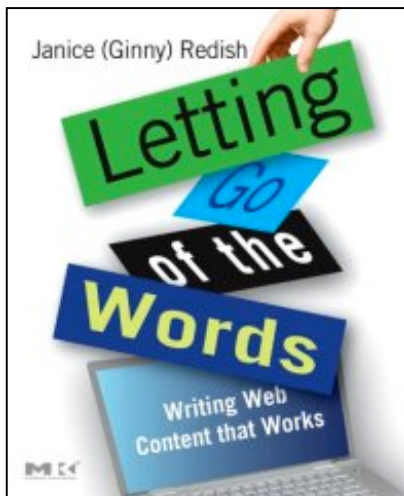


# Writing Information, Not Documents

# 5

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)

# Writing Information, Not Documents

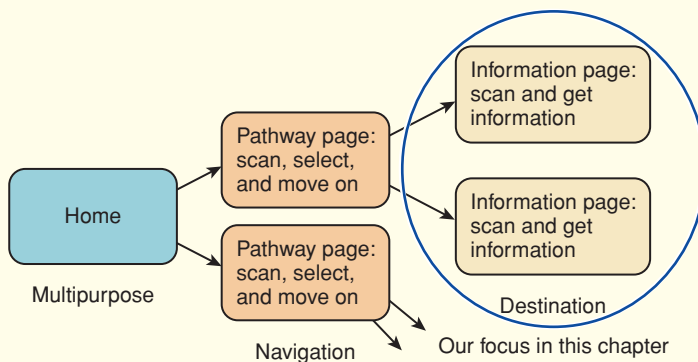
# 5

In this chapter, we tackle three important issues:

- Breaking up large documents
- Deciding how much to put on one web page
- PDF – yes or no?

All three issues relate to helping people get just what they need, when they need it, in the amount they need, as quickly as possible.

Right information at the right time  
in the right amount.



## Breaking up large documents

Most people come to the web for information, not for a complete document. They don't want the user manual; they want instructions for the task they are doing. They don't want the handbook; they want the answer to specific questions. They want usable, manageable pieces.

**Weight Control and Diet**

**December 2001**

**WHAT IS OBESITY?**


Stable weight depends on an even balance between energy intake from food and energy expenditure. Energy expenditure occurs during the day in three ways:


- As energy expended during rest (*basal metabolism*). This accounts for about two-thirds of expended energy, which is generally used to maintain body functions, such as maintaining body temperature and muscle contractions in the heart and intestine.
- As energy used to metabolize food (*thermogenesis*), accounting for about 10% of expended energy.
- As energy expended during physical activity.

When a person's caloric intake exceeds his or her energy expenditure, the body stores the extra calories in the fat cells present in adipose tissue. These adipose cells function as energy reservoirs, and they enlarge or contract depending on how people use this energy. If people do not balance energy input and output by adopting healthy eating habits and regular exercise, then fat builds up, and they may become overweight.

**Measurement of Obesity**

Obesity is determined by measurement of body fat, not merely body weight. People might be over the weight limit for normal

 Few users realize that the scroll bar tells them how long the page is.

 This is the beginning of a very long document but it gives no clues about what other questions it answers.


 This document takes 32 pages to print, but it does not tell you that.

Figure 5-1 A very long document does not work well on the web.

[www.reutershealth.com/wellconnected/doc53.html](http://www.reutershealth.com/wellconnected/doc53.html)



What would you do if you were looking for information on obesity and you came across the web document in Figure 5-1?

Would you print it out even though it does not tell you how many pages it will take to print it? Would you read it all online, scrolling or paging down many, many times? Or would you decide to go elsewhere for your information, hoping to find something that gave you more clues up front about what topics about obesity it covers?

To present content on the web in the amount that most people want:

- Think “topic,” not “book.”
- Break large documents into topics and subtopics.

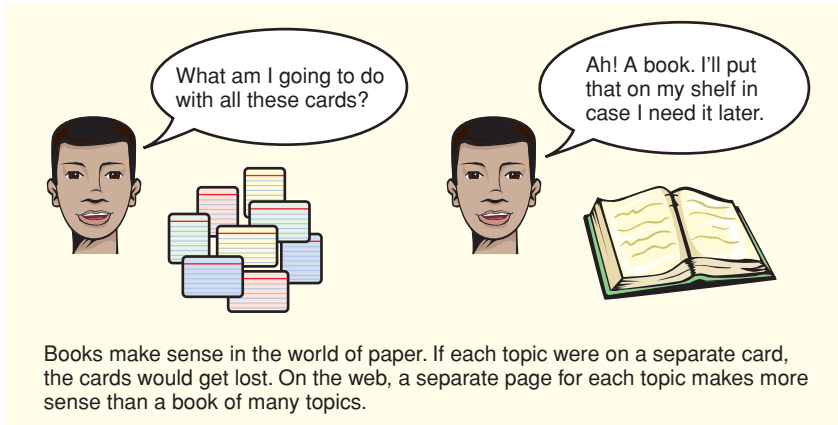
## Think “topic,” not “book”

Imagine that you’ve just bought a new cell phone. You open the box and see a stack of index cards in the box with the phone. Each card tells you how to do one task with the phone: set the time and date, choose the ring tone, put a number into memory, and so on.



How would you feel about getting this information on index cards? What would you do with the cards?

You might never open the plastic wrap around the stack of cards because then it would be hard to keep them together. You'd probably worry about losing them or about how messy they would be in your office, your kitchen, or your briefcase.



In the world of paper, a book is more comfortable than a stack of index cards. You know what to do with the book: you put it on an office shelf or in a kitchen drawer or in your briefcase. In the paper world, you need the book so all the pieces don't get lost.



But when would you ever go to the book? Wouldn't it most likely be to look up just one of the topics in the book? How much of the book would you want to look at? Wouldn't it be just one topic?

Online, we don't need the book. A better model for content on the web is a database with a good search engine and good navigation.

