

FOR WEBMASTERS: HOW TO WRITE FOR THE WEB

BY THE AMERICAN CHEMICAL SOCIETY:
WEB STRATEGY AND OPERATIONS (WSO)

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ACS
Chemistry for Life™

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DRAFT

1. AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE

The most important part of composing a website is to understand your target audience and its purpose. Before you begin, you should be able to answer these questions:

1. Who am I building this for?
2. What information will these people expect to find?
3. What is the order of importance of the information *to my audience*?

The answers to these three fundamental questions will guide the content you put on your site. Anything that doesn't help your audience get the information you've identified in question 2 is extra and more than likely unnecessary.

2. TESTING & USER RESEARCH

Testing is essential to evaluating your users' needs and satisfaction with your website. It helps to validate—or sometimes negate—assumptions you made in concepting your site. And, it will inform the decisions you make going forward.

Basic rules for testing include:

- ◆ Test early; test often. (Don't wait until a project is nearly complete to find out your users don't want, need, or like what you're producing.)
- ◆ Test everything: site architecture, navigation, flow, branding, messaging, etc.
- ◆ Listen to your users. If testing indicates a faulty assumption has been made, rest assured that you are not the first or the last person this has happened to.

3. INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE

Information Architecture (IA) refers to the organization of content on a website. "Good" IA helps users navigate the site quickly to find the information they need.

- ◆ Place information where site users will intuitively look to find it.
- ◆ Organize the content based on tasks, not roles.
- ◆ Create navigation that will make sense to the end user, not the internal staff.
- ◆ A good rule of thumb is to make sure that that users don't have to click more than four times to find the information they need.

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4. COPYWRITING

People read much differently online than they do offline. Therefore, writing for the web requires a set of skills unique from journal, novel, marketing, and other kinds of writing. To help your site users, information should be provided **where** and **in the way** they will be reading each page.

4.1. How People Read Online

The following image shows the results of an "eye tracking" study by Jakob Nielsen, one of the foremost web-writing gurus.



Red: Areas users looked at the most / Yellow: Fewer views / Blue: Fewest views

Source: <http://www.useit.com>

The results of these three "heatmaps" clearly indicate several important points about how people read on the web:

1. They skim.
2. They pay little attention to anything toward the bottom of the page.
3. They read the first two—maybe three—words on a line.¹

4.2. Copywriting Basics

- ◆ Try to keep the information on the page **above the fold**.
- ◆ Ending a sentence in a preposition is better than sounding too formal.
- ◆ Use contractions—it's more friendly.

¹ http://www.useit.com/alertbox/reading_pattern.html

- ◆ Complete sentences are often not necessary. Sentence fragments allow you to filter out unnecessary words and bring keywords to the beginning of the fragment.
- ◆ Eliminate "polite" text. Users WANT to be told what to do. Filter out words like "please," "be sure to," etc.
- ◆ Don't repeat information.
- ◆ Don't unnecessarily elaborate.

4.3. Scannability

Don't assume users will read what's on your page, because they most likely won't. **Reading online is approximately 25% slower than offline.** So, web users typically scan to find information more quickly. If they don't find it quickly, they will move to search another page.

Website content can be made more scannable using the following techniques:

- ◆ **Headlines and subheadings**
These should be brief and purposeful. If users read nothing else on a page, they will walk away with useful information.
- ◆ **Short, succinct paragraphs**
Focus on writing concise sentences that pinpoint the main idea.
- ◆ **Bulleted lists**
These help break up text. Bullets draw the eye; shorter phrases are more efficient than sentences.
- ◆ **Emphasize keywords and phrases**
These help users find key information on the page. Use bold text to highlight only words or phrases that are vital to your message.
- ◆ **Inverted pyramid style**
Place your conclusion or main point at the top of the page. Users have the option to read any supporting text that follows.
- ◆ **Phrases vs. sentences**
Don't write a sentence if a word or two will do. (E.g., "Register" vs. "Please go here to register for...")
- ◆ **Avoiding unnecessary words**
The following words/phrases are almost always unnecessary: online, ACS, be sure to, please (or any variation). If the user is **online** on the **ACS** website, neither needs to be specified. Readers have to filter out "polite" language to get to the point. They'd rather simply be told what to do.

4.4. Readability

Following are guidelines for producing easy-to-read webpage content:

- ◆ Don't use a difficult word when a simpler word will do.
- ◆ Address the user as "you;" refer to ACS as "us" or "we."
- ◆ Use verbs in the present tense.
- ◆ Avoid jargon, buzzwords, and marketing speak.
- ◆ Limit the use of acronyms.
- ◆ Be consistent. To achieve consistency, make sure you A) use the same labels, titles, and names across the pages, and B) know the labels, titles, and names that have been used in other sections of the site. Resolve discrepancies. **Consistency helps users process information more quickly!**

5. DESIGN

The design of any website should aim to make it easy for users to find and understand the information they're seeking. Following are effective strategies for achieving this goal:

- ◆ Provide visual cues to facilitate and speed comprehension (graphics, sub-headings, etc.).
- ◆ Consider the user's environment. (For example, designers for outdoor kiosks need to consider sunlight.)
- ◆ As always, be consistent. (Use the same icon across the site for the same function, etc.)
- ◆ Think of the homepage as a store window. It should entice the user to enter, as well as accurately reflect what the user can expect to find inside.
- ◆ Limit the use of ads. They compete with each other for attention, thereby minimizing their effectiveness. Also, people tend to ignore them.

