

## 9.4: Implementing writing for digital

Apart from the information already covered, writing good copy involves a number of points and best practices that you should keep in mind.

### HTML for formatting

HTML stands for HyperText Markup Language and it's the foundation of documents on the web. HTML tags tell browsers how to present content. HTML tags are written in brackets that look like arrows `< >`.

A good digital copywriter will also be able to use basic HTML to lay out copy knowing that the appearance of the page will get his or her words read. It should be easy for users to skip and skim the copy and it should be easy for them to find the parts that are most relevant to them.

When writing online copy you can use an HTML editor where you insert the tags yourself or, a 'What You See Is What You Get' (WYSIWYG) editor, which works in a similar way to a word processor.

Basic HTML is not difficult to use, and will help you format your content. Here are some basic HTML tags:

**To bold:** `<b>phrase you want to bold</b>`

**To italicise:** `<i>phrase you want to italicise</i>`

**To underline:** `<u>phrase you want to underline</u>`

**To list:** `<li>lines you want to list</li>`

**To create a paragraph:**

`paragraph text</p>`

**To insert a line break:** `<br>`

**To insert a link:** `<a href="page url">phrase you want to link</a>`

**To insert a heading:** `<h1>Level one heading</h1>`

**To insert a sub-heading:** `<h2>Level two heading</h2>`

The tags also help search engines to identify how the content has been laid out on the page.

The best way to get to grips with HTML is to start using it online, where you can see first-hand how the tags work.

#### Note

Right click on any web page and click 'view source'. Can you find the paragraph tag  
?

### SEO copywriting

A good online copywriter will have a thorough understanding of SEO and how this can be integrated into his or her writing. Key phrases can be used in long and short copy alike, to great effect.

#### Optimising for human and machine users

One of the most notable differences between writing for print and writing for digital is that when it comes to the latter, you are writing not only for an audience, but also for the search engines. While your human audience should always be your first priority, your copy also needs to speak to the search engines in a language they can understand. This digital tactic has been covered in greater depth in the chapter on [Search engine optimisation](#). Optimising your copy for search engines is important because your target audience is most likely to be using a search engine to find the products or services you are offering. If the search engine is not aware that your content can give users the answers they are looking for on a particular subject, it won't send traffic to your website.

#### Note

Read more about this in the [Search engine optimisation](#) chapter

Optimising your content for search is the process of telling search engines what content you are publishing. Keywords, key phrases, and themed pages are an integral part of this. Google is becoming increasingly semantically aware and can recognise synonyms, so repeatedly using specific keywords is no longer important; instead, good SEO copy focuses a page around particular themes, using keywords relevant to those themes.

SEO copywriters need to know how to blend keywords into their content and how to use them in conjunction with text formatting and metadata. In addition to assisting you with structuring your content, these tags indicate relevance and context to search engines. Some of the tags are used by screen readers, and so they assist visitors with technical limitations to access your content. The meta description can also be used by search engines on the search engine results pages (SERPs).

### Key phrase

A keyword refers to a single word used in a search query, while a key phrase refers to more than one word used in the search query.

Key phrase research is an important element of digital copywriting, and is covered in detail in the chapter on SEO. Having identified the themes of your web pages, keyword research should be used to identify what phrases your target audience use when searching for you. It is important to know what people are searching for, so that you can provide what they need.

#### Note

Read more about this in the [Search engine optimisation](#) chapter

Once you have a good idea of the words people are using to find information online (online tools exist that will guide you in this), you can create pages themed around the use of these phrases and their synonyms. A good copywriter is able to create these themed pages and use keywords/synonyms seamlessly, so that the reader cannot detect that they have been included.

Key phrases can be integrated into nearly every type of content that you write for the web. Below are a few places where Red & Yellow tend to include key phrases and synonyms on our website.

### Page title

The page title appears at the top of a user's browser and should be able to tell the user (and the search engine spiders, of course) what the main theme of the page is. The page title is usually limited to under 60 characters, including spaces. The key phrase should be used as close to the beginning of the title as possible, followed by the name of the company or website.

### Page URL

The main key phrase for the page should be used whenever possible in the URL for the page. If you are using a blogging tool or content management system (CMS), the URL is generated from the page title, so using the key phrase in the page title should ensure that it is in the URL as well.



Figure 9.4.1: The Red & Yellow School home page URL *Adapted From Screenshot, Google search, 2017*

### Meta description

The meta description is a short paragraph describing the page content. This summary is usually shown on the SERPs if it contains the search term, which means that it needs to entice users to click through with a strong CTA. The spiders use the meta description to deduce the topic of the page, so using targeted key phrases is important here. Copy should generally be between 150 and 160 characters, including spaces.

#### Note

Every page on a website must have a unique URL, page title and meta description.



Figure 9.4.2: Example of a meta description *Adapted From Screenshot, Google search, 2017*

## Meta keywords

Meta keywords are the list of the words and phrases that are important on a web page. Using targeted key phrases is important, but remember, no keyword stuffing! The meta keywords are limited to 200 characters, including spaces. This is, however, no longer a major source of information used by search engines though it certainly doesn't hurt to include these.

