**World Wide Web has introduced journalists to new writing forms**

**1. Know Your Audience**

Write and edit with online readers' needs and habits in mind. Web usability studies show that readers tend to skim over sites rather than read them intently. They also tend to be more proactive than print readers or TV viewers, hunting for information rather than passively taking in what you present to them. Think about your target audience. Because your readers are getting their news online, chances are they are more interested in Internet-related stories than TV viewers or newspaper readers, so it may make sense to put greater emphasis on such stories. Also, your site potentially has a global reach, so consider whether you want to make it understandable to local, national or international audience, and write and edit with that in mind.

**2. Think First — and Think Different**

Before you start reporting and writing a story, think about what the best ways are to tell the story, whether through audio, video, clickable graphics, text, links, etc. – or some combination. Collaborate with audio, video and interactive producers. Develop a plan and let that guide you throughout the news gathering and production process, rather than just reporting a story and then adding various elements later as an afterthought. Also, look for stories that lend themselves to the Web -- stories that you can tell differently from or better than in any other medium.

**3. Tailor Your News Gathering**

Just as print and TV reporters interview differently because they are looking for different things, so must online journalists tailor their interviewing and information gathering specifically to their needs. Print reporters tend to look for information. TV reporters look for emotion on camera, sound bites and pictures to go with words. Online journalists must constantly think in terms of different elements and how they complement and supplement each other: Look for words to go with images, audio and video to go with words, data that will lend itself to interactive, etc… Remember that photos look better online when shot or cropped narrowly, and streaming video is easier to watch when backgrounds are plain and zooming minimal. Tape interviews whenever possible in case someone says that would make a powerful clip. Look for personalities who could be interesting chat guests. And always keep an eye out for information that can be conveyed more effectively using interactive tools.

**4. Write Lively and Tight**

Writing for the Web should be a cross between broadcast and print -- tighter and punchier than print, but more literate and detailed than broadcast writing. Write actively, not passively. Good broadcast writing uses primarily tight, simple declarative sentences and sticks to one idea per sentence. It avoids the long clauses and passive writing of print. Every expressed idea flows logically into the next. Using these concepts in online writing makes the writing easier to understand and better holds readers attention. Strive for lively prose, leaning on strong verbs and sharp nouns. Inject your writing with a distinctive voice to help differentiate it from the multitude of content on the web. Use humor. Try writing in a breezy style or with attitude. Conversational styles work particularly well on the Web. Online audiences are more accepting of unconventional writing styles. At the same time, don’t forget that the traditional rules of writing apply online. Unfortunately, writing quality is inconsistent throughout most online news sites. Stories suffer from passive verbs, run-on sentences, mixed metaphors and clichés. This is a result of fast-paced new gathering, short staffing and inexperienced journalists. This is also a big mistake. Readers notice sloppy writing and they don’t forgive. They’ll stop reading a story and they won’t come back for more. Unlike local newspaper readers, online readers have options.

**5. Explain**

Don't let yourself get caught up in the 24/7 wire-service mentality and think all that matters in that you have the latest news as fast as possible. Readers rarely notice, or care who was first. People want to know not just what happened, but why it matters. And with all the information sources out there now, in the end

It will be the sites that explain the news the best that succeed. Write and edit all your stories with this in mind.

**6. Never Bury the Lead**

You can't afford to bury the lead online because if you do, few readers will get to it. When writing online, it's essential to tell the reader quickly what the story is about and why they should keep reading -- or else they won't. One solution is to use a "Model T" story structure. In this model, a story's lead – the horizontal line of the T -- summarizes the story and, ideally, tells why it matters. The lead doesn't need to give away the ending, just give someone a reason to read on. Then the rest of the story -- the vertical line of the T --can take the form of just about any structure: the writer can tell the story narrative; provide an anecdote and then follow with the rest of the story; jump from one to another, in a "stack of blocks” form; or simply continue into an inverted pyramid. This enables the writer to quickly telegraph the most important information -- and a reason to keep reading -- and yet still retain the freedom to write the story in the way he or she wants to.

**7. Don't Pile On**

Another story structure that has evolved online, mostly by accident, is what I call The Pile-On. A common problem with online writing occurs in breaking news stories. In an effort to seem as current as possible, sites will often put the latest development in a story at the top -- no matter how incremental the development. Then, they'll pile the next development on the top, and the next -- creating an ugly mish-mash of a story that makes sense only to someone who has been following the story closely all day. Unfortunately, the only people who are usually doing so are the journalists. Few readers visit a site more than once a day. Remember this when updating stories, and always keep the most important news in the lead.