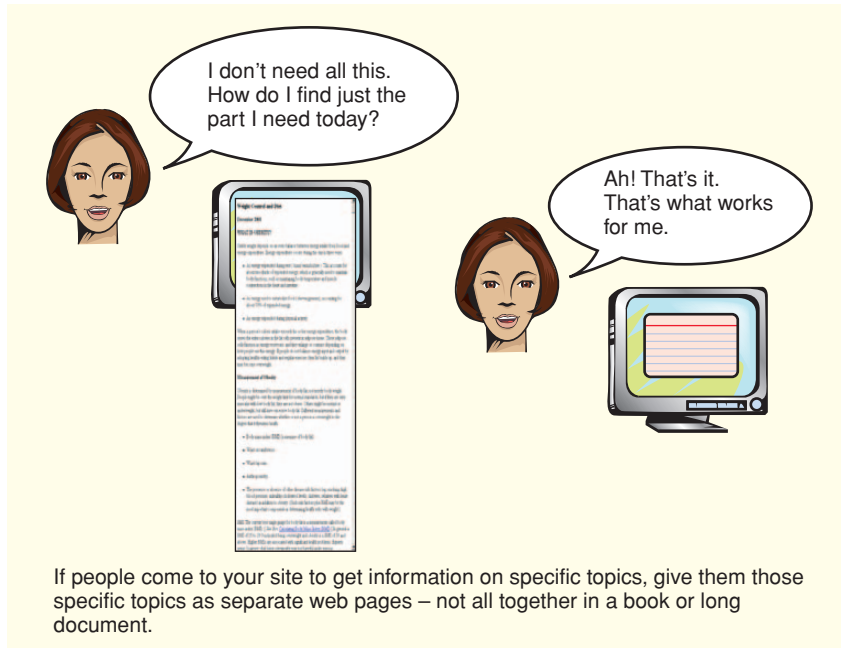


Figure 5-2 shows how Nokia has broken a user manual into a series of “index cards” on different tasks. Note how Nokia has also taken advantage of the interactivity possible on the web. Each task is not only a separate topic on a separate web page, it is also an animated

**Setting the Alarm Clock**

The alarm clock feature is based on your phone's internal clock and sounds an alert at a time you specify.  
Total steps = 4. Click each step below.

Tip: When entering shortcuts on your Nokia phone, press the keys in a quick and timely fashion.

[Step 1: Press the Navi key labeled Menu and press 7 1.](#)  
Set alarm time: prompt appears.

[Step 2: Enter the alarm time.](#)  
Use two digits for both hours and minutes. Enter 10:30.

Note: The Clear key does not work on this screen. If you make a mistake, re-enter all four digits.

[Step 3: Press the Navi key labeled OK.](#)  
The am and pm options appear.

[Step 4: Select am or pm and press the Navi key labeled OK.](#)  
Select am and press OK. The alarm is on.

Each task is presented on its own page.

You can read it quickly or click the links and watch it happen.

Each link is a step in an interactive demo that the user controls.

**Figure 5-2** Nokia makes good use of the web with interactive “index cards” for each task. [www.nokiausa.com/support/phones](http://www.nokiausa.com/support/phones)

demonstration. You can grab the information quickly by reading, or you can watch what to do by clicking each step in turn.

## Break web content into topics and subtopics

Consider breaking up your web content by

- time or sequence
- task
- people
- type of information
- questions people ask

### Divide web content by time or sequence

In many situations, time or sequence is a good way to organize information: something happens first, then something else, and so on. Figure 5-3, from Bank of America, shows a pathway page to a series of short articles on

The six headings give you a sense of the process – in time order – before you read the articles.

**Figure 5-3** Organizing information in a time sequence is often the logical way to break a large topic into useful pieces.

<http://www.bankofamerica.com/loansandhomes>

buying a home. Just scanning down the article titles (the links) gives prospective home buyers a sense of the tasks involved and the sequence they come in.

## Divide web content by task

When you are putting task-based information on a web site, realize that, in almost all cases, a site visitor is looking for information on only one of what may be many tasks that your product lets users do.

Breaking up task-based information into a single web page for each task is the best way to help web users get just the content they need. Of course, you also need a good search engine and a good navigation structure to allow your site visitors to quickly find the right web page.

Figures 5-4 and 5-5, from the Canadian version of Intuit's QuickBooks, show how some companies are breaking up their online manuals into a database of separate articles on different tasks. The first screen invites you to search by keywords, start down a navigation path, or choose one

The screenshot shows the Intuit QuickBooks Support page. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'Intuit Home', 'Quicken', 'QuickBooks', 'QuickTax', and 'WillExpert'. On the right side of the bar are 'Home', 'Français', and 'Shop'. Below the navigation bar, the page is titled 'QuickBooks Support • Search Home'. The main content is divided into two columns. The left column is titled 'Search for Articles' and contains a search box with a dropdown menu set to 'All of the words' and a 'Search' button. Below the search box is a list of product categories under the heading 'Start by selecting your product:'. The right column is titled 'Top Articles' and contains a list of five article titles, each preceded by a right-pointing arrow. Three green callout boxes with smiley face icons are overlaid on the page. The first callout points to the search box and says 'You can search by topic.' The second callout points to the product list and says 'You can navigate by product.' The third callout points to the 'Top Articles' list and says 'If your problem is one of the most frequent ones, you get to the answer in one click.'

**Figure 5-4** A database of articles with good search and navigation is a good model for the web.

<http://knowledgebase.quickbooks.ca>



**Figure 5-5** Each article is like a separate “index card” of information.

<http://knowledgebase.quickbooks.ca>

of the most frequently asked questions. When you get to the information pages, you get just the article on your specific need.

## Divide web content by people

Another useful way to break up your web content is to consider who is going to use the information.

