

Communicating with Constituents: Plain Language on the Web

Presented to: **EPRI**
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Date: **03/19/2007**



ALC Plain Language Associates

Presentation Outline

It's the audience!

**Plain language techniques and
the Web**



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Focus on the audience

Who uses your sites?

Why do they visit?

How satisfied are they with the experience?

Did they complete their task successfully?



How users read on the web

They don't.

They scan.

Nielsen and Morkes, in a famous 1997 study, found that 79 percent of their test users always scanned any new page they came across; only 16 percent read word-by-word.

Today, your sites' visitors probably read even less.



Nielsen and Morkes recommend:

Web pages should use scannable text:

- highlighted keywords
- meaningful sub-headings (not "clever" ones)
- bulleted lists



EPRI Knowledge Study 2

Speaking about the current generation of internet-savvy citizens, recommended that you—

“Do not inundate them with information – make sure it is short & sweet--do not overestimate the ‘eyeball space and time’ you have allotted.”



Good writing for the web

- Uses lots of lists
- Uses as few words as possible
- Uses lots of helpful headings
- Avoids dense text
- Includes only essential information

Plain language techniques are consistent with this advice.



Plain language is a philosophy of communication

Material is in plain language if readers can

Find what they need

Understand what they find

Use it to fulfill their needs



This applies equally to

- Printed documents
- Speeches
- Websites
- Forms
- Software
- Any other communication medium



**Plain language will help you
communicate more effectively on the
Web.**

**The most common plain language
techniques are:**



Using:

Informative headings

Pronouns

Active voice

Lists and tables

Common words



Avoiding:

“Hidden verbs”

Abbreviations

Long sentences

Unnecessary words

Information the reader doesn't want



Today I will focus on

- Using lists and lots of blank space
- Using informative headings
- Eliminating long sentences

These three techniques all help visitors scan your site.



Use vertical lists

Vertical lists -

- Make it easy for the reader to identify all the items or steps in a process
- Add blank space for easy reading
- Help your reader see the structure of your document
- Let you eliminate redundancy



Web pages typically contain many lists

Here's a list of headings on the "about Parliament" page from the UK:

<http://www.parliament.uk/about/index.cfm>



These lists:

- Appear logically organized, with meaningful sub-lists
- Contain seven or fewer items
- Seem to be organized by the topics' popularity with visitors



Here's another list

Lithuanian Parliament

[Naujausi įregistruoti teisės aktų projektai](#)

This list is

- Very hard to read
- Too long
- Has two competing structures



And one more

Polish Parliament

<http://www.senat.gov.pl/indexe.htm>

This list is

- Too long
- Could easily be subdivided
- Has too many items starting with the same) and unnecessary) term



Lists are a useful way to break up dense content

Whenever you have dense content, think about making it into a list.



Here's an example

Dear visitor!

On the following pages you will find information about the German Bundestag, the German national parliament. If you have any enquiries, comments, suggestions or other feedback, please use our [Contact](#) page.

If you require information about the [Government](#), rather than Parliament, please use <http://www.bundesregierung.de>. Further information for understanding our parliament is set out below.

Parliament Live (Webcasting)

The Parliament Live webcasting service [Web-TV](#) carries full audio-visual coverage of the plenary sittings of the Bundestag.



And in list form

This site provides information about the German Bundestag, the German national parliament.

- For questions or comments, [contact us](#) .
- For information about the Government, visit <http://www.bundesregierung.de/>.
- To see Parliament live on the web, watch [Web-TV](#)



Informative headings help the reader navigate the document

- Good headings help readers find their way through your content.
- Headings reveal the structure of your material.



Visitors do not like text like this

Legislative initiative lies with Deputies and Parliamentary Groups - in this case the legislative instruments are referred to as Bills (projectos de lei) - and also with the Government or the Regional Legislative Assemblies - when the instruments are called proposed laws (propostas de lei).

After admission by the Speaker, the instrument receives an Opinion from the specialist Committee to which it was allocated, before a general debate (Debate na generalidade), which always takes place in Plenary Session. The debate ends with a vote on the whole instrument in general.

Next follows debate and vote on the instrument in detail, clause by clause (debate e votação na especialidade), either in Plenary or in Committee.

Certain matters must be debated and voted in detail in Plenary. Such matters include those dealing with: election for positions as titular or head of sovereign bodies, referenda, political parties, creation or modification of local areas and boundaries.



The final text is then subject to a final overall vote (votação final global), always taking place in Plenary.

An instrument thus approved is called a Decree of the Assembly of the Republic.

