*

Dates

Spell out months and days of the week. No punctuation is required if listing only a month and year, but in exact dates the year should be set off with commas: *June 2009*; *a May 11, 1999, memo*

Decades may be referred to in any of three ways: *the 1970s*; *the '70s*; *the seventies*

First year students

Use "first year" not "freshman" in all cases

http://

Use only if needed for clarity, e.g. for URLs without "www":

<http://admissions.wooster.edu>; www.wooster.edu

Independent Study

Always capitalize and spell out on first reference; I.S. may be used on second reference

Latin honors

Italicize but do not capitalize: *summa cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, *cum laude*

Majors and minors

Do not capitalize, except for proper nouns: *she is majoring in chemistry*; *he is an English major and philosophy minor*

Titles

Capitalize titles when immediately preceding a personal name. Titles following a personal name or used alone should be lowercase. Avoid abbreviations: *Professor Mark Wilson*; *Dean of Students Kurt Holmes*; *Mareike Herrmann, associate professor of German*; *an assistant professor of religious studies*; *the vice president for business and finance*

Web

Capitalize only when using the full phrase “World Wide Web.” Otherwise, lowercase:
web page; website; the web

Year in school

Do not capitalize “first year,” “sophomore,” “junior,” or “senior” when referring to a student’s year in school or the year in which a particular course is to be taken