**8. Short But Sweet**

Most stories online are too long for a Web audience, and I imagine few readers finish them. Roy Peter Clark has written a wonderful essay arguing that any story can be told in 800 words -- a good guideline for online writing. But let that be a guideline, not a rule. Readers will stick with longer stories online if there is a compelling reason for a story to be that long -- and if it continues to captivate their attention. Making readers scroll to get to the rest of a story is generally preferable to making them click. Online news users do scroll. If someone has clicked to get to a page, it¹s generally because they want to read the story, and thus chances are high that they will. The Poynter eyetrack study showed that about 75 percent of article text was read online -- far more than in print, where 20 to 25 percent of an article's text gets read, on average. Print readers have less vested in any given story, because they haven¹t done anything proactive to get the article.

**9. Break It Up**

Larger blocks of text make reading on screens difficult, and you're more likely to lose readers. Using more subheads and bullets to separate text and ideas helps. Writing should be snappy and fast to read. Keep paragraphs and sentences short. Like this. Try reading sentences out loud to see if they're too long. You should be able to read an entire sentence without pausing for a breath. It also helps to extract information into charts, tables, bulleted lists and interactive graphics. Even a simple box with a definition or summary can help break up text and convey information in an easy-to-read format.

**10. Eliminate the Guesswork**

People often don't know what they're going to get when they click on stuff. And people are not going to click on something unless they know what they're getting. When they click on something that's not worth it, they lose trust in you as a source and are less likely to come back and click on things in the future. So make sure you tell people what they are going to get. Studies show online news user’s preferred straightforward headlines to funny or cut ones. Cute headlines didn't do as good a job of quickly explaining what a story is about and thus discouraged online users from clicking through.

**11. Do Not Fear the Link**

Don't be afraid to link. Many sites have a paranoid fear that if they include links to other sites, readers will surf away and never return. Not true! People prefer to go to sites that do a good job of compiling click -worthy links -- witness Yahoo’s success. If people know they can trust your site, they will come back for more. At the same time, journalists have a responsibility to apply news judgment and editorial standards to the links they choose. Avoid linking to sites with blatantly false information or offensive content. Select links that enhance the value of the story by helping readers get additional information from the people behind the news. And of course, link to related stories on your site, past and present. This is truly one of the advantages of the Web. By linking to other stories to provide context and background, writers have more freedom to focus on the news of the day without bogging stories down with old information.

**12. Take risks...but remember the basics**

Online journalism is a new and evolving industry and we are writing the rules as we go along. Challenge yourself and your colleagues to question the way things are being done and to stretch the boundaries of what can be done. There are no rules, only ideas. Take risks. Try something different.

But don't forget the fundamentals of journalism. Facts still have to be double- and triple -checked; writing still needs to be sharp, lively and to the point; stories should include context; and ethical practices must be followed. Don't let the 24/7 speed trap and the new tools distract you from these basics. With so many alternative news sources now at everyone's fingertips thanks to the Web, it is now more important than ever that we stick to the fundamentals of journalism to produce news people can trust, because in the end that's what will keep people coming back for more.

**Tips for Writing for the Web**

**Text Formatting**

**Short Paragraphs :>** A 100-word paragraph looks pretty long on a Web page. Long paragraphs send asignal to the reader: This will require effort. The writer expected you to have a lot of spare time. Sit down and read awhile. Short paragraphs send a different message: I'm easy! This won't take long at all! Read me!

**Headings >** The heading at the top of the page should make absolutely clear what the page contains orconcerns. The text under the heading must not repeat the heading information (see redundancy, below right).

**Subheadings >** If the page text exceeds 300 words, subheadings will help the reader scan the pageefficiently and happily.

**Boldface >** Depending on the content, words or phrases in boldface can help readers find what they want.Combining boldface and subheadings could lead to visual noise, so do not overdo it. Combining links and boldface text in the same paragraph could have the same unsightly result.

**Lists >** Numbered, bulleted or other indented lists help the reader make sense of the information on thepage. In many print contexts, lists would look ugly and thus are not used. On Web pages, lists work well in almost all contexts. Like paragraphs, lists appeal more to the reader when they are short.