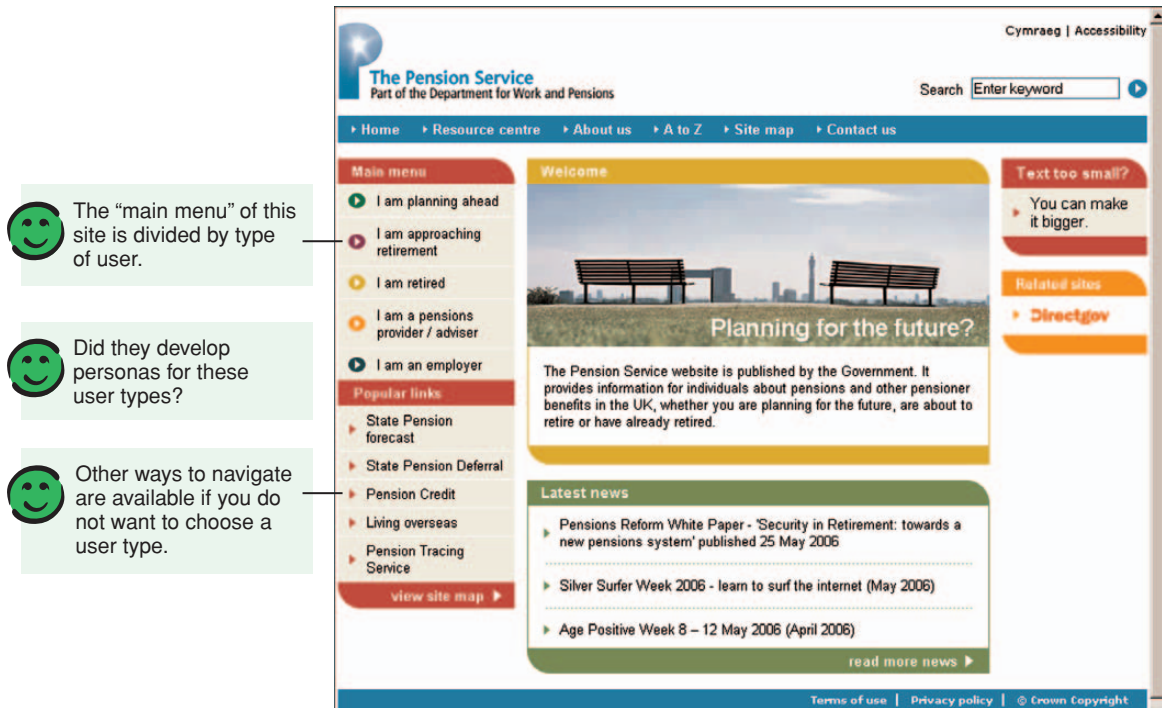
Separating information for different site visitors may work well at many levels within a site. The Nokia and Intuit examples earlier in this chapter ask people to self-identify by the product for which they want help. That’s typical of support and troubleshooting information on sites that support many products.

On some web sites, information for different people is totally separate and the site helps people self-identify right on the home page. Figure 5-6, from The Pension Service in the U. K., shows how one site helps its web users start down paths that are relevant to their different needs.

Breaking up information by user types works, however, only if people will be able to quickly and clearly self-identify into the right group. If they have to stop and think about which link to choose – or if they are likely to start down a wrong path – dividing the information by user type may be more frustrating than helpful.

Consider also whether some people will feel excluded if you divide information by user type. They may feel excluded if they do not see them-

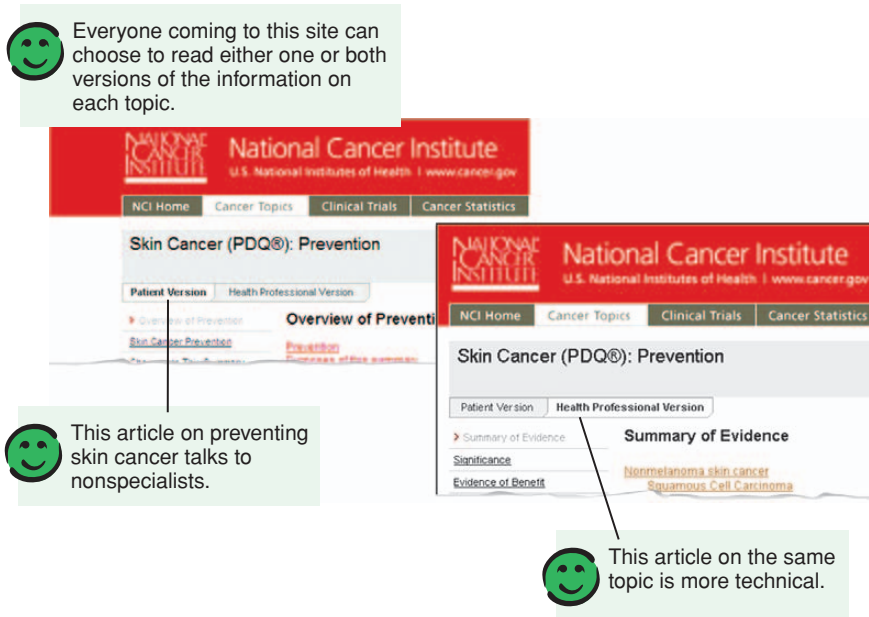




**Figure 5-6** Having separate sections for different user types (different personas) makes sense for some sites, but only if people will easily identify which user type to choose. [www.thepensionservice.gov.uk](http://www.thepensionservice.gov.uk)

selves in any of your user types. Even if they find a relevant user type, they may think you are excluding them from information they may want because that information is under a different user type.

If people are likely to want information you have under different user types, make it clear and easy for them to move between different versions or different levels of related information. For example, Figure 5-7 shows how the U. S. National Cancer Institute (NCI) lets people move easily between articles written for the general public and articles on the same topic in more technical detail and more technical language aimed at health care professionals.



