

Writing for the Web:




Letting Go of the

Words

BY JANICE C. (GINNY) REDISH
Fellow, Washington, DC Chapter

What do users care most about in Web sites? In survey after survey, Web users say they care most about these factors:

- ease of use
- frequent updates
- high-quality content

Users want content that is quick and easy to access. They want content that answers their question or solves their problem or helps them do their task—whatever the question or problem or task happens to be at that moment.

As technical writers, we are critical to Web teams. Clear content is our specialty. We can also help get people quickly to that content. To do so, however, we have to learn to let go of words. Words are our stock in trade, but we can learn to do more with fewer words—and make better Web sites in the process.

How can we best prepare content for the Web? How different is the Web from paper documentation? Let's explore these questions by starting with a quick look at how people use the Web and paper. Then we'll consider some guidelines for "letting go of the words"—the primary key to guaranteeing clear content for the Web.

Skimming and Scanning

How do you use most Web pages? If you skim and scan, looking for key words and jumping from link to link, you are in good company.

On the Web

In a study of users working with a Web site, John Morkes and Jakob Nielsen found that 79 percent of study participants scanned (rather than read) each page (www.useit.com/alertbox/9710a.html). Nielsen offers four plausible reasons for this finding:

- Reading from the screen is slower and more tiring than reading from paper.
- Users want to be actively involved on the Web.
- Every Web page is competing with other pages for the user's attention.
- People simply don't have time.

On Paper

Nielsen's first reason is limited to the screen; it affects Web pages and all online documents, including PDFs and other online formats. The other three reasons, however, all have counterparts for print documents.

Users are also actively involved with print documents—choosing where to

go, choosing what to look at, interpreting what they see, deciding how much time and effort to put into understanding what they find, and so on. Print documents are competing with many other activities in users' lives. And people don't have time for print documents.

In fact, for many types of information and many tasks, people don't truly read at all. That is, they don't start at the beginning of a document and read every word to the end.

Schriver's Study

Karen Schriver reported a study in 1997 that had results almost identical to those of Morkes and Nielsen. Schriver asked people how they read printed instruction guides: Of her more than 200 respondents, 81 percent chose either "scan" or "read as reference." Think of "scan" as skimming or flipping the pages to find just the piece you need; think of "read as reference" as using the index or table of contents to find just the piece you need. Indeed, in another question on the same survey, more than 80 percent of respondents said that they *used* the manual for their most recently acquired product only before trying a new function, while trying a new function, or when confused.

"Reading to Do"

It's not a coincidence that the Morkes/Nielsen and Schriver studies had such similar findings. *It's the task users come with, as much if not more than the medium, that determines what users do.* Users don't come to the Web to read novels. They come to grab the information they need and move on—as quickly as possible. They come to "read to do," not to "read to learn."

Getting Information Quickly

For any document in any medium to be useful and usable, users must be able to *find* what they need and *understand* what they find. And they want to achieve both of these goals with very little time or effort. Consider the types of pages in a typical Web site. Even a site with millions of pages has only four basic types of pages, as shown in Figure 1:

- a home page
- “scan, select, and move on” pages (menu pages below the home page)
- “scan and get information” pages (where the real content is)
- forms pages (to give or to verify information)

To get users to information quickly, the home page and the “scan, select, and move on” pages must convey the information without requiring users to read paragraphs of text.