**Text Content**

**Brevity >** Write tight. Omit all unnecessary words.\*

Sentence Structure > be straightforward. While a meandering introductory clause may seem like a good idea to you, the reader might stop reading -- before she gets to the heart of your sentence.

**Active Verbs >** It is easy to write with passive verbs (am, is, are, has, have). Using active verbs makesthe writer work harder -- but the reader benefits. The writer also benefits, because the reader stays interested. Passive verbs bore readers. Bored readers leave.

**Say What You Mean >** Try saying it out loud before you write it. We tend to speak more directly thanwe write. We get to the point more quickly, too, when we can see the listener's eyes glazing over. **Redundancy >** Reading the same information twice wastes a person's time

**Links**

**What They Say >** Link text should not break any of the rules given for text (at left). A link must give thereader a reasonable expectation of what she will get when she clicks. Linked phrases such as "click here" or "Web page" do not provide helpful information.

**What They Do >** A link that does not open something or take the user to a new Web page seems to be abroken link. When the link will take the user to a different place on the same page, or open a media player, give the user a cue.

**How They Look >** A long phrase (more than about five words) can be hard to read, or just ugly, whenunderlined and/or in a highlight color. Links that are not underlined and do not appear in a different color from the surrounding text are almost impossible for the users to see.

**Introduction**

Cyberspace belongs to readers, not writers. The journalist who carefully crafts a story with a lead, middle and ending is at the mercy of World Wide Web users who resemble TV couch potatoes with a mouse for a remote control. With a world at their fingertips, readers can link to another Web site in an instant before they even access the story. That doesn't differ from print readers who scan headlines. But news stories on the Web offer more diversions and problems. With a multitude of links to others sites and technology that causes poor readability and slow download time, getting and keeping readers' attention is more difficult online than in print.

**How then should we write news for the Web?**

Should we write inverted pyramid stories, with the most important information at the top of the story? Should we write in narrative form like a fiction story with a plot that unfolds from beginning to end? Should we organize stories in chunks for readers to click on or in continuous screens they can scroll? Or should we create new forms of storytelling for the Web?

This study will explore several forms of writing online news. It features interviews with media leaders, research from studies, models for news, and resources for writing on the Web.

**Nonlinear Form**

**Linear and nonlinear defined**

The distinguishing characteristic of the World Wide Web is hypertext, clickable links to other information on the same or other Web pages. Hypermedia adds audio, visual and video. The result is nonlinear information, a format that allows users to read and access information in any order they choose. In contrast, linear information is presented in a set order from beginning to end like a straight line. If readers want to understand the story, they must read it in the order it is presented.

**Useful links needed**

George Landow, a Brown University professor and scholar of hypermedia, says hyperlinks must be useful, coherent and purposeful. "When users follow links and encounter materials that do not appear to possess a significant relation to the document from which the link pathway originated, they feel confused and resentful," he writes in Hypermedia and Literary Studies.

**Reader/writer relationship changing**

Using these principles, an online news story becomes more like a Sunday package with related sidebars than a simple news story. Whether the story contains links to other Web pages or links to topics within the same page, nonlinear structure changes the writer- reader relationship. The writer relinquishes control over the information to the reader. Sven Birkerts, author of The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age, says hypertext "changes the entire system of power upon which the literary

Experience has been predicated.” Once a reader is enabled to collaborate, participate or in any way engage the text as an empowered player who has some say in the outcome of the game, the core assumptions of reading are called into question," Birkerts writes. "The imagination is liberated from the constraints of being guided at every step by the author." But giving the reader freedom of choice in paths to follow can disrupt comprehension. Birkerts describes his experience of reading a hypertext fiction story created in chunks and links to different sections as a constant interruption: "The reading surface was fractured, rendered collage-like by the appearance of starred keywords and suddenly materialized menu boxes."

**Shovel ware persists**

Birkerts would have less trouble reading online news sites. The majority of them still feature the same linear stories that were published in print. That "repurposing" of material from print to the Web is called"shovelware." The term carries a negative connotation. Elizabeth Osder, former content development editor for the online New York Times, says readers of The New York Times want the newspaper's content online. "I don't think there is anything wrong with a Web site that is straight shovel ware.”A good site should be useful to people and should serve its audience," Osder said at a journalism educators’ conference.