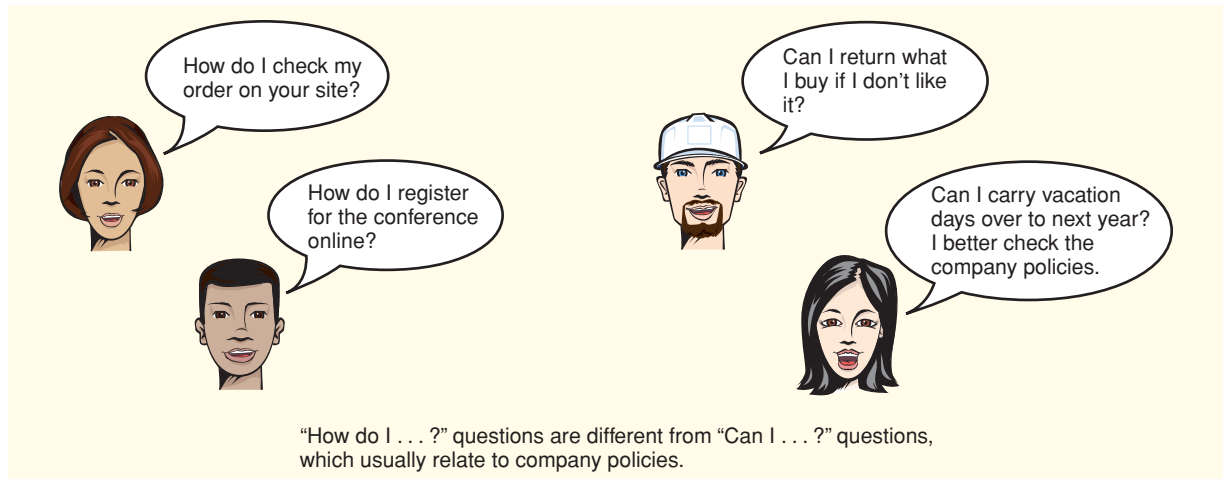
**Figure 5-7** Separating information into general and technical articles may work well. If some site visitors want both, make it obvious how to move from one to the other. [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

The NCI folks learned in usability testing that patients and their families liked starting with the general information in lay language, but they also wanted access to the more technical information when they felt ready for it.

## Divide web content by type of information

“How do I . . . ?” defines one big set of questions people come to web sites to ask. “How do I . . . ?” questions are about tasks or procedures. People want the information as step-by-step instructions.

“Can I . . . ?” “May I . . . ?” “Must I . . . ?” “Why should I . . . ?” and “What do I need to know about . . . ?” define another big set of questions. These questions are about rules, policies, concepts, and facts. People want the information as questions and answers or clear chunks of facts with good headings.



In many cases, you have both “can I” and “how to” information about the same topic. You have policies and procedures. Your site visitors may know the “can I” and need the “how to.” They may know the “how to” and need the “can I” for a specific situation. Answer the different types of questions on separate, linked pages or on separate sections of the same page.

Figures 5-8 and 5-9 show how the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand, has separate, but linked, pages on facts about enrolling (entrance requirements) and the process of enrolling.

For user manuals and other large documents, many technical writing groups are breaking up their information, using the Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA). For more on DITA, see <http://www-128.ibm.com/developerworks/xml/library/x-dita1>.



**Figure 5-8** Information that answers the question “Am I eligible?” is separate from, and linked to, information on “How do I enroll?” [www.otago.ac.nz/study/entrance.html](http://www.otago.ac.nz/study/entrance.html)

This page explains the process. It answers the "How do I..." question.

If you need to check requirements, they are here through this link.

**Figure 5-9** Separate, linked pages are a good way to organize related web content while keeping each web page short and succinct. [www.otago.ac.nz/study/enrolling.htm](http://www.otago.ac.nz/study/enrolling.htm)

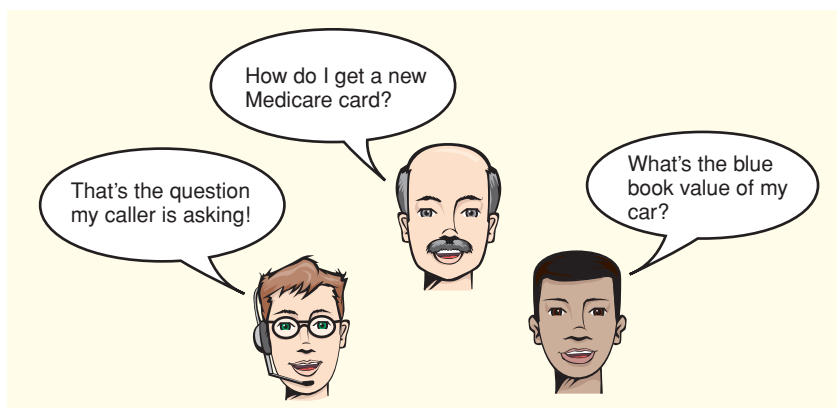
## Divide web content by questions people ask

People come to web sites with questions, so using questions and answers may help people find what they need.

As you write questions, match the way that people would ask the question. You want to help them quickly recognize the question as the place to get the information they need. In fact, an advantage of using questions is that if users come with only a vague sense of what they want, they may recognize a question even if they had not thought of those specific words.

Caroline Jarrett suggests that too often FAQs (frequently asked questions) on web sites are really EAQs (easily answered questions).

Be sure that the questions you include are the ones that your site visitors come with - not just the ones you want to answer.



Writing good questions comes up again in more detail in Chapter 10 on headings.

Figure 5-10, from Briggs and Stratton, a company that sells engines and other machinery, shows how one company organizes its customer support by topic, product, and questions.

The screenshot shows the Briggs & Stratton Customer Support page. On the left is a navigation menu with links for Home, Products, Maintenance, Shopping, Lawn Care, and Safety & Use. The main content area is titled 'Maintenance' and 'Briggs & Stratton Customer Support'. It features a 'Select Product Type:' section with icons for Engines, Portable Generators, Home Generator Systems, Pressure Washers, and Outboard Motors. Below this, there are two sections of questions: 'Engines' and 'Portable Generators'. Each section contains a numbered list of questions, such as 'How do I identify my Briggs & Stratton engine?' and 'Where do I get parts for my Generator?'. Three green callout boxes with smiley face icons provide annotations: the first points to the product selection area, the second points to a question in the 'Engines' list, and the third points to a link at the bottom of the 'Engines' section.

