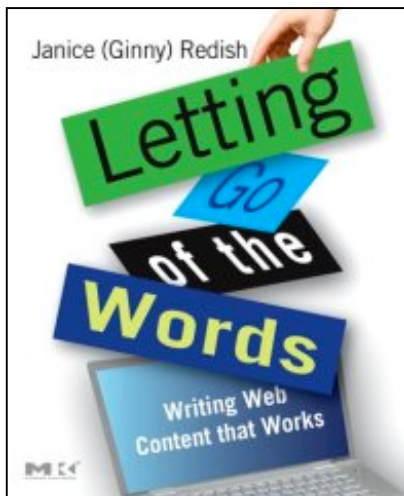


Content!  
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From



Janice (Ginny) Redish  
*Letting Go of the Words*

Morgan Kaufmann / Elsevier  
2007  
365 pages  
Soft cover  
978-0-12-369486

For more information, visit the book's web site:  
[www.redish.net/writingfortheweb](http://www.redish.net/writingfortheweb)

# Content! Content! Content!



Yesterday, while on the web, I

- downloaded a file
- ordered a book
- compared prices on a new camera I'm thinking of buying
- read a few of my favorite blogs
- checked the Wikipedia entry for *usability*
- looked for information on a health topic for my elderly aunt



What did you do on the web yesterday? Were you just browsing around without any goal or were you looking for something specific?

Most people say “something specific.” They want to send a baby gift or arrange a trip. They need to reorder their favorite specialty food or download a software upgrade. They have a question about company policy or want to check the balance in their vacation account. They have a problem with one of their gadgets and think they might find help for the problem online. Or they want to see what bloggers are saying about the latest political turmoil. They have a goal in mind when they go the web.

## People come to web sites for the content

People come to web sites for the content that they think (or hope) is there. They want information that

- answers a question or helps them complete a task
- is easy to find and easy to understand
- is accurate, up to date, and credible

Information = content. In this book, I'm going to use both words – “information” and “content” – to talk about the words and pictures that you and your team put on your web site.

In a survey of business professionals, 95 percent said “that it is very or extremely important that the information they need to do their jobs be accessible, up-to-date, and easy to find on the web.” [www.enterpulse.com/news-051502.html#](http://www.enterpulse.com/news-051502.html#)

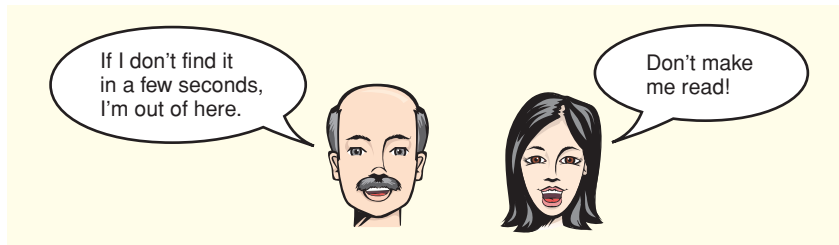
## Web users skim and scan



Last time you were on the web, how much did you want to read? How quickly did you want to get past the home page of the site you went to?



Did you search? How much of the search results page did you read? Did you navigate? How much did you want to read on the pathway (menu) pages you had to go through to get to the information you were looking for?



What did you do when you got to the page where you thought the information was? Did you start to read right away? Or did you first skim and scan?

Most people skim and scan a lot on the web. They hurry through all the navigation, wanting to get to the page that has what they came for. Even on the final (destination, information) pages, most web users skim and scan before they read.

For a study showing that most people scan web pages, see Morkes and Nielsen, 1998, and Nielsen, 2000.

Most web users are very busy people who want to read only as much as they need to satisfy the goal that brought them to the web.

In another study, people spent an average of 27 seconds on each web page (Nielsen and Loranger, 2006).

## Web users read, but . . .

Do people ever read on the web? Yes, of course, they do. They read links, short descriptions, and search results – but they want to read

those very quickly. They read news. They read blogs. They read on topics they are interested in.