**Original content increasing**

But original content developed for newspaper Web sites is increasing. A study, "Media I in Cyberspace," by Steven Ross, an associate professor at Columbia University, and Don Middleberg, chairman and CEO of Middleberg + Associates, conducted in 1997, says that 20 percent of newspapers with Web sites report that at least half of the content on their sites is original material designed for the Web compared to only 7 percent the previous year.

**Medium is evolving**

Andy Beers, executive producer of MSNBC news, says online news sites will continue to develop more content just for the Web. "I think if I were going to pick the biggest mistake we made, we spent too much time trying to reinvent the newspaper online," Beers says. "What you are starting to see more is the evolution of the medium as a unique way of telling a story. There is a unique way of allowing people to control information." Beers cites a recent election as an example of how the Web empowered people to get the information they wanted when they wanted it. People could log into the Web site and search for election results they wanted instead of waiting for the newspaper to print them

or listening to a broadcast until specific elections were mentioned. Beers says online stories must be constructed in layers that offer readers different levels of information. Some readers want briefs, while others want full stories, multimedia, or in-depth information, he says.

**Significance for journalists**

"This new media has some really exciting and useful capabilities for people," Beers says. "What does this all mean for journalists? I think that all of us carry around a lot of baggage based on a kind of entitlement that we decide what people need. I think the Internet is going to break through that concept and force us to examine what journalism is. "People feel much empowered by the Web," he says. "We have to learn to use those capabilities that can change the way they get information. We're involving the audience and allowing them to be in control. That's a very powerful thing."

**Interactivity**

Interactivity is what sets the Web apart from print news. Like hypertext, it is another way to empower readers. Polls, quizzes, and feedback questions are a few ways to involve readers. They have become an integral part of online news writing. Searchable databases are another form of interactivity ideally suited to Web stories. The combined online Web site of the Philadelphia Inquirer and Philadelphia Daily News

Provides readers with a database of more than 10,000 physicians and other health topics that they can search. Other databases such as education packages allow readers to search for test scores and statistical information in their own school districts. Howard Witt, associate managing editor for interactive news at the Chicago Tribune, says Web readers want information that is relative to them and they want to interact with it. Witt referred to a package of homicide stories that allowed users to click on a map and find out

How many homicides occurred in their neighborhoods. But for Witt, the defining moment of writing on the Web came not from his staff, but from readers. When famed columnist Mike Royko died in 1997, within a week 700 readers posted messages to express their grief. "This is where I understood the power of this medium for the first time," Witt says. "If he had died five years ago, some people might simply have written a letter to the editor. This (online message board) allows us to let people grieve together and share something like this. This is a pinnacle of what interactivity means."

**Writing Process**

* Topics in this section
* Planning the story
* Gathering information
* Organizing information
* Writing the story
* Rewriting

Writing in nonlinear form requires a different way of planning, organizing and crafting a story. In any medium, a writing process involves planning, gathering, organizing, and writing and rewriting. But online news requires some elements unique to writing for the Web.

**Planning the story**

In a major online media site such as CNN, planning involves a team of a writer, editor, and technical staff - including a multimedia specialist. Jeff Garrard, executive producer of CNN Interactive, says the planning process begins by listing the stories to be covered on a laminated white board like an old-fashioned blackboard. "It doesn't crash," he quips. Then a writer and associate producer team up. The writer sifts through wires, CNN reports and video feeds. The associate producer tracks down multimedia elements and consults with a multimedia designer. A Web editor then searches the Internet for appropriate links. A writer for a small online news site or even a major online newspaper may have to consider those elements without such a support team. Some questions to consider for planning:

Does the background for the story lend itself to links to separate Web pages?

Should background or related elements be presented as a timeline or visually instead of text? Should multimedia elements, such as audio or video, accompany the story?

Does the story lend itself to discussion questions or other interactive elements that will involve readers? What visual elements does the story need: maps, photos, etc.?

Who needs to be involved early in the process: Web editors, designers, multimedia specialists?