You start by searching or going through a visual table of contents to the five sections.

If your question is here, you are just one click from the answer.

Links take you to more questions – and to a place to submit your new question.

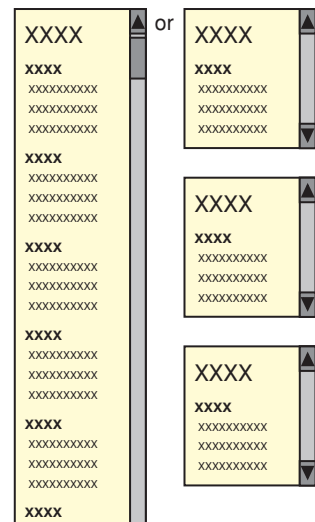
Figure 5-10 Databases of questions organized by users' topics are a useful part of many web sites.  
www.briggsandstratton.com

## Deciding how much to put on one web page

We've been looking at how to break your web content into pieces – by time or sequence, by task, by people, by type of information, and by the different questions that people ask. Once you have the pieces, you have to decide how many topics, articles, questions, or pieces of information to put together on one web page.

One page or separate pages? When faced with that decision, ask yourself these questions:

- How much do people want in one visit? How connected is the information?
- Am I overloading my site visitors? How long is the web page?
- What's the download time?
- Will people want to print? How much will they want to print?

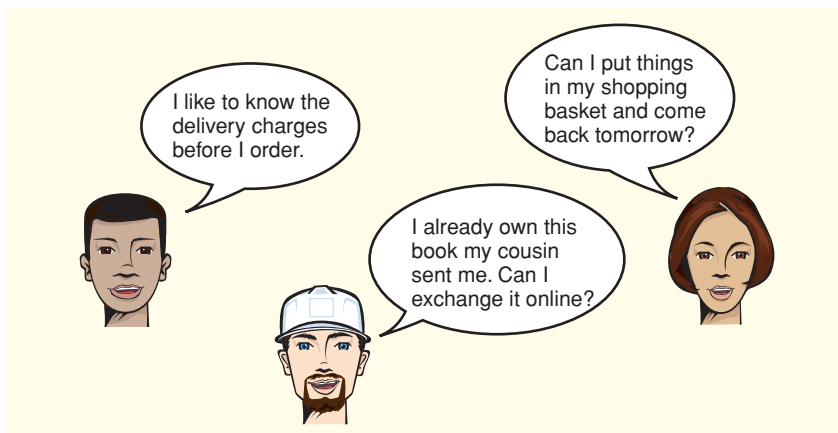


## How much do people want in one visit? How connected is the information?

I see many web pages where topics are stacked together on one web page when they are answers to different questions that different people ask at different times. The topics fit together from the organization's point of view, but the web user wants only one when visiting the site.

For example, you can see in Figure 5-11 that Dymocks, an Australian bookseller, has all of its customer service information in one file – one long web page. Whether you are looking for the company's privacy policy, how to use its shopping basket, or whether you can return an item, you go to the same page. I've been in the Dymocks store in Sydney many times; it's a wonderful bookshop. But this part of the web site doesn't match most web users' needs.

A page like this is built for the scenario, "Mario wants to read all of our customer support policies and procedures at one time." That scenario doesn't seem likely. It's much more likely that site visitors will start conversations like the following with the site.



**DYMOCKS**  
AUSTRALIAN BOOKSELLERS

1 Home 2 Search 3 Browse 4 Basket

QUICK SEARCH Title Author ISBN GO!

## Dymocks Online Help

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT DYMOCKS ONLINE

[Contact Us](#) | [Privacy & Security](#) | [Finding a Product](#)  
[Shopping Online](#) | [Member Services](#) | [Dymocks Stores](#)

**Contact Us**

- Contact Us
- Store Directory

**Privacy & Security**

- Privacy
- Shopping Security

**Finding a Product**

- Searching
- Browsing
- Product Availability

**Shopping Online**

- How to buy
- Updating Your Basket
- Shopping Basket Problems?
- Payment Options
- Delivery Charges & Methods
- International Delivery
- Delivery Periods
- Gifts & Gift Wrapping
- Gift Vouchers
- Refunds Policy
- Cancelling Your Order
- Pricing & GST

**Member Services**

- The Booklover Loyalty Program

**Dymocks Stores**

- Ordering from Our Stores
- Store Directory

**Introduction to Dymocks Online**

Dymocks Online is the leading Australian bookselling website (according to Hitwise). Whether you like to shop in store or online, you will find the website a useful resource.

The range of titles on the website represents the range found in our main store in George St, Sydney, plus a number of titles we are able to order on request. Note that this range is normally not found in other, smaller Dymocks stores. Your online order is fulfilled from the stock in the main store and sent to you by either courier or Australia Post. At this time we cannot offer a store collection service.

Please note that we cannot advise whether a book can be found in a particular store, as each store selects its own inventory data.

Please note that prices, products and availability on Dymocks Online may differ from Dymocks stores. All prices on Dymocks Online are in Australian dollars.

**Privacy & Security**

**Privacy**

Dymocks Online respects your right to privacy under the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) and is required to comply with the national privacy principles in respect of the collection of personal information from individuals.

The information we collect

On our website, you can order products and subscribe to our online newsletter. The sort of personal information we collect from these pages includes your name, address, email address, telephone number, fax number, credit card information and information about your areas of interest.

How you can access or correct personal information

You may request access to personal information we hold about you by

All the help topics are on one very long page.

At some resolutions, you can't see all the topics in this list.

The page keeps going beyond this.

