



# Writing For The Web

## The Little Things That Make Web Pages Work For You

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A lot of people came up to me after my session at Podcamp Pittsburgh 4 and asked if I was going to post my slides online. I told them I would but then realized that the slides alone weren't worth much without any text to go along with it.

Hopefully the recording of the session will be posted but some people prefer to read or just like having some text to refer back to.

The following are the notes I brought into the session with me.

I've cleaned them up a bit and organized them so hopefully you can follow along a bit easier. But keep in mind, these are just notes. It's quick and dirty and I didn't bother putting in any fluff or filler.

There are some points that were covered in the session that didn't make it on here because they were in response to a question or just me going on a tangent.

You can get almost all of this information online for free somewhere. But one of the problems most new writers, bloggers and marketers face when getting online is not knowing all of the questions to start asking.

Hopefully you get some good, practical tips out of this, but at the very least, I want you to walk away knowing what areas to look at if your web pages aren't getting the attention they deserve.

-Henry Bingaman



## Quick Intro And Bio

I was raised in Reading PA and educated at the University of Pittsburgh.

When I first came to Pitt, I thought I was going to major in information science... but it turns out that's really, really boring.

What wasn't boring was making stuff up and telling people stories, which is how I ended up with a degree in Fiction Writing.

There aren't a lot of companies lining up to hire new graduates with fiction writing degrees so my first job was as a flight attendant for United Airlines.

You can picture that can't you? A young man, dead broke, traveling around the world finding adventure and romance as he pens the great American novel...

Then reality punched me in the nose with a girlfriend and Washington DC rent prices.

I needed to supplement my income and I already knew that I could write well. I'd throw my pen in the pile with all these other hotshots online.

How hard can it be?

Well I learned 2 things very quickly.

1. Almost all of my competitors online were also part-time copywriters with some other job they hate, and wouldn't write another article or blog post the second their novel was published and became an instant best seller.
2. Because of the law of supply and demand (for idealistic-writers who write well but don't know squat about business or the Internet) just knowing how to write articles and blog posts wasn't going to supplement my income very well.

So I took every copywriting course, went to live seminars that drained my already tiny savings, and bought expensive Internet Marketing coaching programs

And here's what I learned. A lot of websites get the number one rule right. Keep pumping out great content.



But most of them never figure out how to get people to read it once they're actually on the site.

That's what I'm going to talk about today.

There are plenty of great resources if you want to learn how to write better blog posts and articles.

Check out Brian Clark's [www.copyblogger.com](http://www.copyblogger.com) and James Chartrand's [www.menwithpens.ca](http://www.menwithpens.ca)

***Here's the secret.***

It's actually the little things on a site that make the biggest difference. People make very fast decisions online.

Think about it. If you're online, you have competition. There's someone else out there talking about the exact same subjects or selling very similar things.

When someone lands on your page, they're making very fast subconscious decisions. Am I in the right place or will someone else provide the same thing better, faster, and easier.

Today I'm going to go over 3 small slices of text that are some of the hardest parts of any page to write.

I'm talking about:

- Taglines
- Headlines & Subheads
- Link and Button Text



# Taglines

A tagline usually comes after your site's title and is supposed to give the reader some idea what the site is about and why they should stick around. This is very different than taglines in traditional mass media advertising.

The mistake most website's make is they try to imitate traditional advertising taglines.

For example...



Nike can say, "just do it" and it works for them. But that will never work for a blog or website.

That slogan works for Nike because it was (and still is) part of a multi-million dollar TV marketing campaign. It was repeatedly drilled into the consumers mind.

The TV commercials were stoic heroes, inwardly focused and driven to excel in their sport... gods among men.



It captured people imagination.

Here's why you can't (just) do it on your website.

**You don't have a captive audience.** People won't come to your website to see a 45 second commercial, over and over in a million different mediums to drill in exactly what "Just do it" means.

A tagline has to do 2 things. Tell the reader what the site is about and tell him how it can improve his life.

The phrase "just do it" means nothing.