* Back to topics menu
* Gathering Information

Reporting for the Web involves gathering material for brief and in-depth presentation. Even if a site doesn't feature audio and video now, it probably will in the future. Robin Palley, former Web editor for the online Philadelphia Inquirer and Philadelphia Daily News, says writing for the Web has to start with reporting for the online site. Palley says print reporters should take tape recorders and computer disks to a news event. They should tape interviews for sound bites and ask if a full text of a speech or a complete list of science fair winners is available in computer form to post on the Web, she says. Reporters also need to gather information to update the story or plan the next step. A follow-up story could be posted on the Web in an hour rather then waiting for the next broadcast or print edition. Every news Web site becomes more like the all- day television or online news sites of CNN Interactive and MSNBC. Competition of online news sites and the need to be current are forcing a return to the days when newspapers were published all day long, Palley says. "I think the time will come when we will need a rewrite desk."

* Back to topics menu
* Organizing Information
* Nonlinear stories pose enormous organizational challenges.
* Should they be written in chunks linked to other Web pages?

Should they be written in one long screen with or without links to internal topics?

Before writers craft the story, they should outline. In online storytelling the word "outline" has been replaced by a more palatable term: storyboarding. And this is a crucial step in online writing. A storyboard is a diagram like an organizational chart. Each chunk of the story is a box on the chart, including audio and visual elements. The storyboard is a concept borrowed from film or cartooning where each panel of the cartoon is a box in the diagram showing the sequence. Related Web pages for background and other elements are parts of the storyboard.

Dividing the story into subtopics is another way to envision its parts, even if it will be

Presented as one complete story. Leah Gentry, editorial director of the online Los Angeles Times, describes the nonlinear storytelling process as deconstructing and reconstructing a story. She suggests: Deconstruct: Divide your story into component pieces. Look for similarities and relationships between the pieces. Group those that are similar. Reconstruct: Then use a storyboard to diagram the relationships between the groupings. It doesn't have to be fancy, Gentry says. "Mostly I scribble on paper. It becomes a blueprint for your site." "Every story has a micro element, the part of the story that must be linear," she says. "For example, a man walks into a room and is shot. The man must have walked into the room before he can be hit with the bullet, so that sentence is the micro story, a linear part that explains what the story is about. It could be a sentence or paragraph similar to a nut graph or several paragraphs." The macro story is the rest of it -- contextual and related information -- in an order the reader can choose. Gentry say a story also works using a point of view strategy. A story could contain a cast of characters, and the story could be told several times filtered through the eyes of each character.

Not all parts of the story have to be text, Gentry says. Images or multimedia elements can

Also tell the story. But she warns against using technology for technology's sake. "It must further storytelling." she says. "Anything that doesn't is just noise and it gets in

The way of information." A storyboard might look like this:

**Writing the Story**

Good writing still begets good reading. Style should be dictated by content. Usability studies suggest the inverted pyramid to facilitate scanners. But if writers are trying to entice reading, other styles must be explored. Experiments with writing on the Web involve many fiction sites, and fiction is not written in inverted pyramid style. The Web offers a chance to be as eclectic in writing styles as it is in its reading population. One size does not fit all! Here are some tips that can be used for any style of online writing: Write a discussion question first, whether you will use it or not. That will help you create your focus and insert a context that will relate to readers. You can move the discussion question to the end later. Write a nut graph at the top of your story as a teaser. This will help you put your focus high in the story. This graph can be used as a tool and removed later if it doesn't serve as a subhead.

Use short sentences. Avoid connecting sentences with conjunctions. Use short paragraphs.

Write topic subheads.

Use lists to help the reader scan the page.

Write in chunks of information that can be split into logical subtopics and related nonlinear parts. If stories are presented on different Web pages, treat each chunk as a separate story like a sidebar. Restate the context. Use the blocking technique when possible, especially in a basic news story. If a story has three or more sources, try to structure the story so each source is in one block and does not have to be used again. See next point. Avoid the journalistic convention of using last-name only on second reference. When readers scroll different screens or click to another chunk on a separate Web page, the second reference is confusing. Ignore journalistic taboos of writing questions for leads or transitions. They work well on the Web, especially at the end of chunks. Try cliffhanger endings if the story will link to another screen.

**Rewriting**

The Web has unlimited space, but readers don't have unlimited attention. Cut every extra word, conjunction and unnecessary adjective. Count the number of lines in each section of your story. A computer screen generally contains 29 lines of type. Use this as a guide to see where subheads might be placed. Scan the story. Does your eye focus on subtopics or other points of entry? If not, create them.

Check your endings and transitions to new screens. Does the story lure readers to continue to another screen or Web page?