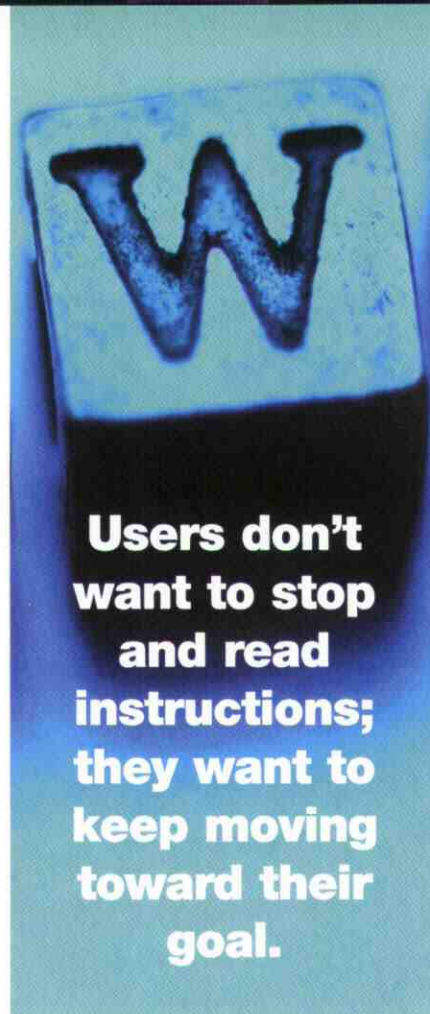
The Home Page

A home page has many functions. It must

- identify the site; establish “brand recognition”
- set the tone; establish a personality for the site
- tell users what the site is all about, with links, brief descriptions, and a tagline—without paragraphs of prose
- give users a “big picture” of all the possibilities on the site
- start users down the right path quickly

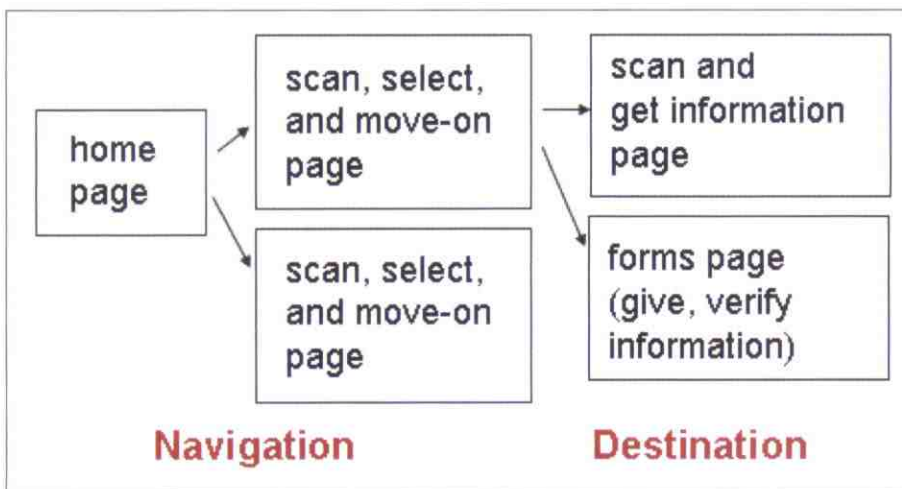
A home page is like the front cover, the back cover, the preface, and the table of contents to the site all at once and all in the space of half a piece of paper—and it works best if it has almost no complete sentences at all.

People don’t want to spend time on the home page; they want to move quickly toward their goal. Most users won’t read a paragraph-long mission



statement on a home page. They’ll look at a tagline (a three- to eight-word fragment that “says it all”). They’ll notice the visuals, colors, and typography; they’ll notice the tone of your few words. All of these elements affect the users’ perception of what type of site they are visiting and how helpful it will be. Users will take in all this information quickly, while trying to find the link they need to get off the page.

Figure 1. The four main types of pages in most Web sites.



The home page is a navigation page; it’s almost never the ultimate page the user needs. And navigation on a Web site is like finding the right page in a manual—perhaps a necessary step, but always an extra task on the way to the “real stuff,” the content.

In fact, many people avoid both home pages and the mid-level “scan, select, and move on” pages. They use a search engine like Google to try to go directly to relevant content pages. (An important implication of this increasing trend: If you want people who come into your content pages through an outside search engine to stay on your site and see all the other great stuff you have, you must make it easy for them to move around your site. I see many content pages that have no indication of the site they are part of, no way to get to the site’s home page, no global navigation that shows the main sections of the site. Pages like this are dead ends, and with every dead-end content page, you lose tremendous opportunities to capture an interested audience and share more with them.)