5.1. Templates

The contract entered by ACS and the Local Sections and Technical Divisions requires the use of one of the three ACS templates.

5.2. Images

Images should:

- ◆ Relate to the surrounding content

- ◆ Not dominate the page
- ◆ Have a clear focal point
- ◆ Be of good quality (e.g., not blurry, etc.)
- ◆ Look professional and present subjects in a positive light
Hint: Ask yourself "If this was me, would I want someone to put this picture on a public website?"

Be sure that you have rights to use any images and give proper credit.

Good rules of thumb for keeping the page size low are to:

- ◆ Limit the number of images.
- ◆ Optimize image file sizes. Images should not exceed 16 – 25 Kb—the smaller the better.

A good image can usually be achieved at a resolution of 72dpi (best practice for the web). Manage file sizes with photo editing software, such as Adobe Photoshop Elements. (Refer to the software's user manual or help function for instructions.)

5.3. Downloadable-File Icons

Use appropriate icons following any downloadable file (e.g., PDF, PowerPoint, etc.) included on a page.

5.3.1. When to Use PDFs

PDFs are useful when you are dealing with content that users are *likely* to access when away from the Internet. Examples include:

- Forms
- Articles, as in a magazine
- Other documents designed for print that include elements like pagination, print-quality images, etc.

PDFs are clumsy to deal with for users, and they add a layer of maintenance for webmasters. So, limit their use only to times when preserving the formatting of the document is important.

6. W3C COMPLIANCE

Any website affiliated with ACS should follow standards and guidelines issued by the [World Wide Web Consortium \(W3C\)](#). A major goal of W3C is to ensure that all users have comparable access to any information on a website, regardless of physical impairments, etc.

6.1. W3C Basics

Following are guidelines for achieving W3C compliance:

- ◆ Don't refer to a physical location on the user's computer screen.

Incorrect: "Look below to learn more about ACS careers."

--OR--

"Scroll down..."

--OR--

"Hover above..."

Correct: The following provides more information about ACS careers.

--OR--

[ACS Careers](#)

- ◆ Don't provide instructions that assume users are using a mouse.

Incorrect: [Click here](#) to see a list of award recipients.

Correct: [List of Award Recipients](#)

- ◆ Provide column and row headings for all tables.
- ◆ Include captions for all images.
- ◆ Keep readability at as low a grade level as possible.

6.1.2. Calculating Readability Levels in Microsoft Word

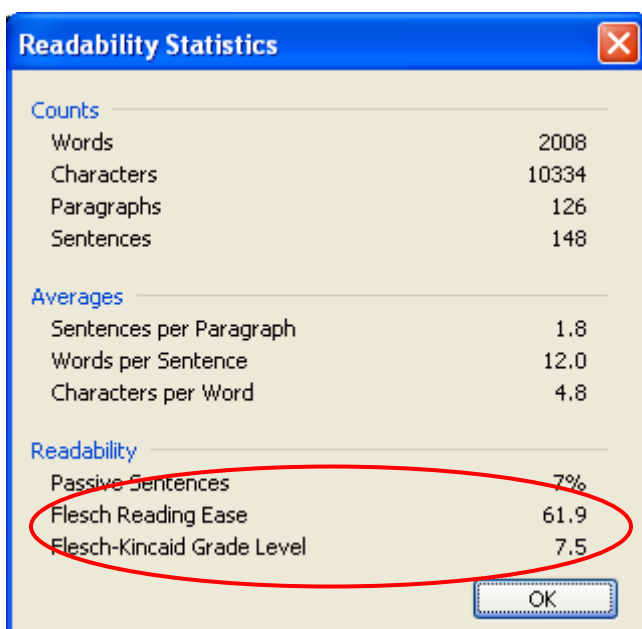
Microsoft Word can be set to calculate the reading level of your document when you run a spell-check. Here's how to turn on this functionality:

1. Go to Tools > Options.
2. Select the "Spelling and Grammar" tab.
3. Under "Grammar," select the "Show readability statistics" box.
4. Click "Ok."

Among other information, two reading scores will automatically display after you run a spell-check (Tools > Spelling and Grammar): Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level.

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Readability Statistics	
Counts	
Words	2008
Characters	10334
Paragraphs	126
Sentences	148
Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	1.8
Words per Sentence	12.0
Characters per Word	4.8
Readability	
Passive Sentences	7%
Flesch Reading Ease	61.9
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	7.5

While no readability analysis tool is 100% accurate, Flesch-Kincaid scores are extremely useful in crafting easy-to-read text. Following are scoring guidelines:

◆ Flesch Reading Ease

Content for the ACS website should aim for a Reading Ease score of 60 or higher.

Score	Notes
90–100	Easily understandable by an average 11-year old
60–70	Easily understandable by 13- to 15-year-olds
0–30	Best understood by college graduates

Source: [Wikipedia](#)

◆ Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level

This score corresponds directly to grade levels. (For example, 7 = 7th grade reading level, 8 = 8th grade reading level, etc.) For pages that don't require using scientific terms, the ACS website strives for approximately an 8th grade reading level. (Try not to exceed a score of 10.)