Picture this. You land on a website page that you know nothing about. Maybe you saw a link on twitter or on someone's blog.

"DansShoes.com- Just Do It"

Just do what? Buy your shoes. No you arrogant son of a... shoe-maker. I'll shop somewhere else.

This is something you need to remember. Bad taglines will confuse, frustrate, or tick off your visitors.

You're better off ditching the tagline entirely than tacking up a bad one.

## How do you write a tagline?

There are 2 parts.

1. Let visitors know what the site is about
2. Tell them what benefit they'll get for sticking around.

For Example (from copyblogger)...



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The tagline here is “Copywriting tips for online marketing success.”

It accomplishes both of the two crucial tasks.

What is the site about? Obviously it offers copywriting tips. What will that do for you? It will help you achieve online marketing success.

So how do you create a tagline?

Ask yourself what the site is about? What’s the purpose? What problems are you trying to solve, what are you offering, what are you teaching? This is called a feature.

Let’s say you have a natural health site. What your site offers is natural health tips.

Ask what does this mean for visitors. What will they get by sticking around?

It means they’ll know how to eat better, exercise better, or whatever kind of advice or information your site offers. Basically, they get knowledge. This is a benefit, but it’s a weak benefit.

Your tagline benefit should have an emotional element. It needs to be something that people *want*.

Do find that you have to dig deeper. Ask why do they ultimately want that? How will that improve their life? This will be your deeper emotional benefit.

In the natural health example, people might want independence from conventional medicine. They may want to stop feeling sick or tired. They may want to improve their children’s health without pharmaceuticals.

When you find an emotional benefit that catches your attention, you’ve found a benefit that is probably tagline worthy.

So the tagline might be, “Natural Health Tips for Healthier, Happier Children.”



What's the purpose of a tagline anyway?

Remember all the competition online. You only get 3-5 seconds. People land on your page and look for clues.

Will I like this? Is this what I was looking for? Is this what I was expecting?

If you've written a good tagline that lets visitors feel comfortable on your site, they'll give you a few more seconds.

So the tagline is there to transition the visitors into the site.

Then you have to get them emotionally invested in staying there.

We do this with headlines.



# Headlines & Subheads

Ask any professional copywriter what the most important part of any piece of writing is and they'll almost all tell you, "The Headline."

If you've done your job with the headline, people will give your headline a chance.

Since your site's title and tagline are on every page, I'm going to assume the next item on that page is your content.

If you want your content to be read, you need a headline.

*Important note about how people function on a website.* I'm assuming most of you have blogs or websites with lots of posts and articles on them. If you have any kind of significant traffic, you'll probably notice that most people don't enter your website on the home page.

Most visitors enter on a certain article or post. Think about why that is. When you type a search query into Google, it's typically a question or a problem. The purpose of your content, in most cases, is to offer answers and solutions.

Google doesn't return homepages and tell people that somewhere on this site is an article relevant to your question. They take them directly to the content that answers that question.

Another very important way that your content is shared is through social media. A lot of bloggers are getting half of their visitors through social media sites like Twitter and Facebook.

Would you read a great article and then link to the homepage and say go find it? Probably not...

This is important to keep in mind because it means that for every blog post or new page you write you have to put a serious amount of energy into your headline.

Alright, back to the "how-to."



## Headlines need a good hook

John Carlton is a huge disciple of the hook (and since he's probably the best working copywriter, that's worth paying attention to).

If the visitor is someone who is remotely interested in your topic, your headline should get them so worked up and burning with curiosity that they can't possibly leave without finding out what the heck you're talking about.

Let's look at a couple of examples of good headlines and figure out why they work.

### 1. Why Some Foods "Explode" in Your Stomach

If you're worried about the havoc you've been causing in your gut from what you eat, this headline is irresistible. The use of the word "Explode" creates an image that grabs the reader. *Why does food explode in my stomach?* That image is the hook.

### 2. Amazing Secret Discovered By One-Legged Golfer Adds 50 Yards To Your Drives, Eliminates Hooks and Slices... And Can Slash Up To 10 Strokes From Your Game Almost Overnight!