Navigation Pages

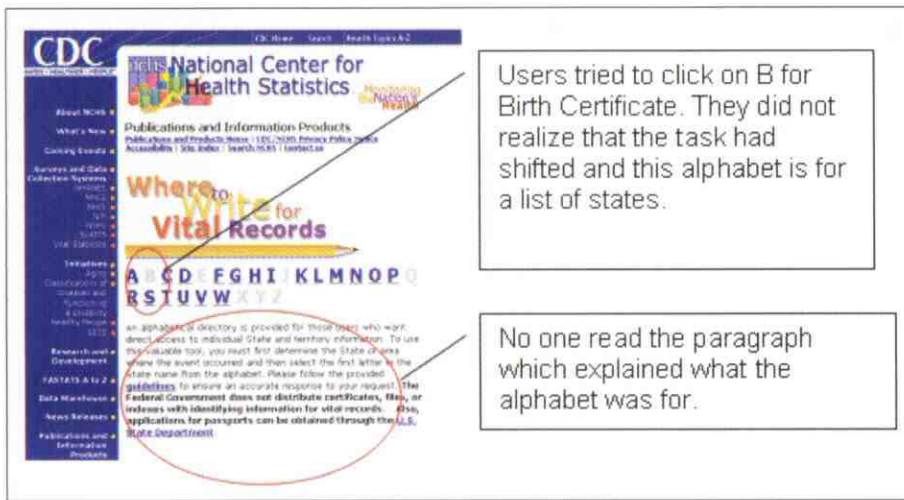
On most sites, it takes more than the home page to get users to the content. There’s just too much to do it all in one click. So users have to go through one or more menu pages below the home page to get to the content. They don’t want to read on these menu or navigation pages—they’re still not “there” yet.

As you structure a Web site, be clear about whether the pages you are constructing are in this middle level where people are still making choices to get to the real content—or whether they are the final, destination, content pages.

Case Study

Here is a case study where there were too many words on a navigation page: If you need a copy of your birth certificate and don’t know where to write, you can start at the government’s main portal, *Firstgov.gov*, and click on an option for **Birth, Marriage, and Death Certificates**. When I helped with usability testing of

Figure 2. The 2001 version of the page for vital records.



an early version of Firstgov.gov, this link led to the page in Figure 2. I watched as user after user got to this page and tried to click on **B**. What would you have done?

No one read the paragraph of instructions. These users were on a hunt for their birth certificates. **B** seemed the natural choice. The fact that **B** was grayed out didn't matter. Even for experienced users (who know that gray means "not available"), the connection of **B** with "birth certificate" weighed more than the message the gray **B** was sending. Users didn't even notice that the task had shifted. Instead of an index of topics, this alphabet is a list of the first letters of states.

This is a "scan, select, and move on" page. Users were not yet at the page with the answer to their quest. On pages like this, users don't want to stop and read instructions; they want to keep moving toward their goal. What users needed was an obvious instruction and the list of states.

The good news is that the usability test findings made a difference. Figure 3 shows the top of the page today. Now, with the names of the states clearly displayed, the next step (to choose a state) is obvious even to someone scanning the page quickly.

This version requires no sustained reading to understand what to do. (For those who want it, there's a link at the top to more detailed instructions at the bottom of the page.)

Moral of this case study: Let go of the words on "scan, select, and move on" pages.

Making It Easy

Once users get to the destination page that they need, you must make the content easy to use. In Figure 1, I called the destination pages "scan and get information." Even at the final level, most users don't read word for word. They skim; they scan; they look first at headings and links. How much they read depends on their reasons for coming to the page.

On content pages, users have at least four tasks:

1. Recognize that they are on a destination (content) page.
2. Decide whether this content page is relevant to their quest.

3. Find what they need on the page (often, they do not need it all).
4. Understand the information that they need (and they usually want to do this without reading a lot of prose).

The guidelines that follow help with all four of these tasks.

1. Think in Scenarios

When you plan content for the Web, think in scenarios. Why would a user come to this content? Most of the time, users have one of the following:

- questions they want answered
- tasks they want to do

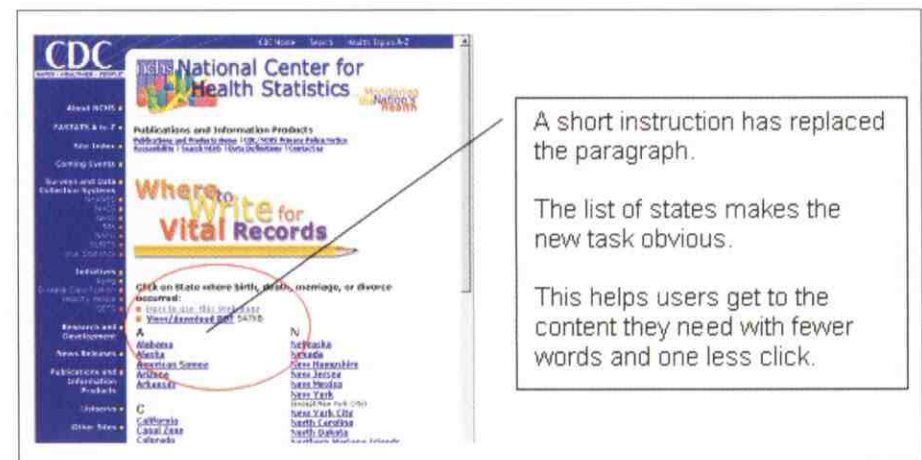
2. Break Up the Text

Headings, headings, headings. Use lots of them.

