

ROCKABLE\* and FREELANCESWITCH present



HOW TO WRITE

# GREAT COPY

FOR THE WEB

how to write web copy  
that works!

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# ROCKABLE\*

Rockablepress.com  
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# **AN INTRODUCTION**

## Introduction

Website copy is the text that appears on the pages of a website. It can be used to explain, inform, persuade, or entertain – and an experienced web copywriter will use it to do all of these things at some point. What you'll be using it for depends on your situation.

Whether you want to write the copy for your own site, or for somebody else's, this mini-book will quickly bring you up to speed with some clever strategies that will make you popular with your site's visitors – or with your clients!

As you read this mini-book, you'll learn:

- How to pass on important information without inducing yawns.
- How to grab a reader's attention and keep it.
- How to write web copy that stays true to your branding – or your client's branding.
- How to persuade readers to do what you – or your clients – want them to do.
- How to use web copy to sell products and services.

If you're a designer, you may have had a client ask you to write the copy for the website you just designed. In the past you might have refused – after all, you're a designer, not a copywriter!

But by saying no to these jobs, you miss the chance to earn more money for your work. This mini-book will give you all the know-how you need to comfortably take on these jobs, create more billable hours and impress your clients!

If you're creating your own website – whether for a company, personal project or a blog – you've made a smart choice by purchasing this mini-book. The skills you'll learn will help you communicate your site's purpose to its visitors. If you want to persuade visitors to do something – whether it's buying from you or supporting a cause – then you'll need to be persuasive. Luckily, we're about to teach you how to do just that.

Let's get started!

## How Web Copy Works

The web copy you write will drastically affect the way visitors interact with your – or your client's – website. You have the power to shape how visitors see the site, how visitors navigate it, how much visitors like it, and how effective the site is at meeting its aims. Great copy can lead to increased traffic, more leads, more subscribers, or more sales. On the other hand, bad copy can prevent a website from ever reaching its full potential. That's why your role is so important.

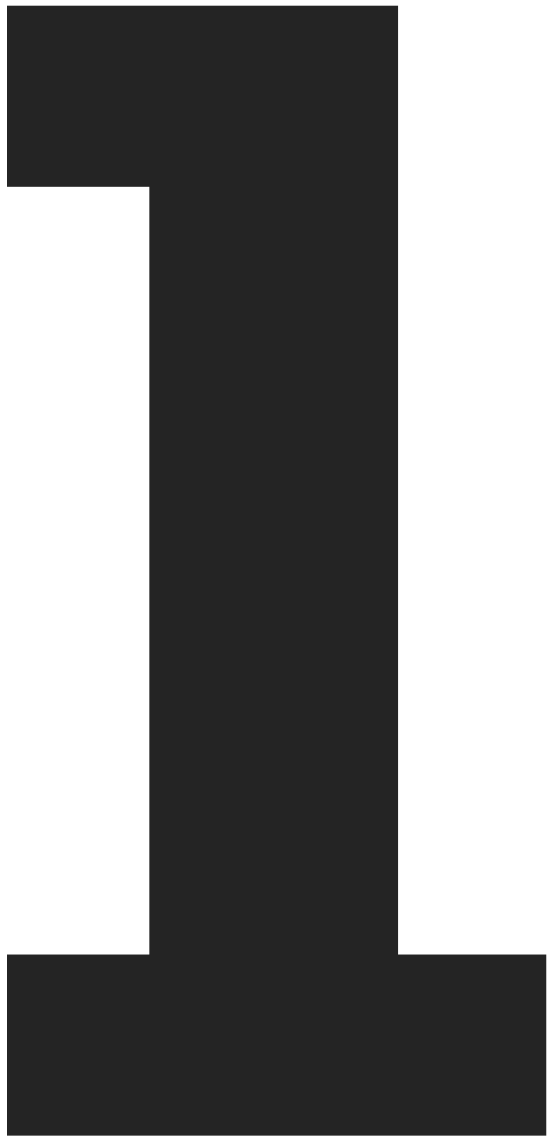
In your role as a web copywriter, you will probably be using copy in the following ways:

- **To inform and build branding.** You will mainly be doing this through all types of pages, including an About page, Contact page, Bio page, or Services page. The purpose of these pages is primarily to make sure that the site makes sense to the visitor. They might also have secondary aims, like presenting the right image, or encouraging newsletter sign-ups.

