

Strategies for Condensing Online Text

Alysson M. Troffer

Online writing experts recommend that writers and editors write less text when composing for the screen. To do so effectively, writers need specific strategies for condensing text that go beyond the usual advice for clear, concise writing. In addition, they should be cautious when advised to arbitrarily cut the word count in half, as some experts suggest.

This paper offers strategies for condensing online text that result in fewer words overall. It also suggests strategies for making online text seem shorter, even if the word count remains unchanged. This paper concludes by discussing the risks of condensing text too rigorously. Providing complete information with nothing extraneous requires knowing not only what readers need, but what they do not need.

BACKGROUND

Readers typically avoid reading long blocks of online text, preferring to scan the text for relevant tidbits of information (1–4). One reason for this preference is the reduced legibility of screen text. Contributing factors include the low resolution of computer monitors, screen glare, and the small display area for document viewing.

Many online writing experts agree that these limitations of screen reading demand that online text be clearer and more concise than its comparable print equivalent (1–3, 5). To help writers craft such text, these experts offer strategies for cutting verbiage that largely follow the principles of effective technical writing. These principles include using simple sentences, active voice, and present tense, and avoiding nominalizations (turning verbs into nouns) and unnecessary jargon.

Nielsen's Guideline for Condensing Online Text

Web usability expert Jakob Nielsen turns this general advice about writing concisely into a numeric guideline. He recommends: "Write no more than 50 percent of the text you would have used to cover the same material in a print publication" (4). Nielsen supports this guideline with the results from his usability study with 51 participants. The one example about writing concisely offered in his book, *Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity*, is derived from this study. The example shows five ways of writing the same content for a Nebraska tourism Web site. According to Nielsen (4), the most successful text includes the following improvements in writing style:

- Concise text (follows the 50% less text guideline)
- Scannable text (breaks up text into a bulleted list)
- Objective language (removes "marketese")

Nielsen's Example. The original and most successful texts from the usability study are as follows:

Original text (61 words):

Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), Carhenge (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).

Most successful text (38 words):

In 1996, six of the most-visited places in Nebraska were:

- Fort Robinson State Park
- Scotts Bluff National Monument
- Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum
- Carhenge
- Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer
- Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park

Analysis of Nielsen's Example. The most successful text is only 38 percent (not 50 percent) shorter than the original. In addition, though the most successful text eliminates unnecessary detail, this detail does not belong in the original text either. Who but workers in the tourism industry care how many visitors attended each tourist attraction? Certainly not tourists—the intended readers of this Web site.

Nielsen's example effectively demonstrates the usefulness of eliminating unnecessary detail and "marketese," and of breaking up text into a bulleted list. However, without offering further guidelines about how to condense online text to 50 percent of its comparable print equivalent, Nielsen puts us at risk of sacrificing quality and completeness in order to satisfy the demands of an arbitrary guideline.

More Strategies Needed. The argument that online text should be shorter than print text is sound. However, we need specific strategies on *how* to condense online text—not just an arbitrary guideline or general advice about writing clearly and concisely.

CONDENSING ONLINE TEXT

Good online writing is basically good writing. However, the following strategies can help you condense your text and make it more readable online.

Use More Headings Online

Precisely worded headings and subheadings are shorter and more readable online than introductory sentences or paragraphs. They also force you to organize long, linear text into short, self-contained topics. When writing online text:

- Use headings and subheadings instead of introductory sentences or paragraphs. In the text, get right to the point without repeating the heading.
- Do not begin headings with “the,” “a,” or “an.” Place the most important words first.
- Trim other unneeded words. They add clutter and slow readers down.

Use More Bulleted Lists Online

Long blocks of text are difficult to read online. By breaking up text into bulleted lists, you make your point in fewer words, and your text is easier to scan. When using bulleted lists online:

- Include no more than nine items in a list.
- Use short phrases instead of complete sentences in bulleted lists and annotated lists of links, when possible.
- Link to separate pages to flesh out details of list items for those readers who are interested.
- Use lists of links instead of links embedded in the text, when possible. Links in a list are easier to scan and interpret.

Weave Links Into Sentence Structure

When constructing links, do not refer to the mechanism of the Web or online display tool (such as “Click here for...”). Text is shorter when you weave links into your text (or place them in a list). For example:

Original Text:

Ready to improve your personal health and well-being? Just click on one of the following highlighted articles or click on a specific subchannel from the menu on the left.

Improved Text (seven fewer words):

Ready to improve your personal health and well-being?
Choose:

- A highlighted article
- A topic from the menu on the left

Keep Overviews Brief

Many online readers skip overviews, but some seek them to grasp basic concepts or to decide whether to delve into the details. Although some online experts suggest eliminating overviews, you should probably provide them in some form.

To keep overviews brief:

- Address only the most important points. Leave out details that are irrelevant to the central point.
- Do not include related but nonessential information in overviews. Instead, link to this information.
- Do not repeat overview information in step-by-step instructions. Include a link to overview material, if appropriate.
- Consider providing overviews in print versions only, if your document will be available in both online and hard-copy formats.

According to one technical writer at IBM (6): “In my latest online project, I converted a 600+ page user’s guide into HTML. I included only the procedural portions, and kept the information-only portions in hardcopy and PDF format.”

Eliminate Unnecessary Material

We might be tempted to tell readers everything about a subject, regardless of whether the information is useful. In any technical document, but especially online, you need to provide information that is complete, but not extraneous. To this end, finding out what your readers need is paramount. And, as Ridgway (7) argues, “It is equally important to find out what they don’t need.”