Even on paper, headings help. How did you approach this article? Did you first skim the headings? Did they help you even before you read any text? Do they help you as you go through the text? If you wanted to go back to find the information from the Schriver study, could you do it quickly?

On the Web, headings are critical. They chunk the text into small pieces. They put boldface or color on the page. They force the use of a little white space. They facilitate scanning. They can be accumulated into "anchor links" so that users can jump to the section they need. On the Web, it is important to make the chunks small (in prose or lists or tables or fragments) and to give each a heading.

Figure 3. The "after" of the vital records page at www.cdc.gov/nchs/howto/w2w/w2welcom.htm.



3. Use Q&A

The Question and Answer format is a great organization scheme for many types of documents—not just for sections that are labeled “Frequently Asked Questions.” When you think in questions and answers, you’ll find it easy to break up the text and use lots of headings. (Note that Q&A is great for policies, handbooks, rules, guidance, fact sheets, and anywhere that users’ scenarios involve questions. Gerunds [-ing forms; “doing x”] are best for action documents, like manuals and procedures, where the users’ scenarios involve tasks.)

4. Rethink Documents

As technical communicators, we have long urged our clients not to just put paper documents on the Web. We know that what does not work well on paper will be impossible to use on the Web. Moving information to the Web is a good opportunity to reconsider paper documents.

One problem in many paper documents is that a single paragraph may answer three or four different questions. Rethinking documents for the Web often means dividing such paragraphs into separate questions.

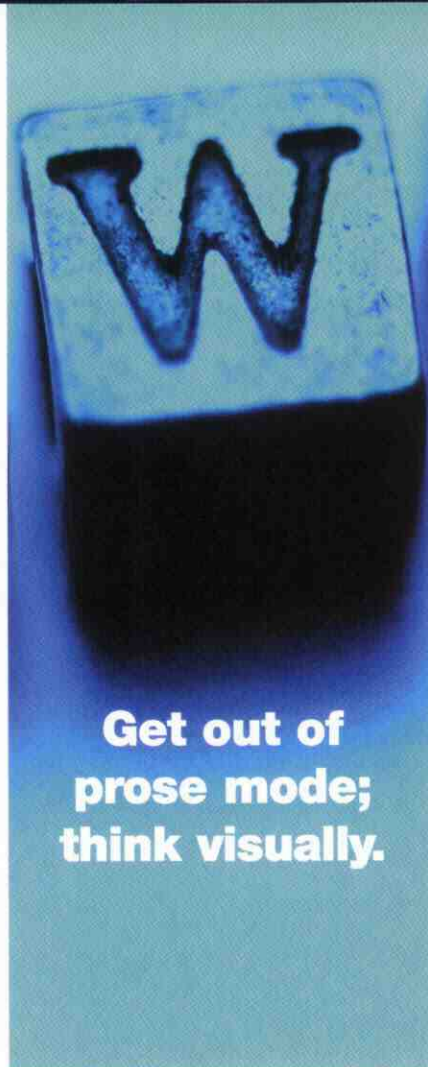


Figure 4 shows how you can take even a legal document and make it easy to use with small chunks and question

Figure 4. Part of the Washington state regulation on unemployment benefits (fortress.wa.gov/esd/portal/resources/wac/wac110-005.htm).

WAC 192-110-005 Applying for unemployment benefits--General

(1) **How do I apply for benefits?**

(a) File your application for benefits by placing a telephone call to the unemployment claims telecenter listed in your local telephone directory.

(b) In situations involving individuals with physical or sensory disabilities that make filing by telephone difficult, or in other unusual circumstances, the commissioner can authorize other methods for filing an application for benefits.

(2) **When can I apply?** You may apply at any time between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. (Pacific Time) Monday through Friday (excluding state holidays), even if you are working. Your claim is effective on the Sunday of the week you file your claim.

(3) **What information am I required to provide?** The minimum information needed to process your application is:

(a) Your legal name; and

(b) Your social security account number.