- **To persuade.** Web copy is often used to persuade website visitors to take certain actions, whether that's buying a product or following someone on Twitter. The best examples of web copy often persuade and inform at the same time.

If you don't consider yourself a talented writer, you may be a little worried at this point. You shouldn't be. Web copy isn't the same as a feature article in a magazine, or a piece of stylish reportage. It doesn't exist for its own sake. Instead, its purpose is only to help the visitor do something else, whether that's what the visitor wants to do, or what *you* want them to do.

Web copy is the facilitator, not the end product. As a result, great web copy isn't beautifully written, detailed and complex, or breathtakingly unique. Instead, it's useful, functional and concise. It's a means to an end, and because of that, anyone can do it well if they understand the basic principles taught in this mini-book.



# What's Different about The Web

The web offers new and interesting ways to reach and communicate with people.

In this section, you'll learn:

- How the web is different to other written mediums of communication.
- How to write content that is easy to scan online.

## The Difference

Most of what you would have learned in school about writing probably didn't touch on writing for the web. As you'll learn in this section, writing for the web and writing for print couldn't be more different!

Lets Look at some of the key differences, and why they matter:

### Web Writing Is Delivered on Screen

Duh! You knew that, didn't you? But do you know why it's important?

When you read from paper, a light source bounces off the paper and is reflected into your eyes. When you look at a computer screen, the light isn't reflected – it is direct. The light from paper is diffuse; the light from a computer screen is much harsher.

This means it is more tiring to read from the screen. It's also slower – up to 25% slower than reading from paper. But you probably figured that out already – you can lie in bed and read a novel for hours, but after an hour staring at the screen your eyes are getting tired.

This simple difference affects how we write. Because people read more slowly and get tired faster, we need to write in a way that helps them to breeze through our words.

### We Do Different Tasks

When we read from paper, we literally have the material within arm's length. We are already holding a book, or report, or newspaper, and don't need to find it. But when we read online, a large part of

our time is spent simply looking for the material we want to read. In fact, we often spend more time hunting for information online than we spend consuming it!

Here's another difference. We often dip in and out of web content, seeking a quick answer without ever intending to read all the text on a page. Print is different – we read in a much more linear fashion, usually going through every word from start to finish.

The third difference is that we don't usually sit down at our computers to read a novel, school text or annual report. In situations where we need to read for a long time, we're more likely to use print.

Because of these three differences, to create great web content we need to:

- Put more effort into helping readers find the information they need.
- Let people get quick answers if that's what they need.
- Provide ways for readers to consume longer pieces of information when necessary.

## **Web Writing Is Less Linear**

Reading printed material is usually a linear process. We start at the beginning and move forward. We may read it word for word, or skip whole chunks, but we do tend to move in one direction. As we move in that direction, we build up knowledge in the order the writer has arranged it.

When we read material on the web, there is really no such thing as forward. Content on the web is hooked together by links and we

can jump from page to page designing our own information flow. We also can't guarantee that our readers have read information in any particular sequence.