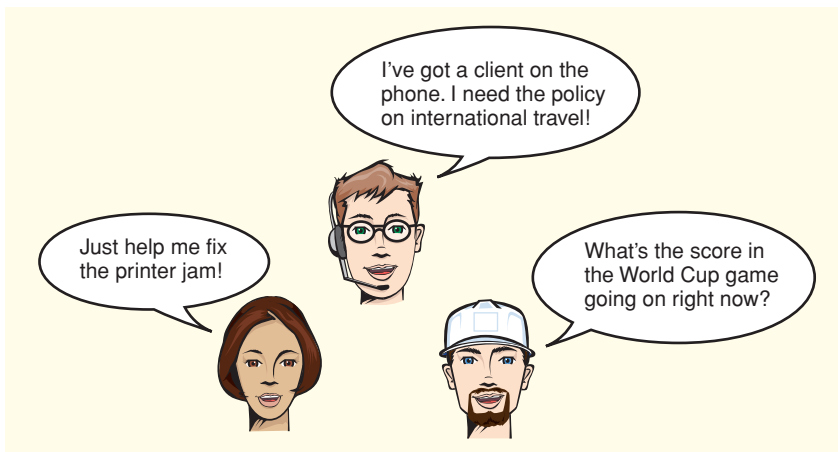
Note, however, how much of this reading is “functional.” In this book, I’m not talking about novels and poetry on the web. I’m talking about information sites, e-commerce sites, blogs that are trying to be informative, and information parts of web applications and e-learning programs.

People don’t come to the web to linger over the words. Most uses of the web are for gathering information or doing tasks, not for the pleasure of reading. If your busy web users lose interest or don’t find the information relevant, they’ll stop reading. If they can’t find what they need quickly enough, they’ll leave your site and go elsewhere.

And if people don’t find your site useful, they are not likely to come back. The Enterpulse study in the margin note on page 2 found that “66% [of the professionals in the study] rarely – if ever – return to a site once they’ve had a bad experience.”

In the study reported by Nielsen and Loranger, web users spent, on average, less than 2 minutes before deciding to abandon a site.

## They don't read more because . . .



- They are too busy.
- What they find is not relevant to what they need.
- They are trying to answer a question. They want to get right to the answer and read only what they need to answer the question.
- They are trying to do a task. They want to read only what is necessary to do the task.

- They are bombarded with information and sinking under information overload.
- As Nielsen and Loranger (2006, 22) say, “If people carefully studied everything they came across online, they would never get to log off and have a life.”

## What makes writing for the web work well?

Good web writing

- is like a conversation
- answers people’s questions
- lets people grab and go

## Good web writing is like a conversation

Think of your web content as your part of a conversation – not a rambling dialogue but a focused conversation started by a very busy person.

I'm going to be in London next week, and I'm going to use public transportation. I wonder if they have special deals for visitors.

I have a special section for visitors, but you have to recognize that it's under [Tickets and Oyster](#).

Oyster?? Why would I click on that?

www.tfl.gov.uk



How often does someone come to your web site to ask a question: How do I . . . ? Where do I find out about . . . ? May I . . . . ?

In many cases, web sites are replacing phones. In many cases, the point of web content is for people to get information for themselves from your web site rather than calling.

Caroline Jarrett's three-layer model of forms as relationship, conversation, appearance is as relevant to web sites as it is to forms. See [www.formsthatwork.com](http://www.formsthatwork.com).

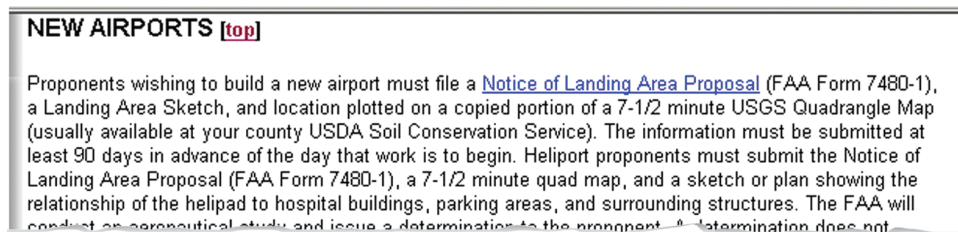
When site visitors come with questions, you have to provide answers. When site visitors come to do a task, you have to help them through the task. But, because you aren't there in person to lead them to the right place, give them the answer, or walk them through the steps, you have to build your site to do that in your place. You have to build your side of the conversation into the site.

## Good web writing answers people's questions

As we'll see in later chapters, if you think of the web as conversation, you'll realize that much of your content is meant to answer the questions that people come with. You do not want an entire site to be in a section called frequently asked questions. You do want to think about what people come wanting to know and then about how to give them that information as concisely and clearly as possible.

## Good web writing lets people "grab and go"

On the web, breaking information into pieces for different users, different topics, different questions, and different needs helps web users to *grab* just what they need and *go* on to look up their next question, do their next task, make a decision, get back to work, or do whatever comes next for them. In this book, we'll look at several ways to write so that busy web users can grab and go. Figures 1-1 and 1-2 show you just one example of how we can transform traditional writing into good web writing.



