

Handout: How to Write for the Web

Prepared by Cory Bergman, LostRemote.com

For years web producers have handled the tedious process of converting TV scripts for the web. But today the demand for more timely and comprehensive online coverage has led many newsrooms to assign TV staff to write for the web. Even with the growing popularity of online video, written stories still attract the vast majority of traffic.

So what's the difference between writing for TV and the web? When you write a script for TV, you're writing for the ear in conversational, straightforward prose. You're using video to help tell the story. And you have a time limit.

On the web, you're writing for the motivated reader. Users impatiently scan headlines for anything that jumps out at them, and once they find a story they like, they click it. Once they've made that decision to read a story, they expect more details than they typically see in a 90-second TV piece — not as many as a newspaper story, but more than television. In a nutshell, web writing should be tighter and more conversational than print, but more detailed and a little more formal than TV.

While TV stories frequently begin with the most compelling video or sound bite, web stories are organized with the most important information at the top. This is known as the "inverted pyramid" style of writing. Web stories also follow the AP Style Guide for proper grammar, sentence construction, abbreviations, spelling and more - a daunting prospect for many in TV. Go out and get a copy of the guide, and it will be a big help.

Now let's walk through the process of writing a story for the web.

1. Gather more details

Since web users want more details, you have to gather them in the first place. Reporters should seek out additional information that's not slated for air.

But the biggest challenge is for TV assignment editors and producers who are used to making short, quick calls on deadline for information on a story. Don't just ask the questions you need for TV - ask yourself if you have enough details to write a web story. This is especially challenging in the early stages of breaking news when the desk is calling to get a quick read on a story. If you don't have the time, get the information you need and pass the call to someone else who can take down expanded details for the web.

2. Pull the quotes

If you're calling on a story or conducting an interview, you'll need to jot down the best quotes as they come. Don't paraphrase them - they have to be exact. This takes some practice, and most people come away with one or two short quotes, which may be all you need.

If it's a longer interview for a reporter-length story, write down potential quotes as you log the tapes. This means "verbatim" (writing out the verbatim) of the best sound bites in their entirety - if you don't, you'll hate yourself later when you have to go back and find them all over again.

As you find the best quotes, start envisioning how you plan to write the web story.

3. Start with a fresh page

Even if you've already written the TV version of the story, it's best to write your web story from scratch. I once published a guide on how to "convert" TV scripts to the web, but now most people agree that rewriting them from top to bottom is much easier and more effective. You can certainly cut-and-paste chunks from the TV story to the web story here and there, but in the end a well-written web story will look much different than a TV script.

4. Write the lead sentence first

Nearly all web stories should lead off with the most important information at the top. The first sentence incorporates what makes this story a story. It's different than a TV "toss" which seeks to build interest in the story that follows. For example:

TV toss:

Seattle firefighters and neighbors scrambled to save a man trapped in a trench... buried alive under a half-ton of concrete. It was a desperate struggle... with time running out. Joe Smith tells us what happens next.

Web lead sentence with a "dateline" to establish the location the story was filed:

SEATTLE — Firefighters and neighbors armed with shovels saved a homeowner who was trapped in a trench under a half-ton of concrete for several hours Tuesday.

Notice that it's written in the past tense. If the rescue were still underway, we'd write the sentence in present tense sans the word "Tuesday," and we'd update it several times over. But for stories that have concluded, the past tense prevails. Sure, it's not as dramatic, but TV drama doesn't always

translate well to the web where users may read the story today, tomorrow or a week from now.

5. Use quotes to help tell the story

Now check your list of quotes, and paste the best ones into your page. A good quote can often tell a part of the story better than you can. For example:

SEATTLE — Firefighters and neighbors armed with shovels saved a homeowner who was trapped in a trench under a half-ton of concrete for several hours Tuesday.

“He had only minutes to live by the time we got to him,” said Seattle Fire Department Chief Jeff Richardson. “He was gasping for air.”

Notice how the quote is constructed. You could also do it like this, assuming he said the quote without an interruption between the two sentences:

“He had only minutes to live by the time we got to him. He was gasping for air,” said Jeff Richardson, Seattle Fire Department chief.

You can also set up quotes by introducing someone with a sentence or two, and subsequent references can simply use the person’s last name. There are many more ways to write quotes, and you should consult the AP Style Guide for more.

6. Attribute copy

As you add facts into the story - weaving them together with the quotes - keep a close eye on attribution. Attribution is critical for any medium, but it’s much more important in printed form. The same goes for accuracy. (You’d be amazed how fast people can pass around a web story they believe to be false. And besides, anything that’s printed has a sense of permanence.)