## Headings and sub-headings

Spiders assign more relevance to the text used in headings, so it is important to use your key phrases in the headings on your page. It also helps you to structure your content. Headings are created with HTML tags. Heading structures are set out like this:

**<h1> Main page headings**  
**<h2> Sub-headings**  
**<h3> Information under the sub-headings**

Figure 9.4.3: Heading structures *Adapted From Stokes, 2013*

Having a good heading hierarchy is important as spiders use it to move through your page and understand its relevance to the search query; it also helps human readers to scan your page.

## On-page copy

For on-page copy, remember that you will be optimising for a theme rather than for a set key phrase. This means you want to use relevant synonyms as well as your keywords without being overt about it meaning they should not stand out too much.

For SEO effectiveness, a page of web copy should be at least 250 words long. On this page, use keywords and synonyms that fit the theme as and when required.

The page should not be so long that the user needs to scroll continuously to get to the end of it. If you find the page is getting exceptionally long, consider breaking it into different web pages for different sections. In this way, you could add several pages of optimised copy focused on one theme instead of one very long page. This will benefit your reader if they are looking for something that is particular to the shorter page.

## Links to your optimised page

The text used to link from one page to another is considered important by search engine spiders, so try to ensure that your key phrase is used when linking to the optimised page. The anchor text of links should include the key phrase of the page being linked to, and not the page being linked from.

### Note

When submitting promotional copy to other sites that includes links back to your own website, which phrases would be most important to include in this link text?

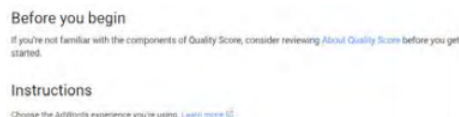


Figure 9.4.4: Links on a Google Support page dealing with Google Quality *Adapted From Score Screenshot, Google support for Adwords, 2017*

## Images: Alt text and title tags

Alt text refers to the 'alt' attribute for the HTML tag: this is the text that appears in the caption. It is used in HTML to attribute text to an image on a web page, normally to describe what an image is about and display text in instances where the image is unable to load. While this is handy for humans and aids accessibility, it is also used for another reason, namely, search engine spiders can't read images, but they can read the alt text. The image title tag shows when you hover with your mouse over an image, depending

on your browser, and can also be read by the search engine spider. This will also help users find your images on Google's Image Search, which can also be helpful in driving traffic to your page.

## Best practices for online copywriting

Now that we have covered the basic theoretical principles of writing for digital, we need to look at the best practices to apply whenever you are writing copy for publication on the web. There are several things that you need to consider.

1. Does your copy convey a creative idea?
2. Does the layout of your copy make it easier to read?
3. Is your meaning clear and direct?
4. Does the copy convey the features and benefits necessary to make your point (if applicable)?
5. Will your readers clearly understand the content of your writing?
6. Is the content of your message structured in a logical manner for desktop and/or mobile reading?

The rest of this chapter will be dedicated to ensuring that you have the knowledge and tools to answer these questions.

## Conceptual copywriting

Most of the points in this chapter have focused on the practicalities of writing online copy such as getting information across and encouraging user actions and engagement.

Copy should also be creative, beautiful and thought provoking.

Your copy should express an idea that grips readers. Conceptual copywriting is about making an idea memorable merely by using words to express it. The idea is central, and the words are the vehicles that convey it. Clever wording, smart ideas and thoughtful copy should make the reader pause, think, and want to engage more deeply with your idea.

While images are often used to express powerful ideas, words can be just as effective. Consider this famous example, which demonstrates how a small change in the copy can radically affect one's perception of an idea:

**A woman without her man is nothing.**

**A woman: without her, man is nothing.**

Writing conceptually means conveying a brand message in a creative way to make an emotive connection with a specific audience. It's all about bringing a big idea or concept to life.

## Layout and legibility

As we have mentioned already, readers process content differently online from the way that they read offline. On the web, readers tend to scan text rather than read every word.

As a result, online copy is judged at a glance, not just on content, but first and foremost by its layout. It needs to look as if it's easy to read before a user will choose to read it. Digital copy should be easy to scan. This means using:

- Clear and concise headings
- Bulleted and numbered lists
- Short paragraphs
- Bold and italics
- Descriptive links.

It's easy to see this in practice.

Before	After

Tea has been drunk for thousands of years, and as people are growing more health conscious, tea sales are increasing. Personal preference plays an important role in making the perfect cup of tea. However, using fresh water ensures maximum oxygen in the tea, and warming the teapot first is standard practice. Tradition dictates one teabag per person, and one for the pot. Tea is served with milk, lemon, honey or sugar, according to taste.

Worldwide, **tea sales are increasing** as people are becoming more health conscious. Here are some tips on making the **perfect cup of tea**:

- Use fresh water (for maximum oxygen)
- Warm the teapot first
- Use one teabag per person, and one for the pot

The perfect cup of tea is based on **personal preference and taste**. Tea can be served with:

Milk or lemon

Honey or sugar

## Language

The basic principles of good writing apply online, but because your audience's attention is limited and often divided, it is best to keep it simple and tailor your language to your audience.