**Figure 1-1** Paragraph style makes it very difficult to quickly grab information.

www.faa.gov

## Building a new airport or heliport

### What must I submit?

<b>Airport</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Notice of Landing Area Proposal</a> FAA Form 7480-1</li> <li>• Landing Area Sketch</li> <li>• location plotted on a copied portion of a 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> minute USGS Quadrangle Map</li> </ul>
<b>Heliport</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Notice of Landing Area Proposal</a> FAA Form 7480-1</li> <li>• sketch or plan showing the relationship of the helipad to hospital buildings, parking areas, and surrounding structures</li> <li>• location plotted on a copied portion of a 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> minute USGS Quadrangle Map</li> </ul>

### When must I submit these documents?

At least **90 days** before the day that work is to begin.

**Figure 1-2** My suggested revision makes it easy for different users to quickly grab the information that they need.

## Introducing *Letting Go of the Words*

My goal in this book is to help you provide your site visitors with high-quality content that is easy to find and easy to understand. *Letting Go of the Words* is about planning, selecting, organizing, writing, illustrating, reviewing, and testing content that meets people's needs – that gives them a successful and satisfying web experience.

Let's talk a bit about what this book is and what it is not, as well as about how you might work with *Letting Go of the Words*.

### It's about writing and design, not technology

*Letting Go of the Words* is about strategy and tactics, not about tools. I'll help you think about the people who come to your web site and help you write so that they have a successful web experience and you have a successful web site. Technology changes too fast to be a major part of the book – and the principles of good writing for the web transcend the technology you use.

## It's full of examples

I know you want examples, so I've included lots of screen shots. (It's smart to want examples; it's easier to understand a point if you can see it as well as read about it.)

In many cases, I've also shown how I might revise the web page. In consulting projects, of course, I work closely with the subject matter experts to be sure that the final writing is accurate and consistent with the web site's personality and style. Here, I've shown what I *might* do because I have not worked with every web site that I show in the book.

Also, web sites change. In a few cases, the site changed while I was writing the book and I've included two shots to make a point about the change. Many more of the sites in this book may have changed by the time you go to look at them. That does not invalidate what I am showing. Even old examples can make excellent learning opportunities. If you see ways to improve the web writing on your site from any of the examples in the book, the examples will have done their job.

## It's based in a user-centered design process

User-centered design is a process for creating products that work well for their users. When you practice user-centered design, you focus on people: their goals, their needs, their ways of working, and their environments. User-centered design means that you are using technology to help people achieve their goals in ways that work for them.

The concepts and processes of user-centered design flow through this book. My goal is to help you develop a usable and useful web site *for your audiences*. When you talk to others, you may hear terms like “reader-focused writing,” “usability,” and “plain language.” To me, those are all names for what we are striving for. They are all part of the same idea; they are all aspects of user-centered design.

## You can start the process in several places

If you are revising an existing web site, you might want to start by finding out how well it works for the people whom you want to use it. The best technique for finding out how well a site works is usability testing: watching and listening while representative users try to find specific information or accomplish specific tasks with the web site.



You should not wait until the end of a project to do usability testing. In fact, usability testing is a great way to *start* your web project. Test early; test often; test on a small-scale, iteratively.

## You can jump around in the book

A book has to be linear, but you don't have to use it that way. The path I've set up through the book is one logical way to move: from users to scenarios to home pages to pathway pages to destination pages – and then within destination pages through overall design, writing, lists and tables, headings, illustrations, and links – ending with getting from first draft to final web page.

But that may not be the most logical path for you or for your project. Feel free to jump around in the book. Read it once through quickly now and then come back to it again when you have a specific question or need.

## You can join our web community

I hope that you will learn from *Letting Go of the Words* and that it will answer most of your questions. I would also like to continue the conversation that I'm starting in this book. Join us on the web site at [www.redish.net/writingfortheweb](http://www.redish.net/writingfortheweb) to ask a question, voice an opinion, get information about usability testing and other topics, and share your examples.

I'm putting lots of information about usability testing on the book's web site at [www.redish.net/writingfortheweb](http://www.redish.net/writingfortheweb).

Other good sources are [www.usability.gov](http://www.usability.gov) and the books by Barnum, 2002; Dumas and Redish, 1999; and Rubin, 1994.

## SUMMARIZING CHAPTER 1

Here are key messages from Chapter 1:

- People come to web sites to satisfy goals, to do tasks, to get answers to questions.
- They come for information, for the content.
- They don't read much, especially before they get to the page that has the information they want.
- Even on information pages, they skim and scan before they start to read.
- They want to read only enough to meet their needs.

- Think of the web as a conversation started by a busy web user.
- Answer people's questions – throughout your web content, not only in sections called frequently asked questions.
- Write so that busy people can *grab* the information they need and *go* on to whatever they need to do next.
- Start with a usability test. Test early; test often; test on a small-scale, iteratively.