A John Carlton Classic. Note that the size of the headline, contrary to popular belief, doesn't matter. However, it is important to notice that the hook, in this case the one-legged golfer, is very early on in the headline.

If he had put this headline together differently and mentioned the one-legged golfer at the end, my guess is that many more people would have abandoned the headline.

But because they were willing to give it 2 seconds, and he hooked them right at the beginning, he was able to get them to read on. This headline sold a million dollars worth of golf videos. Pretty good for a headline that's "way too long."

### 3. "YOU KILL THAT STORY --- OR I'LL RUN YOU OUT OF THE STATE!"

This headline was run by a newspaper back in the 60's. It's a great example of the story headline. But what a hook... I first saw this as an example in Victor Schwab's book, "How to Write A Good Advertisement." I've been dying to read the rest of the article ever since.



## Write a Headline Using The 4 U's

**Urgent-** this is something visitors have to know about right now!

**Unique-** Either a unique angle or a unique concept. Other people aren't talking about this.

**Useful-** Contains some kind of practical knowledge that would improve my situation.

**Ultra-Specific-** Tells you what it's going to tell you.

You won't always be able to get all 4 into a headline, but try to get at least 3 of these elements into each headline.

Example. Without naming names, here's a headline I saw on someone blog.

"Why I Think Twitter is Cool"

Let's put it through the 4 U's test.

Is it urgent? No. I don't see any reason why I should read this right now?

Is it unique? No, everyone thinks twitter is cool and they're constantly saying so.

Is it Useful? No... I mean... just plain no.

Is it Ultra-Specific? It tells you that it's going to be talking about twitter. But *what* about twitter? Why is it cool? This doesn't offer many clues as to why he thinks twitter is cool.

Here's a better example (although, in this case, completely fictional)

"How Twitter Saved My Marriage and Got Me Promoted In 3 Days"

Is this urgent? If you have a bad marriage or a crappy job this would be urgent.

Is this unique? Yes. I don't know anyone talking about how twitter saved a marriage or a job.



Is it useful? Again, it's useful if you have a troubled marriage or are afraid of losing your job.

Is it ultra specific? Yes. You know *exactly* what that article is going to be about.

### **Don't be obnoxious or condescending in your headline.**

Some people get tempted into this because being obnoxious and condescending gets a lot of attention. But it's not good attention. You will gain **zero** valuable readers. You will, however, get a lot of people who read your stuff to fight with you and insult you in the comments.

But do be bold. State an opinion. Journalistic objectivity goes out the window when you're trying to get people to read your stuff. Don't be afraid to stand out from other blogs and websites. If you have an opinion share it proudly.

Remember, your headlines aren't supposed to make everyone in the world want to read. They're only supposed to get people who care.

### **Other Types of Headlines...**

- Questions that can only be answered by reading on. "Does your blog make these mistakes?"
- Announcement or Interesting News "Announcing: The New And Improved..."
- Give A Command "Scrap Your Facebook Page."
- Use a testimonial "This widget saved my job"
- Issue a Challenge "Does Your Blog Pass This Headline Test?"
- Show a seeming contradiction. "Will Your Wealth Have You Scorned By Women?"

Notice that all of the above are just different approaches to introduce a good hook.



## Subheads

Why use subheads?

**People don't read online. They skim.** This is what trips up most traditional writers. If someone picks up a book, they're going to sit down and read the whole thing. Whereas when someone lands on a webpage, there are a million different things competing for their attention.

**Keeps interest high.** If someone starts to get bored with what you're talking about – and shelve your pride because it happens in almost every article and post- you're going to lose them. People won't be bored. As they get bored, they start to skim and hopefully your next subhead will capture their attention again

**Makes Pages Look Easier to Read.** Instead of one long continues block of text that looks too intimidating and time consuming to bother with, they'll see several smaller blocks of text. This Makes people think, "Ok, that's not so dense. I'll check it out." Again, the happens subconsciously.

**The Dual Readership Path.** This is a copywriting term for sales letters. Since it's pretty well documented that people will skim any piece of sales writing, the idea is to tell as much of the story as you can so people get the general idea even if they only read your subheads.