You should also be prepared to provide the names, addresses, dates worked, and reasons for job separation for all of your employers during the past two years. Other information may be requested in individual circumstances.

(4) **Will I receive benefits immediately?** The first week you are eligible for benefits is your waiting week. You will not be paid for this week. However, you must file a claim for this week before any benefits for future weeks can be paid to you.

headings. The questions presented here are the ones that an unemployed person is likely to ask. They make it easy for the user who gets to this page to say, “Yes, this is a content page; yes, this is the page I need; yes, I can find what I need; yes, I can understand the information.”

Note that by stating the question clearly we also help ourselves write a clear answer. Users respond positively to pages that are organized as questions and answers. Whitney Quesenbery, former manager of STC’s Usability SIG, tells me of a usability test participant who got to a page like the one in Figure 4 and said, “This is great. They already know the questions I have, and all I have to do is read the answers.” The user’s trust in the site went up because of how clearly it demonstrated that the authors understood what she wanted.

5. Use Headings as “Anchor Links”

Even on content pages, users often don’t want to read the whole page. They may need only one section. Users today do scroll down content pages: Most users I see in usability testing are comfortable with vertical scrolling—but not with horizontal scrolling. However, I’ve also often seen users miss what they are looking for when scrolling—and for low-vision users, scrolling is a serious problem. When the page is magnified, users can’t keep the scroll bar and the left margin of the text on the screen at the same time.

Anchor links, as shown in Figure 5, solve all these problems. The headings on the page are all listed at the top and each is a link to a section further down the page (www.cancer.gov/cancerinfo/chemotherapy-and-you/page2#).

Anchor links also have another benefit: They serve as an overview of the Web page, telling users what they’ll find on the page. They create an overview with no prose except the words in the links. In a recent usability test, I also found another benefit of anchor links—they helped users quickly decide that they were *not* on the right page.

Two caveats about anchor links:

Figure 5. An example of anchor links.

Chemotherapy and You
A GUIDE TO SELF-HELP DURING CANCER TREATMENT

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Understanding Chemotherapy (Section 2 of 8)

- [What Is Chemotherapy?](#)
- [How Does Chemotherapy Work?](#)
- [What Can Chemotherapy Do?](#)
- [Is Chemotherapy Used With Other Treatments?](#)
- [Which Drugs Are Given?](#)
- [What About Clinical Trials?](#)
- [Questions to Ask Your Doctor](#)

[Table of Contents for Booklet](#)

What Is Chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is the treatment of cancer with drugs that can destroy cancer cells

- Don't put a paragraph of text above the anchor links. If links are listed near the top of a page, users' eyes will go to the links. They'll miss any text above those links. Let go of those introductory words. Are they really necessary? If so, shorten them and move them to a first section—with its own anchor link—below the list of anchor links.
- Make sure the headings are coded as headings. Blind users who listen to the Web need the headings to be coded so that their software can help them skim through the headings—just as sighted users do with their eyes.

6. Think "Grab and Go"

Get out of prose mode; think visually. We've already talked about letting go of the words on home pages, on "scan, select, and move on" pages, and above the anchor links on con-

tent pages. To make your Web pages easy to use, you may also find that you can let go of lots of words within the content.

Write for scanning. Write so that users can grab the information and move on. That means taking material out of prose paragraphs and turning it into lists, tables—even fragments.

If you pose the right question as a heading, the answer might be a single word. For instance, in Figure 6 we see a section of the Food and Drug Administration's guidance for industry on new rules about labels for food (www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/transgui.html).

Figure 6. A section of the FDA Web site.

11.	Can <i>trans</i> fatty acids be labeled right now?
	Yes.
12.	When does this rule become effective?
	The effective date of this final rule is January 1, 2006.

If you use prose paragraphs, they should be short. A one-sentence paragraph is fine on the Web. Notice how many news sites use shorter paragraphs on the Web than they do in print.

7. Think Information or Topics

Large documents, books, and manuals make sense on paper. Imagine opening the box with your new computer and finding a stack of 500 index cards instead of a bound manual. You'd cringe. You'd worry those index cards would disappear all around the office. It's easier to have the information in a book that sits on the shelf, even if the information is really a compendium of many different procedures or the answers to lots of different questions.

But the book is only a logistic solution. Most people never read the book (the stack of index cards) cover to cover. Remember Schriver's 81 percent! Users go to the book when they need a specific piece of information—a topic—just one of those index cards.