**Eye movement study**

Before you decide how to write a story for the Web, it helps to understand how people read online.” They don't," says Jakob Nielsen, a consultant and former Sun Microsystems distinguished engineer. He has conducted several studies about reading and writing on the Web. He says readers are scanners in search of information. A leader in Web usability research, Nielsen says reading on the Web is 25 percent more difficult because of screen resolution. That doesn't mean writing should be 25 percent shorter, he writes in a bimonthly column on the Sun Microsystems Web site. It should be 50 percent shorter, he says. His advice: Writing for the Web should be short, simple and written in inverted pyramid style. But major news stories in the past two years indicate that online reading is increasing. After the death of Princess Diana and during the scandal involving President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, a former White House intern, Web usage in news sites soared. Whether users scanned or read thoroughly is still unknown. But studies by Nielsen and other researchers provide valuable insights.

**Writing for the Web study**

Nielsen conducted three studies from 1994 to 1997 with fellow researcher John Morkes. "Our studies suggest that current Web writing often does not support users in achieving **their** main goal: to find useful information as quickly as possible," they wrote. "We have come to realize that content is king in the user's mind," they concluded. "When a page comes up, users focus their attention on the center of the window where they read the body text before they bother looking over header bars or other navigational elements."

In their study, "How to write for the Web," conducted in 1997, they tested four models of writing. Promotional writing using adjectives and "marketese" found on many commercial sites concise text with half the word count of the promotional model scannable layout, using bullets objective language, eliminating adjectives.The concise text was the most popular, followed by the scannable model with bullets and then the objective language model. None of the test subjects chose the promotional writing model, which impaired credibility. Based on this study, Nielsen and Morkes suggest these techniques for writing scannable text on the Web:

Highlighted keywords

Meaningful subheads (not clever ones)

Bulleted lists (They help scanners move through information.) One idea per paragraph

Inverted pyramid style

Half the word count (or less) than conventional writing.

The last study was one of the first to test different writing styles, and its results are significant. But it must be viewed with caution for online news writing. The 41 users in the study were tested for their ease of searching for information, recall, and subjective satisfaction, not for reading news. The test only involved different versions of a story about travel attractions in Nebraska. And, as the researchers note, content is still a major factor in readability. Other news writing styles can be as effective, as this Poynter report will show.

**Formula to Measure Readability**

Another study by User Interface Engineering, a Massachusetts consulting firm, tested nine Web sites for a variety of design factors influencing ease of use. As part of the study, Jared M. Spool and other researchers used formulas that calculate readability, such as the Gunning Fog Index. This tool measures readability based on the average number of words, sentences and syllables.

The researchers found that Web users find information better in online text that contains fewer conjunctions and lacks standard grammatical structures. The study presumed that users were skimming text in search of information, not reading it thoroughly. They found that writing for the Web may require shorter sentences with simpler words.

Embedded links surrounded by text were another deterrent to readability. The researchers found that links contained within a sentence make it harder for readers to find information. Readers who skim tend

to look for links. If links are buried inside text, they slow the readers' progress and are more difficult to understand, the study says.

**Clicking vs. scrolling**

In early studies conducted by researchers Jakob Nielsen and John Morkes, the majority of users preferred to click rather than scroll below one screen to get information. In their 1997 study on writing for the Web, they found that readers are becoming more receptive to scrolling past one screen if the content interests them. My own studies with journalism students for the past two years revealed similar findings. Five unscientific surveys showed that in 1997 more students wanted to click through screens than scroll. In the most recent survey conducted in 1999, students were evenly divided among the clickers or scrollers. In all the experiments, almost all the students said they scanned when they read text on the Web instead of reading stories thoroughly. Their comments were more revealing. Those who favored chunks of text with links to click to the next part:

"I seem to lose my place when I scroll."

"Clicking is a more active thing. It seems more engaged."

"Scrolling tires your eyes because you have to pay attention to the moving lines in order not to scroll too far." Those who favored scrolling:

"I hate waiting for the next page to load."

"I'm a scroller because I like to have everything on one page, and it is easy to move up and down with the scroll. I like to click when the subject is different."

"In case I need to reread a little above, it's still on the screen. I can take it at my own speed, and it's easier to keep my place."

If there is any conclusion for writers on the Web, it is that if the content is worth reading,

Web users will click or scroll to get it. But the majority will scan it and print it out if they want thorough readability.