When and how to write a subhead

Include a subhead when there's a shift or transition. That's when they fit in most naturally.

Writing subheads is similar to writing headlines. Have a good hook and try to follow the 4 U's.



# Button And Link text

The forgotten text of most websites

**American Cancer Society-** Good example. Lots of action verbs. Action verbs move people along.

The screenshot shows the American Cancer Society website homepage. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links: "In My Community", "Get Involved", "Donate Now", "Contact Us", and "Site Index". A search bar is located to the right of these links. Below the navigation bar, there is a green banner with the text "Need answers? 1-800-ACS-2345" and "Sign In | Register". The main content area features a large banner for "MAKING STRIDES Against Breast Cancer" with a pink ribbon logo and a silhouette of a woman. The banner text reads: "In the fight against breast cancer, birthdays are signs of progress – and we want to see more of them. A world with more birthdays gets closer and closer at every Making Strides Against Breast Cancer event. Together, we'll stay well, get well, find cures, and fight back." Below the banner, there are three main navigation buttons: "Learn About Cancer", "Join the Fight Against Cancer", and "Find ACS in Your Community". The "Join the Fight Against Cancer" button has a list of actions: "Donate", "Participate in events", "Volunteer your time", and "Advocate for change". The "Find ACS in Your Community" button has a form for "Enter ZIP:" and "Search using city and state >>". Below these buttons, there are three sections: "Donate Now" (with a "Find It Fast" sub-section listing "Access to Health Care", "Cancer Facts & Figures", "Statistics", "Research Programs and Funding", "Guide to Quitting Smoking", and "Clinical Trials"), "In the Spotlight" (featuring "Lower Your Breast Cancer Risk" and "Lane Adams Award Nominations Now Open"), and "Managing Your Cancer Experience" (featuring "Get help making treatment decisions, understanding the effects of treatment, finding treatment centers and doctors, coping with side effects, and talking with others.").

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)



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**Iron City Beer**- Bad example. Where are the buttons? How are people supposed to know what to click? They're hoping you scroll over the bottle to see if your little arrow turns into a little hand. Some people will. But they're not giving any reason why you should.



[www.ironcitybrewingcompany.com](http://www.ironcitybrewingcompany.com)

The site is very company-centric. Their counting on their brand name to be cool enough that you're going to investigate further.

**Coolmath.com.** Way too many buttons. Everything is calling for attention. This is a math games site. They should be encouraging kids to play games (it's not hard to do).



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## Why is button and link text so important?

Your visitors will *stubbornly refuse* to do your thinking for you. And yes, it's your job to do the thinking.

If you were at the hospital and your doctor prescribed a drug, you'd want to know what it was for and what it was going to do, wouldn't you?

If he pointed at the door after your appointment and said, "Go get pills," you'd probably leave with an uneasy feeling.

Yeah, you hope that he has your best interest in mind, but what exactly was it for again?

What you really want him to say, "pick up this bottle of pills, at the pharmacy, third door to the right of this room, because it will get rid of that headache."

Yes, at some point in the conversation he probably told you what kind of medication you should be taking and gave you a long reason why that made you feel better.

## Every button and link needs to accomplish 2 things very quickly.

1. Answer the question, "Why should I click this button/link?"
2. Answer the question, "When I click it, what will I get?"

There are 2 buttons that I see all the time and they drive me absolutely crazy.

The first is putting the text "submit" into the button.

Remember this: **I submit to no one.** It's just not a warm and fuzzy thing to say to people. If I submit to you, does that mean that I lose?

A generic "submit" button gives no information and it doesn't tell you what you're going to get.

The other button that drives me crazy is "click here." I have the same confrontational attitude when I see a button or link that only says "click here."



Why? What am I getting? All of us are driven by self-interest. Like *every other* part of your website, a button or text link needs to at least hint at a benefit, or something that will help your visitor.

I'd like to thank everyone who came out to Pittsburgh Podcamp 4 or watched the sessions online.

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