Documents, books, and manuals are the wrong structures for the Web. People come to the Web for information, not for a document. They want a specific procedure or the answer to a question or information about a product or the latest news on a topic. Usability testing has shown over and over that Web users are topic-focused.

Topic focus means providing a database of those index cards with a helpful search engine or decision tree to get people to the right card quickly. Topic focus means bringing many more of the topics up higher in the Web hierarchy—having a structure that is broad and shallow rather than narrow and deep.

8. Grab Users with the First Few Words

Once you have the information in small chunks and have put a useful, informative heading—in the users' words—on each chunk, you have to think about how to order the chunks on the page and how many chunks to have on one page. One advantage of organizing the information as questions is that the questions themselves often

provide a logical order. Notice in Figures 4 and 5 how the first questions are, in fact, the first ones users would probably ask.

As users scan a page, they look quickly at the first few words. If those words don't catch their attention, they may leave. They may not scroll down to find out what else you have to say. And remember, we see much less on a screen than we do on a piece of paper.

Web writing requires that you put the main message up front. Instead of building to the conclusion, you start with the conclusion and put the details in other chunks further down the page or in other layers (topics linked to another page). This method is often called the "inverted pyramid" style of writing. All users get the key message; those who want more can scan or read to get more.

From Paper to Web

So, is writing for the Web different from writing for paper? My answer: yes and no.

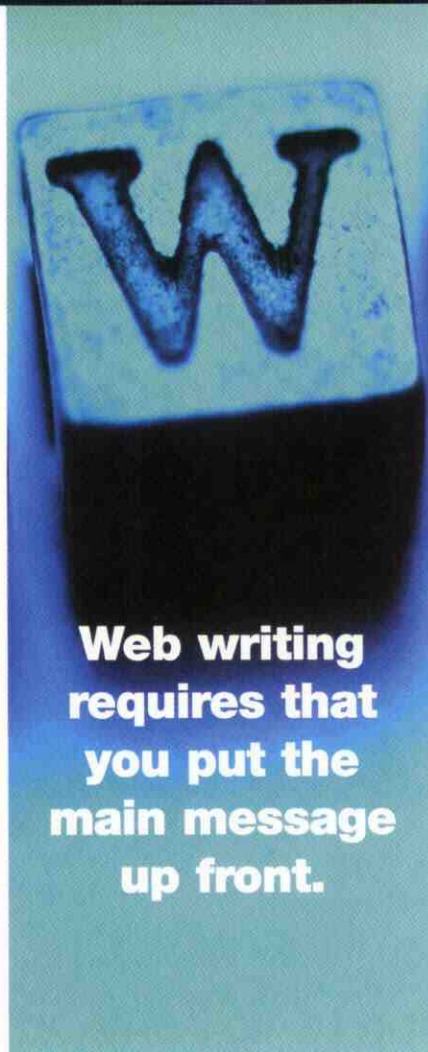
Yes, the Web Is Different.

Navigation to information is different on the Web. We have to think about different types of pages (home pages, "scan, select, and move on" pages, content pages where only a little is visible above the fold). Users have come to expect smaller chunks and more headings on the Web. Nielsen's first point is also correct: It's more difficult and slower to read from the screen.

No, the Web Is Not Different.

All the guidelines in this article apply to print documents when the purpose of the document is "reading to do." Most of the print documents that we develop as technical communicators are "reading to do." People don't read them from cover to cover. They use them by skimming, scanning, grabbing information, jumping into and out of them. It isn't the medium that requires these guidelines as much as it is the type of message.

If you ask why so many print documents do not follow these guidelines, my answer would be that they were poorly written.



Bottom line: If you write first for the Web, your paper documents will be much better. Try to let go of the words—for both paper and the Web. **❶**

Author's note: I thank Tori Matthews of LTS Corporation for suggesting the title of this article.

RESOURCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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www.useit.com/alertbox/9710a.html for the John Morkes and Jakob Nielsen study and Nielsen's guidelines for Web writing.

For more on the inverted pyramid style of writing, type inverted pyramid in Web writing at Google or another search engine and look at some of the examples.

Janice C. (Ginny) Redish is president of Redish & Associates, Inc., in Bethesda, Maryland. She has helped clients communicate clearly for more than twenty years; most of her work today concerns usability of Web sites. Ginny is an STC fellow and a former member of the STC board of directors. Contact her at ginny@redish.net or visit her Web site at www.redish.net.

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