The Decree, signed by the Speaker, is sent to the President of the Republic for promulgation (approval). After promulgation, the Decree is designated as a Law, and is sent to the Government for signature by the Prime Minister and is then, finally, delivered to the National Press for publication in the Journal of the Republic (Diário da República).

The President of the Republic may exercise his right of veto, either because he considers that the instrument approved by the Assembly of the Republic contains measures contrary to the Constitution (therefore requiring an Opinion from the Constitutional Court), or for political reasons which must be stated in a substantiating message.

•Where an instrument is considered to be unconstitutional, the Assembly may approve amendments and send the instrument back again for promulgation. However, whatever the reason for the veto, the Assembly may always confirm an instrument previously approved by an absolute majority of Deputies in service (or a 2/3 majority for certain matters). In such a case, the President of the Republic must promulgate the instrument within one week.



The first part, with headings

Introducing bills and laws

Legislative initiative lies with Deputies and Parliamentary Groups - in this case the legislative instruments are referred to as Bills (projectos de lei) - and also with the Government or the Regional Legislative Assemblies - when the instruments are called proposed laws (propostas de lei).

Initial actions and debate

After admission by the Speaker, the instrument receives an Opinion from the specialist Committee to which it was allocated, before a general debate (Debate na generalidade), which always takes place in Plenary Session. The debate ends with a vote on the whole instrument in general.

Detailed debate

Next follows debate and vote on the instrument in detail, clause by clause (debate e votação na especialidade), either in Plenary or in Committee.



Matters requiring Plenary debate

Certain matters must be debated and voted in detail in Plenary. Such matters include those dealing with: election for positions as titular or head of sovereign bodies, referenda, political parties, creation or modification of local areas and boundaries.

Final overall vote

The final text is then subject to a final overall vote (votação final global), always taking place in Plenary.



There are many examples of dense text with inadequate headings on your sites

Here are two:

Slovakian republic information about the European Union

<http://www.nrsr.sk/main.aspx?sid=eu/info/spravodlivost>

Cyprus international relations

http://www.parliament.cy/parliamenteng/006_06_01.htm



Visitors come to your sites with questions.

If you know the visitor's questions, they make the best headings.

Functions of the Dutch Senate:

<http://www.eerstekamer.nl/9324000/1f/j9vvqh5ihkk7kof/vqipcmqxiu2>



Eliminate long sentences

No one wants to read sentences like this:



He is elected for a five-year term of office in universal, equal, direct and proportional elections, conducted by secret ballot; the President does not bear political responsibility towards the Parliament nor either of the two Chambers; the National Assembly, formed by the Sejm and the Senate sitting together, has the power (by a majority of at least two-thirds of the statutory number of members) to bring an indictment against the President for an infringement of the Constitution or statute, as well as for the commission of an offence.

88 words in one sentence!



In order to ensure a stable democracy and to prevent misuse of power, the supreme power in Denmark is, like in most other Western democracies, divided into three independent organs which control one another: the legislative, the executive and the judicial powers. *(42 words in one sentence)*

The supreme power in Denmark is divided into three independent organs: the legislative, the executive and the judicial. Most Western democracies share this structure. By balancing powers, this ensures a stable democracy and prevents misusing power. *(36 words in three sentences)*



Here's one that is better as a list

This can be done either on the occasion of a general policy statement for which the Prime Minister calls for a vote of confidence by the Assembly, or on the occasion of the passing, by an absolute majority of members of the National Assembly, of a motion of censure signed by a tenth of its members. *(56 words in one sentence)*



This can be done when either:

- The Prime Minister calls for a vote of confidence by the Assembly on a general policy statement, or
- An absolute majority of members of the National Assembly passes a motion of censure signed by a tenth of its members. *(45 words)*



Another one changed to a list

The Federal Parliament of Belgium This survey made by the Senate Legal Service is designed to give you in-depth information on the Parliament's organisation and activities, on the legal status of the Members of Parliament and on the election, dissolution and composition of the Federal Chambers. *(46 words in one sentence)*



As a list:

The Senate Legal Service did this survey to give you information on:

- the Parliament's organisation and activities,
- the legal status of the Members of Parliament, and
- the election, dissolution and composition of the Federal Chambers. *(35 words)*



To conclude, let's go back to one of the first slides.



Focus on the audience

Who uses your sites?

Why do they visit?

How satisfied are they with the experience?

Did they complete their task successfully?



Until you can answer those questions, much of your effort building websites will be wasted, because you will be building the wrong site.



Resources

- US federal plain language site
Plainlanguage.gov
- Research-based web design guidelines
<http://www.usability.gov/pdfs/guidelines.html>
- Jakob Nielsen on writing for the web
<http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/>

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