**Eye Movement Study**

In the early 1990s, The Poynter Institute for Media Studies conducted scientific tests by using eye-tracking equipment to see how people read newspapers. The study, Eyes on the News, by Mario Garcia and Pegie Stark Adam, also concluded that most readers are scanners. Although it was primarily aimed at testing the impact of color and graphics in newspapers, the study found that only 25 percent of the people tested began reading the text and about 12 percent actually read stories thoroughly. These findings for print readers are even more significant for online readers.

Garcia, author of Redesigning Print for the Web, now concentrates on consulting for online news sites. The Web is obviously ideal for scanners, he says. The average time spent reading on the Web is seven minutes compared to 20 minutes for newspapers.

"People who use it are highly educated," he says. "They want a lot of information. All the evidence from focus groups shows that word links tend to be more effective than icons in making people click. Good writing is crucial. We need headlines that entice you to click. We are going to need the best word people in the world. The art of writing is back."

**Teaser Study**

* Topics in this section
* Teaser study overall results
* Summary vs. broadcast-style
* Repetition of headlines, subheads and leads
* Comparing print and online reading patterns
* Conclusion

Headlines and summaries that introduce Web stories are the first step in enticing readers. But summary teasers often tell so much about the story, they give the reader little reason to click into it. If the reader does click, repetition awaits because most subheads on the main page merely duplicate the lead in the story. If most Web readers are scanners and we are competing for their average of seven minutes of online reading time, should we ask readers to read the same information two or three times? Or is the

Repetition of summaries and leads helpful to Web readers so they know they have accessed the right story?

**Teaser study**

An unscientific study of the affect of writing styles for Web headlines, subhead and leads on readability revealed conflicting results. Although the majority of respondents in the study said it bored them to read leads that had been repeated in headlines and subheads, the repetition did not affect whether or not they would read the story. Nor did the style. content was the major determinant. The study of 52 journalism students, ranging in age from 20 to 50, tested four factors: Summary versus broadcast-style teaser subheads: Which were more effective in enticing users to click into a story? Students chose broadcast-style "stay-tuned" teasers over inverted pyramid-summary subheads in four out of five examples, but they said they preferred summary style when scanning the Web. Their comments: "Content would be a major factor. If I'm interested in the story, it wouldn't matter if it were a summary or a teaser."

"I like summaries better. There's less chance for misreading the facts. It also cuts to the Chase. I pay for online time. Cut to the chase and don't be coy."

"I like teasers because they entice you. It makes me want to read on. But when I don't have time to read the whole article, I like summaries."

Impact of repetitious headlines and subheads on readability of leads:

53 percent said repetition made no difference whether they would read the story. 18 percent said repetition helped their comprehension.

29 percent said repetition bored them.

Many students commented that they wanted headlines and subheads to be brief – not several paragraphs that would be repeated in the story. However, 46 percent said they often skip reading the lead in online stories if the subhead repeats it, and 29 percent said they sometimes skip reading the lead if it is repetitious. The percentages were similar for skimming or skipping repetitious leads in print. Their comments:

"I like, or don't mind, a repetitious headlines, subhead and lead if not too much of the

story is given before you reach 'click here' for full story. If three paragraphs are given, then I get annoyed because I'm into the story; one paragraph is OK. "It helps to hammer home the point of the story. And since I don't read stories on the Web thoroughly, it helps me get as much information as quickly as possible." "I hate repetition. It's a waste of my time."

Comparison of print and online reading patterns: Did users read print stories that interested them more thoroughly than online news stories. Almost all the respondents show similar patterns for print and online news reading.

Always read print news stories of interest thoroughly -- 21 percent compared to 11 percent online. Often read print news of interest thoroughly -- 62 percent compared to 60 percent online. Most of these students who answered often for print responded the same for online.

Sometimes -- 12 percent for print news stories, 25 percent for online. Age made no difference in reading patterns. Undergraduate students in their 20s had the same patterns for print and online as did graduate students in their 30s, 40s and 50s.

**Conclusion**

Content is the main factor in enticing readers to click. Shorter subheads work better than detailed ones with several paragraphs. Subheads that don't repeat the leads are preferable because readers will skip repetitious leads. This unscientific survey should only be viewed as a starting point to consider whether summary or teaser subheads and repetition should be used. A more thorough scientific study would be needed to derive definitive conclusions. Story Forms 1

**Topics in this section**

* Overview: Coast to coast innovation
* A new generation of Web users
* Scanners' models
* Screen-size chunk model
* Overview

Eric Eaton is a designer for the Wired News site. "I try to make sure everything is pure information," Eaton says. "I would like people to get everything from the top-level headlines. There's always more for people who want the rest." Add Eaton to proponents of the inverted pyramid form.

