

road
to the
new
w&m
web
presence



a transitional writing & style guide

assembled by
the re.web project team and mStoner

Best Practices for Web Writing

Good web writing is everything. It provides worldwide, non-stop marketing and supports a commitment to great communication—not just for the institution, but for every program, department, faculty member, program, club, and event associated with William & Mary.

A high school student's first visit to a college site is usually only one minute long. But clear, informative, friendly copy leaves an impression that will bring them back. In fact, prospective students report that the most important thing about a college website is its content.

Best practices are tried-and-true guidelines that help you create content that will draw students in and showcase your school's best attributes. Below are the practices that mStoner uses to develop dozens of higher-education websites.

How to Arrange Content

Avoid crowding the page. Introductory copy: 150 words or less. Lower pages with more information will necessarily be longer. Print content tends to be a lot longer than is readable on the web, so shorten it and/or divide it into several pages.

Keep paragraphs and sentences short. This makes the content easier to skim—especially if the paragraphs have topic sentences.

Use bulleted lists, links, and anchors to break up copy on longer pages. This helps users skim the page to find exactly what they're looking for. Hyperlinks allow a user to move from page to page with a simple glance—which accomplishes your goal of drawing them further into the site.

Anchors (shortcuts to a specific section of a page) let users click to the exact content they're interested in, rather than scrolling the whole page in a blind search.

Quality of Content

Be succinct. Cut out unnecessary words. Stay away from convoluted phrasing. And keep sentences short when you can.

Avoid web clichés. When the web was young and we were unsure of whether people would get it, websites had a lot of directions and introductions that are now unnecessary. Some of the most common:

- Welcome to the Benneton College Weaving Department Web Page.
- [Click here](#) to find out more! (The hyperlink should describe what it's pointing to.)
- On this web page you will find... (Descriptive navigation will make it clear.)

Keep the tone conversational. Formal language often sounds aloof—and it uses more words than are really needed. Also, administrative writing tends to be hard for readers to absorb. Certain areas of your site will be more dignified than others (Academics and About, versus Admissions and Student Life), but their style can still be warm and friendly.

Remember the web is nonlinear. Visitors might enter your site from a lower page through Google... which means they'll need some context. That's why the Admissions page has some general copy about the school even though the About page also gives an introduction.

Linking & Navigation

A navigational link should always match the name of the page it points to. Click on "Admissions" and you should get to a page named "Admissions," not "Getting In" or "Forms & Applications." There is more latitude with links in the body of the text, but the relevance between the name of the link and the page it links to should be readily apparent. (Otherwise, visitors get irritated.)

Use straightforward wording in the navigation. A clever but obscure link name can be confusing and even frustrating.

Hyperlink phrases rather than single words. Phrases are easier to spot.

Best Practices for Web Pages

Don't copy and paste from Microsoft Word. MS Word isn't designed for creating web content—it inserts extraneous code that makes your web page inconsistent. If you draft text in Word before posting it on the web use a program like Notepad.

Use the same font, graphical elements, and colors throughout your site. Visual consistency tells visitors they are on YOUR site reading YOUR content.

Keep the background simple. A brightly colored or busy background can make text hard to read; this distracts from the purpose of your site: the content!

Formatting Text for the Web

Keep text size between 10pt and 16pt, even in headlines. What looks good on your screen might look huge (or tiny) on someone else's monitor.

Don't overuse bold or italics. If too much is emphasized, nothing stands out.

Avoid colored and/or underlined text. Visitors often mistake colored or underlined text for links. This leads to confusion and reduces the impact of what you were trying to highlight.