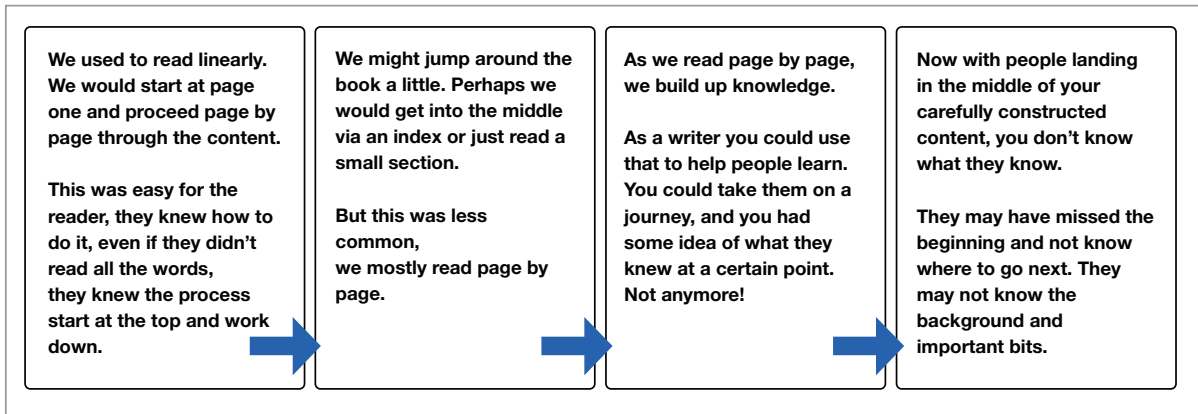


Figure 1.1. We used to read linearly, page by page

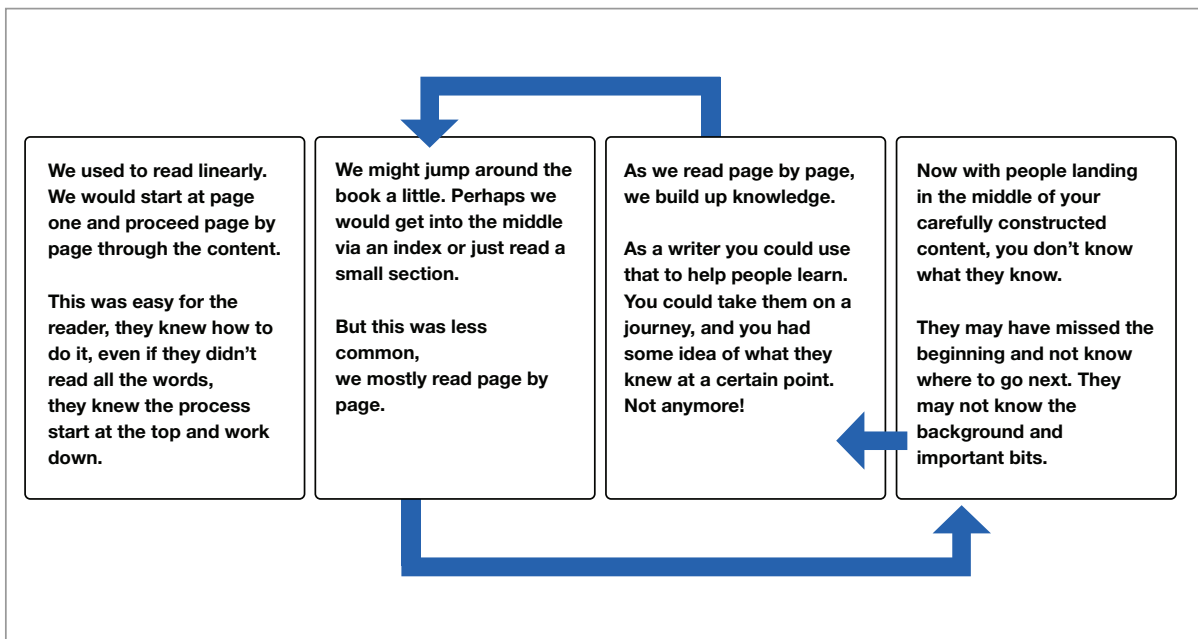


Figure 1.2. Now we start wherever we like and jump around. We miss whole pages and learn out of order

## We Skim And Scan

When we read print material, we usually do it word for word and line by line. We may skip-over some sentences, but we tend to at least glance over each paragraph before moving to the next.

When we read online, going through every word linearly is the exception to the rule. I've watched people use computers while using special hardware that tracks where their eyes move. Their eyes go all over the place – jumping all around the screen, up, down, side to side. Only when they really need to pay attention to detail will they read line by line.