Two desks away Taylor is experimenting with high-tech ways of producing stories with graphics and motion. "Everything we know about online is different from print," he says.

This 20-something Web designer represents a new generation. He even shortened his name to a one- word click. He prefers Web stories in small chunks of graphically charged information that he can choose in an order he pleases. He can click from one Web page to another without losing a mental nanosecond of comprehension.

"You grew up in a world of three channels on TV," he tells this 50-something writer. "I grew up in a world of 80 channels." He also grew up with video games, so multitasking - - switching from one task to another -- is just an extension of his childhood skills. Add Taylor to proponents of nonlinear chunks of writing.

In the middle of the country, John Caserta, Chicago Tribune's online Web designer, works on innovative storytelling packages. Some tell a story with a screen of short text and photos. Others, like a series on classical music, depend on multimedia.

"Design is communication of information in a clear way," Caserta says. "Text is not always the best way to communicate it. I think the traditional story should be questioned."Add Caserta to proponents of new writing models for the Web.

And on the East Coast, a team of designers, photographers, writers and editors for The Philadelphia Inquirer Web site labored over a 29-part narrative serial about the battle of Mogadishu. The series features multimedia and compelling writing like a novel with chapter endings in cliffhangers.

**A new generation of Web users**

From coast to coast, online news sites are experimenting with new ways of storytelling on the Web. And around the globe, the next generation of Web readers and writers is already rocketing through cyberspace to create inventive ways of conveying information.

A million dollar-grant by the Advanced Network & Services in a "Think Quest" program for high school students throughout the world reveals their ability to create Web packages that would humble most American online newspaper writers and designers. If most Web readers are only scanners now, the generation that is growing up with the Web could well become serious readers. To limit our vision of writing forms for a current generation of scanners is short-sighted. So which form is best? All of the above: the inverted pyramid for some hard news stories, serial narrative for others, screen-size chunks with links to different Web pages if stories have logical breaks and scrolling stories for those that need a more linear presentation for comprehension. Different forms for different functions.

Howard Witt, associate managing editor for interactive news at the Chicago Tribune, says these innovative storytelling forms for the Web take a lot of time to produce. He says they work best on Web specials that have "shelf life" but aren't practical for daily news. But the models discussed here can be adapted for daily news stories on the Web with little more than a few copyediting adjustments and some nonlinear thinking. Other models to be discussed will focus mostly on the writing styles rather than the interactive features and technical design.

**Scanners' Models**

A study of 50 metropolitan daily online newspapers reveals that the majority present text in long strips of black rolls resembling toilet paper. No subheads. No bullets. The lessons learned in print design have been ignored online. In many online newspapers, the text spans the entire width of the screen, creating a torturous task for eye movement. A few, however, offer models that adhere to readability for scanners as well as thorough readers without requiring major adjustments in writing or design.

Star Tribune online model: This Minneapolis online site uses topic subheads on most stories, unless they are very short, and bullets when appropriate for the story. The online newspaper also places links to related items in a column on the side of the story at the top of the page and again near the end, making nonlinear navigation easy for readers without

Interrupting the flow of the story.

Keep subheads on main pages short and informative to entice readers. Use bulleted lists when applicable to the story.

Avoid embedded links in stories.

Use teaser or summary headlines that don't repeat the lead, especially when the news story features an anecdotal lead. Use nonlinear formats when they enhance the story. For a long, scrollable story, consider internal links targeted to topics on the same page. If the story has logical breaks that might be presented as a short series or sidebars, consider screen-size chunks. Explore new writing styles such as the serial narrative. Train reporters to gather full text on disks, audio and searchable databases for online stories. Multimedia will soon become a regular feature of online all news sites. Consider alternative forms of presenting information such as question-answer format or timelines for background. Confine text to tables of 350 to 450 pixels for ease of eye movement instead of spanning the entire screen. Add interactive elements -- feedback questions, quizzes, calculators and search capabilities -- that let readers figure how a budget story will affect them.

* Experiment.
* Resources

**Nonlinear form**

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