Typically, attribution goes at the end of a sentence:

A concrete slab slid down a pile of dirt and trapped the homeowner in the trench, said neighbors who rushed to the scene after they heard the man’s cries.

Attribution is also critically important when excerpting information from newspapers - a common practice at most TV stations and something you should try to avoid online. While newspapers may turn a blind eye to the practice on TV, when it hits the web it becomes a direct competitor. And besides, if you copy of a line of text from another writer without attribution, it’s called plagiarism.

This doesn't apply to wire copy (unless you're not a subscriber.) Just make sure you credit the wire source in the byline.

7. Incorporate visual cues

When writing a web story, you usually have a treasure trove of visual cues at your disposal. Look at the video and try to describe what you see. For example:

Dozens of people lined the sides of the long, muddy trench that wrapped around the back of the house. Some used shovels to dig. Others used their hands.

8. Pull it all together

Combine the facts, quotes and visual descriptions into the story, with the most important information concentrated at the top. Try to make it flow from paragraph to paragraph. As a rule of thumb, the quotes shouldn't make up more than half of the story. As you reach the end, incorporate some background information or historical perspective, if relevant. Unlike a TV story, there's no need to "button up" the story with a final line that brings it all together.

Once you're done, it's time to look it over and smooth over the rough spots. Be your own copy editor and check for accuracy, attribution, misspellings, sentence fragments, bad punctuation, incorrect capitalization, etc. What other facts could you add? If the story is long, add sub-headings to break up the copy and make it easier to scan.

9. Write the headline

Now we've reached arguably the most important step of writing a web story: writing the headline. If the headline doesn't "pop," then people won't click. And if people don't click, then they won't read your story. Literally.

I've rewritten headlines before and watched as the traffic *doubled* in the next hour. The trick is writing headlines that not only compel people to click, but also show up in search results.

Seattle man trapped in trench rescued

This headline contains the keywords that people would search for the story (trench, rescue, Seattle), but it's certainly not very compelling. Here are some better options:

Neighbors help rescue Seattle man buried alive in trench

Seattle man buried alive in trench collapse rescued

Close call for Seattle man 'gasping for air' in trench collapse

(Notice that you need to use single quotes when incorporating a quotation into a headline.)

So what makes a good headline? It should be simple, straightforward and active. It should emphasize a twist or compelling fact in a story, such as "buried alive" or "gasping for air." It should contain search keywords. And it should attribute when necessary. For example:

Teen shot and killed his mother, police say

Finally, make sure you're following your site's guidelines for minimum and maximum headline length. Many sites enforce these limitations to ensure the headlines are displayed in an organized fashion when grouped together.

10. Add video, photos and resources

Now your story is done. Or is it? Ask yourself what resources you can add.

The most obvious is video, of course. When video accompanies a text story, users usually read the story to learn the facts and watch the video to experience the emotion. So for the trench story, it would be more effective to post a "raw" natural sound version of the video instead of a reporter-tracked version. Even better yet, edit some sound bites together and cover it with video from the scene for three minutes or so. This is also very teaseable from on-air: "For raw video from the scene, go to KXYZ.com."

And what about photos? You'll need at least one in the story that also appears on the home page. Slide shows are very popular, and they're an easy way to drum up thousands of page views. But make sure you have the rights to post the photos - snagging them off Google Images or a competing newspaper site doesn't count.

Then try to think of other resources that add value to the story. Anticipate what readers would want. If you're writing a weather story, link to your site's weather resources. Is there a follow-up to an old story that's worth linking? Do you have some related statistics that would make a nice table or graph alongside the story? Is this story worth blogging about and then adding the link to the story? What about a poll? Survey? User comments?

Philosophies vary, but many news sites make it a point to link to external resources — even sites that may be considered competitors. By aggregating links to a wide variety of resources, you're providing more value for your users.

If you're a reporter, you may not be able to do this all yourself, but make the suggestions to your web producer.

11. Post, check and update

Now you're ready to post the story. Once it appears online, read it over and check the links. Despite editing the story before publishing it, I often find more mistakes after it appears on the site. For some reason, the errors jump out a little more when they're published.

Ok, you're done... for now. If the story is still developing, you'll need to update the copy or at the very least notify the web producer to update it. If the story evolves into another story the next day, you'll write a new story and perhaps link to the old one for reference.

Writing for the web isn't easy, but that's why it's so powerful. Good luck!

Other resources:

[How users read the web](#) (Poynter)

[Tips for writing on the web](#) (Poynter)

[Writing for findability in search](#) (Alertbox)

[Online storytelling forms](#) (Cyberjournalist)

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