**Figure 5-11** Very few, if any, site visitors want all of this long page. The topics go together only from the company's point of view, not from the web user's.

www.dymocks.com.au

These site visitors each want only the answer to the one question they are asking. They don't want to have to wade through other information to get to what they want.

From the web user's point of view, a more useful design would be a pathway page with topics each leading to a much shorter page that covers just that topic – the way it is done by Powell's of Portland, Oregon (Figure 5-12).



In this web site, visitors choose the help topic they need from a pathway page.

The screenshot shows the Powell's.com website with a navigation menu on the left. A callout box with a smiley face icon points to the 'Payment Methods' section of the menu. The 'Payment Methods' section contains the following text:

Powell's.com accepts payment by credit card. Businesses in the US ordering regularly by volume may apply to be billed by our Accounts Receivable office. Or, for those of you who'd prefer to order by phone, we've set up a special page to show you how.

**Paying by Credit Card**

Powell's accepts American Express, Discover, JCB, Master Card, and Visa. If you are paying by credit card, your billing address must be the same as the address to which your credit card statements are mailed. Your card will not be billed until we have your books in hand and are ready to ship.

**Billing with our Accounts Receivable Department**

If you're ordering for a US business, library, or educational institution, you may want to open a billing account with us. When selecting a payment option:

1. Mark the Accounts Receivable box, then
2. Click on the "Submit" button at the bottom of the page.

You may leave the credit card information section blank - we'll need more specific information about your institution to set up your business account.

A page will appear on your browser that you'll need to read, sign, and fax to us, along with three credit references. Once we've approved your account, you'll be free to pay with your Business Account.

**Please Note:** Only purchases of \$50 or more may be billed to Accounts Receivable.

Figure 5-12 If each topic answers a different need, giving each topic its own page makes sense for web users.

www.powells.com

## Am I overloading my site visitors? How long is the web page?

We've just seen when you should break up web pages that cover many different topics. A web page on one topic can also be too long. Consider again the example at the beginning of this chapter: the 32-page document on Weight Control and Diet. That's just too much for any person to absorb at once.



Most people today do scroll vertically if the page layout indicates that the page continues. But they won't scroll forever. Think of three or four scrolls' worth as a maximum length for a web page.

To break up longer pages, use the guidelines earlier in this chapter to find a good way to group and divide the information into subtopics. That way, you can make a series of pages with a table of contents on a previous (pathway) page.

## What's the download time?

A third consideration in deciding between putting information together on one web page or separating it onto separate web pages is how long it will take for your site visitors to get what they need. Remember that many people still have slow connections and pay by the minute.

People are going to be annoyed if they wait a long time for a page that has much more than they need. On the other hand, if you break up the information onto many small pages and your visitors want all those pages, waiting for each one to load may be annoying. And the time between pages may interrupt their putting the information together in their heads.

So you have to think about the issue of download time together with the issues of how much of the information people want and how connected it is in their minds.

## Will people want to print? How much will they want to print?

And the fourth question to think about in deciding between one page or separate pages is what people might want to print.

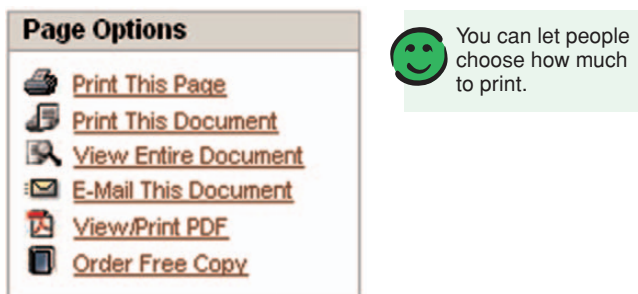
- If people want just one section and have to print pages and pages to get it, they waste toner, paper, and time. That's frustrating.
- If the document is broken into pieces that are so small that people have to print several web pages in succession to get what they need, that's also frustrating. They waste paper and time, if not toner – and it takes many clicks to finish the task.

So you have to consider how much people want in any particular visit to your web site.

If you have some people who want to print only a little, some who want to print more, and some who want to print an entire document, offer

Make sure that your pages print well.

Always include a way for people to print the content without losing the end of each line of text.



**Figure 5-13** This web site, where sections of a document are separate web pages, offers people three printing options (as well as other options). [www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/chemotherapy-and-you](http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/chemotherapy-and-you)

options. Figure 5-13 shows how the U. S. National Cancer Institute makes some of its content available.

## PDF – yes or no?

You probably already know this, but just in case . . . PDF stands for portable document format. PDF was invented by Adobe Systems, Inc. ([www.adobe.com](http://www.adobe.com)), as a way to publish documents that anyone can read, regardless of whether they are working in the same operating system or using the same software that the document's creator worked in.

A PDF file keeps the layout, page breaks, and fonts of the original document. With PDF, you can have a document that looks the same whether you send a paper copy to someone or that person prints it from the web.

Anyone who has Adobe Acrobat Reader on a computer can open, read, and print the document. Most new computers today come with Acrobat Reader already installed, and Adobe allows free downloads of Acrobat Reader from its web site. Anyone who is comfortable downloading and installing software can have a copy.

## Should you rely on PDF files for your web content?

I'm not going to say, "Never put up a PDF file." As always, it comes down to your goals, your audiences, and their scenarios.

However, realize that, with most PDF files, you are providing a paper document on the web rather than web-based information. If the docu-

ment looks like a paper document or if it is large, people are likely to print it rather than read it on the screen. You have distributed the document; you have saved the printing and shipping cost; you have shifted the cost and effort of printing to your audiences – but have you really met their needs?

## When might a PDF file be appropriate?

If you are using the web to distribute journal articles or other material that you expect people to print and use on paper, and if your audiences are comfortable with PDF files, PDF may be the right way to go.