**Tone:** The tone of your content should be consistent with the brand for which you are writing. Brands will often have full tone-of-voice documentation. If they don't, read some of the brand material to get a feel for the company's style of communication. Compare the difference in tone in the examples below.

### ✓ Example 9.4.1 of Tone A: Investec

We provide a diverse range of financial products and services to a niche client base in three principal markets, the United Kingdom, South Africa and Australia, as well as certain other geographies.

Investec's strategic goals are motivated by the desire to develop an efficient and integrated business on an international scale through the active pursuit of clearly established core competencies in the group's principal business areas (Investec, 2016).

### ✓ Example 9.4.2 of Tone B: Nando's

The story of Nando's starts hundreds of years ago with the first Portuguese explorers who set sail for the East in search of the legendary spice route.

Lured by the promises of our beautiful continent, they came ashore and there, under our famous sun, they discovered the African Bird's Eye Chilli or as we know it (and love it), PERi-PERi. Unique in its properties, they used it to create a one-of-a-kind sauce that ignited the fires of passion inside them.

A few centuries later, in 1987, it was the same PERi-PERi sauce that inspired Fernando Duarte to invite his buddy Robbie Brozin to a small Portuguese eatery in Rosettenville, South Africa, to try some PERi-PERi marinated chicken. In his own words, "I knew nothing about the food business, I just knew that it was the best chicken I had ever tasted." (Nando's, 2016).

**Active voice:** Grammatically speaking, people expect characters to execute actions that have an impact on objects or other characters.

For example: The girl ate a chocolate.

- The girl is the subject.
- Eating is the action
- The chocolate is the object that is affected by the action

This is known as the active voice. Unfortunately, writers often use the passive voice. This turns the object into the subject forcing the reader to think more carefully about the sentence. For example: The chocolate was eaten by the girl. The human brain automatically translates this into the format that it expects. According to Price and Price, this adds 25% to the time required to understand a sentence (Price & Price, 2002).

When writing for the web, it is better to use the active voice.

**Neologisms and buzzwords:** Sometimes the World Wide Web is referred to as the Wild Wild Web as it is an environment where anything goes. The ever-growing numbers of social media participants, for example, habitually play fast and loose with grammar.

With new services and products being developed daily, it can feel as if the list of new words, and their uses, is growing faster than you can keep up with. Dictionaries and reference guides celebrate this regularly with a ‘word of the year’, usually one that has been in heavy use on the Internet for the three years preceding its entry into a dictionary.

For example, in 2015, the laughing emoji was voted word of the year by the editors of the New Oxford American dictionary to reflect the worldwide increase in popularity of the emoji (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015).



Figure 9.4.5: The Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year, 2015 *Adapted From Telegraph UK, 2015*

Online services can quickly become verbs in everyday language, so we say ‘Googling something’ instead of ‘searching on Google’, and of ‘Facebooking someone’. Bing is still trying desperately to work its way into everyday conversation in this way.

Always remember you are writing for your users so talk in the same way that they talk. If your content is aimed at cutting-edge early adopters, then pepper it with the latest buzzwords. If your audience does not know the difference between Chrome, Safari, and Microsoft Edge, then be cautious when using a word that did not exist the day before.

**Features and benefits:** Writing compelling copy means conveying to readers why they should perform an action. While features may seem all-important, you need to communicate the benefits of the features to the user.

You also need to communicate the benefits in a way that makes the user think about the product’s role in their life. Write so that they imagine actually owning the product.

- **Feature:** a prominent aspect of a product or service that can provide benefit to users. It describes what the product does.
- **Benefit:** the positive outcome for a user that a feature provides. It can be the emotional component of what the user gets out of the product.

Why would your audience want to buy your product or service? Put aside the features for a moment; what will compel your audience to buy on an emotional level? How does it address their wants and needs?

For example, consider a home entertainment system. Features could include surround sound and a large flat-screen television. The benefit is a cinema-quality experience in your own home.

Features and benefits are very different. Features are important to the company that provides the product or service. Benefits are important to those who decide to use the product or service.

Persuasive writing makes use of features, benefits and active verbs to create appealing messages for your personas:

*Enjoy cinema-quality movie nights in your own home with a surround-sound home entertainment system.*

### Logic

The structure of online copy can be compared closely to the structure of a newspaper article. The headline, usually containing the most important bit of information in a story, comes first. Online, visitors decide quickly whether or not to read a page. As a result of this, the most important information needs to be at the top.

Start with the summary or conclusion which is the main idea of the article.

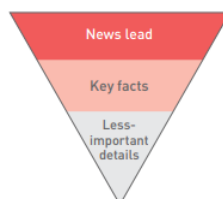


Figure 9.4.6: Information hierarchy *Adapted From Stokes, 2013*

While clever word play in headings can attract some attention, these need to be written in line with the objective you want to achieve. The copy is multitasking, not only is it informing visitors of what to expect; it is also telling search engine spiders what the page is about.

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