### ROCK\* TIP

*Have a look at these eye-tracking videos to get a better idea of how people look at the screen:*

- <http://au.youtube.com/watch?v=ilq9qeyVjT0&e>
- <http://au.youtube.com/watch?v=sVXjMXnU56E>

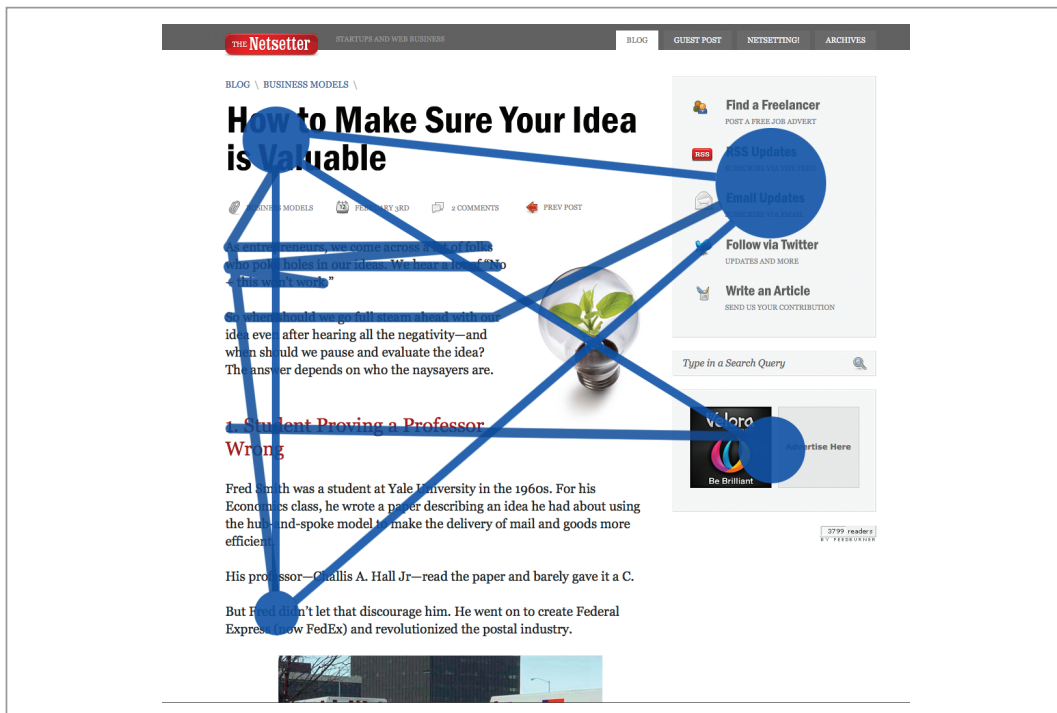


Figure 1.3. We don't read linearly, but we do scan all over the page

When we read on screen, we tend to skim pages quickly and focus on parts of the page such as headings, bulleted lists and links, and rarely read every word.

## The Result

As a result of these differences, good web copy tends to:

- Be clearer and more concise.
- Use shorter sentences and paragraphs.
- Depend less on linear reading.
- Be a lot easier to scan, with more headings, links and bulleted lists.

It should also have the characteristics of good writing (in general). That is, it should:

- Meet the needs of the readers.
- Be written for the readers, with them in mind.
- Communicate in more than one way – including theory, stories and diagrams.

If the above sounds like a lot to ask for so early, don't worry – that's what most of this book is about.

In chapter 2 we'll look at some of the secrets of writing great web copy; in chapters 3 – 5 we'll discuss how to write interesting and usable content. In chapter 6 we'll show you how to write persuasively, and in chapter 7 you'll learn how to write copy that is search engine friendly.

## Follow-Up Reading

- Four Modes of Seeking Information and How to Design for Them. Donna Maurer, Boxes & Arrows. <http://www.boxesandarrows.com/story/index/date/8>
- The Paradox of the Active User. John M. Carroll and Mary Beth Rosson. <http://faculty.ist.psu.edu/rosson/Papers/Paradox.pdf>
- Eye-tracking videos:
  - <http://au.youtube.com/watch?v=ilq9qeyVjT0&e>
  - <http://au.youtube.com/watch?v=sVXjMXnU56E>
- How little do users read? Jakob Nielsen. <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/percent-text-read.html>
- Lower-Literacy Users. Jakob Nielsen. <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20050314.html>
- Writing for the Web. Jakob Nielsen, PJ Schemenaur, and Jonathan Fox. <http://www.sun.com/980713/webwriting>