The web is a great distribution mechanism:

- Many people are now more comfortable going to a search engine than trudging down to the library.
- You can get the PDF whenever you want (no need to know when the library is open; no need to work only in the daytime).
- A search engine may find what you want from a few keywords (no need to understand the way the library organizes the journals; no need to go hunting through the stacks; no worries that someone else will have already taken the article).
- You can send the link to colleagues or get the document instantly because someone sent the link to you.
- You can have and give access to the documents to people who might not live near a library or who are in countries where mail delivery is slow or unreliable.

Distribution is the great advantage that the Internet has over paper, even for paper documents.

## When is a PDF file not appropriate?

However, PDF documents are often not the best way to create a useful and usable web site. Break documents into non-PDF pieces –

- when people don't want the whole document
- when people want to read from the screen
- when your audiences are not comfortable with PDF files or with downloading software
- when accessibility is an issue – and you should always consider accessibility

## **When people don't want the whole document**

If people come to your web site for information – not for documents as a whole, but for only some of the information in those documents – a PDF file defeats the very purpose and nature of the web.

Yes, PDF files are searchable. But people don't want to first navigate or search to get the document and then search again within the document. They want to navigate or search directly to the specific information that they want. And many people don't know how to search in a PDF document.

And yes, you can divide up a PDF document and give it a linked table of contents so that people who know how to open the index list can jump to a specific place in the document – but only if you have set it up well. Most PDF files are just put up on the web, with no attention to internal links.

A story: I was getting information from the web site of a government agency when I reached a point where I needed the physical address of one of the agency's regional offices. A link on the page said it would take me to a list of the regional offices. What would you have expected to happen by clicking that link? I expected a single page with a list of offices. To my surprise, Acrobat started to open. I waited, as one must, and a document opened that had nothing at all to do with regional offices. It was a report on something totally different from the topic I was getting information about. My first thought was "wrong link," but curiosity led me to at least look quickly through the document. Sure enough, an appendix 20 pages later was the list of regional offices I needed.

That's not a good use of PDF. If the link promises a list of offices, take the page out of the paper document and make it a separate (not PDF) web page.

## **When people want to read from the screen**

Why make the document look just like paper if it is not meant to be used on paper?

For example, a two-column layout works very well on paper. It doesn't work well on the web if you can't see the entire page without scrolling. On the screen, people have to scroll down while reading only halfway across the screen and then scroll up again to read the second column.

A document like the U. S. Department of Agriculture Issue Brief in Figure 5-14 just begs to be printed and read off-line.

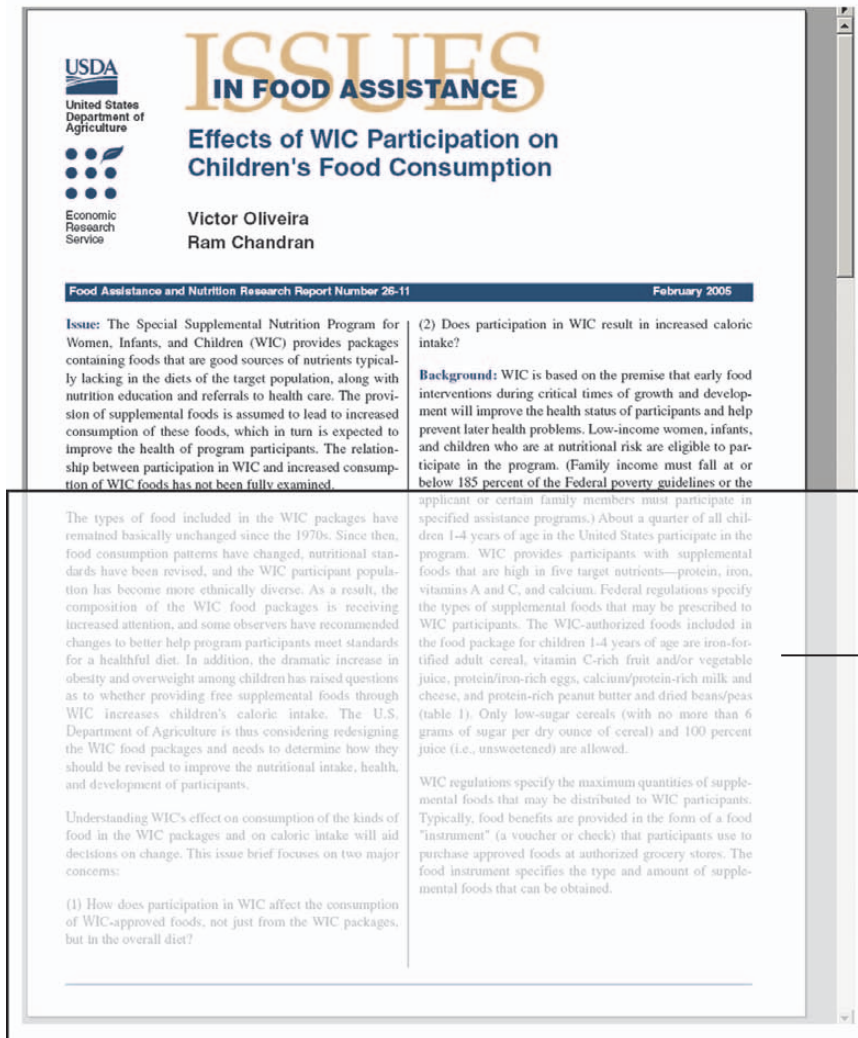


Figure 5-14 A two-column PDF document does not work well if readers have to scroll to read the columns.

## When your audiences are not comfortable with PDF files or with downloading software

If you have a public audience, don't assume that a PDF file is acceptable. Not everyone has Acrobat Reader. Not everyone is willing or able to download and install software even if it is free.

In usability testing that I did in 2004 on information about cancer, more than half of the public participants – cancer patients and their family members – were unwilling to select the PDF option. They said they saw

the PDF symbol all the time, but they didn't know what it was and never chose it. They had never downloaded programs onto their computers, and they were leery of doing so.

Even people who have computers that come with Acrobat Reader may be uncomfortable going to PDF files. For people with dial-up access or slow machines, a PDF file may take a long time to open.

PDF files often open in a second window, and second windows cause problems for many people. They want to back out of the file that came up, but Back isn't available – and they don't realize that they now have two browser windows open.



## When accessibility is an issue

For many years, PDF files did not work well for people who use assistive software, such as screen-readers. That has changed. Adobe Acrobat 8.0 supports tagging so that accessibility software can read a PDF file. But . . .

- For Acrobat to work well with a screen-reader, the author has to set up the file well with correctly marked headings, appropriate tags for images, and other elements that the screen-readers need. Most PDFs aren't well set up.
- If you scan a document as a graphic file to get it on the web, even Acrobat 8.0 can't tell what to do with it to make it accessible.
- Many people who use assistive software still bypass PDF files. Experience has taught them that PDF files are not accessible. Even though PDF files can now be made accessible, so few are that people have no reason to change their negative expectations.
- Many people (not only those who use screen-readers) do not update software regularly, even if it is free. It takes time and effort to upgrade. People may be afraid that the upgrade will not work well with something else on their machine. They may not want to take the time to learn new features. They may need authorization from a supervisor or another group in the company to upgrade.

## Three more reasons for not using PDFs

PDFs are not the best way to provide information on your web site for at least three more reasons:

- PDF files are optimized for the printed page.
- Acrobat Reader works differently from browsers.
- Most PDF files are not written in web style.

### PDF files are optimized for the printed page

A typical PDF page is in portrait orientation. Most web users are looking at landscape-oriented screens.



### Acrobat Reader works differently from browsers

Users have to learn yet another way of navigating, another way of printing, another way of searching.



Internet Explorer controls

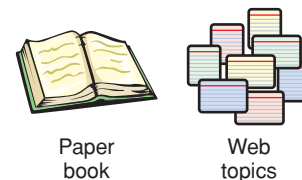


Acrobat Reader controls

As a web content specialist or a web developer, you may be comfortable going back and forth among different browsers, even though that means changing where and what you click on. Are the people you are writing to all equally comfortable doing that?

### PDF files are usually paper documents – not written in web style

If the author was in “paper mode” – in “document mode” or “book mode” – when writing what becomes the PDF file, it’s very likely that the writing isn’t going to work well on the web. The paragraphs will be too long. The headings will be too sparse. The author will have probably assumed that people coming to the document will read it from first page to last.



Paper book

Web topics

### In some cases, offer both versions

If some site visitors want information on the screen and others want entire documents, offer both. Many sites do.

When you link to a PDF, tell people that’s what they are getting and how large it is or how long it will take to download.

Figure 5-15 shows you how employees at the U. S. Federal Aviation Administration can choose to download a PDF of their entire web content standards or get an HTML page on specific topics in the standards.

The screenshot shows the FAA employee site with a 'Table of Contents' on the left and 'FAA Web Content Standards' on the right. A callout box at the top right says: 'If you want the whole document, you can see it or print it in PDF.' Another callout box at the bottom right says: 'If you want to look up one topic, you can get that topic as a web page.' The 'Table of Contents' includes items like 'Know FAA Websites', 'Know Your Audience', 'Write for Your Audience', 'Meet Information Quality Requirements', 'Sensitive Security Information', 'Use Plain Language Principles', 'Be Direct', 'Organize Long Documents on Your Webpages', 'Be Consistent', 'Use Links Wisely', 'Avoid Posting Personal Information', 'Comply with Information Collection Requirements', 'Comply with Lobbying Restrictions', and 'Download the PDF Version (PDF)'. The 'FAA Web Content Standards' section includes a 'Download the PDF Version (PDF)' link and a list of principles: 'Know FAA Websites', 'Know Your Audience', 'Write for Your Audience', 'Meet Information Quality Requirements', 'Sensitive Security Information', 'Use Plain Language Principles', 'Be Direct', 'Organize Long Documents on Your Webpages', 'Be Consistent', 'Use Links Wisely', 'Avoid Posting Personal Information', 'Comply with Information Collection Requirements', 'Comply with Lobbying Restrictions', and 'Download the PDF Version (PDF)'. The 'Use Plain Language Principles' section includes a table with 'Use:' and 'Don't use:' columns.

**FAA Web Content Standards**

The following content standards build on best practices for web content and usability, and guidance from OMB. All FAA Web Liaisons and staff – either FAA staff or contract staff – developing content for webpages or applications for FAA websites must follow these standards.

**Know FAA websites**

The FAA web refers to all FAA websites. The FAA has two types of websites: [FAA.gov](#) for the public, and [employees.faa.gov](#) for FAA employees. The FAA web includes all publicly available and access-controlled websites that FAA organizations have primary content responsibility for.

Each website has its own look and feel. Even though they look different, both FAA websites are audience-centric. That means they are organized around services and information users need.

**Know Your Audience**

**Use Plain Language Principles**

Use words easily understood by your audience.

Use:	Don't use:
will (to mean future)	shall (could mean will, must or should)
must (to mean a requirement)	
should (to mean a preferred action)	

**Figure 5-15** This intranet site offers the whole document as a PDF and also offers each topic as a separate web page.

## SUMMARIZING CHAPTER 5

Here are key messages from Chapter 5:

- Break up large documents.
- Think “topics,” not “book.”
- Divide web content by
  - time or sequence
  - task
  - people
  - type of information
  - questions people ask
- Decide how much to put on one web page by considering
  - how much people want in one visit
  - how connected the information is
  - how long the web page is
  - the download time
  - whether people will want to print
  - how much they will want to print
- Think carefully about using PDF files for your web content.



- PDF is more of a distribution mechanism for paper documents than a good way of giving web content.
- PDFs are appropriate in some situations.
- But consider not using PDFs when
  - people do not want the whole document
  - people want to read from the screen
  - your web users are not comfortable with PDF files or with downloading software
  - accessibility is an issue
- In some cases, the best solution is to offer both PDF and HTML versions of your web information.