Reduce word count by eliminating:

- Unnecessary definitions and explanations, or information that is too technical for readers’ needs. For example, do not give UNIX network administrators a table of frequently used UNIX commands. This information is too simplistic for their needs.
- “Nice-to-know” information. You must give readers what they need to get their work done, but exclude information they must sift through before realizing that it is of no use.
- Introductions to figures, tables, or graphics that repeat the caption.

- Redundant figure callouts for buttons or other screen features that already have a self-explanatory name. For example, a callout for a Delete or Save button is probably redundant.
- Duplicate instructions on how to use a graphical user interface (GUI). If online help provides these instructions, do not repeat them in other online documentation.
- Subjective adjectives such as “great” and “amazing,” buzzwords, and unsupported claims. According to Morkes and Nielsen (8), online readers detest overly hyped promotional writing and prefer objective language. These authors write: “Questioning the credibility of promotional statements seems to distract users from processing the meaning.”

Edit Your Text Online (or Ask Someone Else To)

If your text has any excess verbiage, it will be obvious when reviewed online. Solid blocks of continuous text impede reading and invite robust editing.

Become a Usability Expert

An online document or Web site should be so simple to navigate that instructions are unnecessary. By becoming a usability expert, you can learn how to simplify navigation or correct design flaws. Perform usability testing to:

- Improve an online document’s design. An improved design helps you avoid wasting words on text that attempts to resolve design or navigational flaws.
- Determine how much scrolling readers will tolerate.
- Determine how readers use your online document and whether you can eliminate certain types of content.

For an annotated list of usability resources, see “Resources for Online Usability” at the end of this article.

Practice Writing Short Texts

Kilian (1) suggests setting an arbitrary limit of 75 words to craft Web-appropriate text. First, write longer blocks of text (such as 150 to 200 words). Then, cut the blocks down to 55 or 60 words. Now you have “the luxury” of adding more words. Using this strategy, Kilian writes, “you will be amazed at how easy it is to cut the fat out of your text.”

Another exercise is to take a large, solid block of text and condense it to 25 words. Strive to retain the gist of the content without losing meaning. If successful, you have written a concise summary of the content. Presenting readers with concise summaries with links to further detail takes advan-

tage of hypertext and gives readers more control over their online experience.

MAKING ONLINE TEXT SEEM SHORTER

You can make your online text seem shorter to readers, even if the word count remains the same. For instance, if you reorganize the content to take advantage of links, readers can skip information that does not interest them. If the same content had been designed for the printed page and simply dumped online, readers would be forced to read more text than would otherwise be necessary.

By writing for the screen, you give readers the option to read less text overall. As a result, they perceive your online text as information-filled but short.

Divide Text Into Multiple, Linked Topics

To make online text seem short without sacrificing depth of content, convert the text into short, self-contained topics. Each topic requires only one or a few screens of text; yet, each topic is connected through links to a sizable network of topics. As Nielsen (4) writes: “Each page [topic] can be brief and yet the full hyperspace can contain much more information than would be feasible in a printed article.”

When creating short, self-contained topics:

- Make sure each topic answers one question about one subject for one purpose. To do so, write one question that the topic is meant to answer. Then, judge whether the content fully answers that question.
- Label each topic clearly to let readers know exactly what the topic is about. This strategy help readers select only the topics of interest.
- Do not use hypertext to divide a long, linear text into multiple pages (electronic “page turning”). If electronic “page turning” seems like the only way to present your material, provide a printer-friendly version that contains your complete document on one page. Or, provide a file that readers can download for offline reading.

Do Not Divide Text Too Vigorously. You risk creating small useless topics linked to one another, which frustrates readers by forcing them to jump around too much. As online writing expert Amy Graham advises: “Some Web writers go too far and place on separate pages material that really should be placed in separate sections on the same page. This is all really a judgement call and a matter of taste, but I do think a general aesthetic is evolving here” (9).

Some advice from Tim Berners-Lee (10), who invented the World Wide Web in 1989: “The most important point here is that a document should put across a well-defined concept. It is not generally worth splitting one idea arbitrarily into two bits in order to make the bits smaller. Nor is it a good idea to put together ideas which are really separate just to make a bigger document.”

Use Links to Make Text Seem Shorter

Conciseness might be unnecessary at the document level. With links, your text seems short but still offers the rich content that some readers welcome. To implement this strategy:

- Link to long examples, overview, background, reference, or supplementary information.
- Link to basics so experts do not get bored and novices can access the material if they are interested.
- Use concise summaries (similar to “leads” in articles) and link to great detail. A collection of well-worded links can function as a brief summary of your content. Online readers can drill down for more in-depth content using links—only if they want to.
- For detailed technical arguments, write one self-contained argument on the first page. Relegate secondary arguments and long examples to separate, linked pages.
- Organize by hierarchy to present general overviews that link to increasing levels of detail. Try to avoid valueless intermediate pages. Provide solid information on each level of the hierarchy.

When to Repeat or Link to Duplicate Information. Whenever possible, link to, rather than duplicate, information. However, be aware that if online text is divided into multiple topics that can be read in any order, you might have to repeat some information more than once. You do not want to frustrate and confuse readers with too much redundancy. At the same time, you do not want to force them to jump around too much and lose their place.

As Grahan points out, finding the balance between these opposing concerns “is a fine line to draw. It’s something you only learn over time” (9).

Write Scannable Text

Scannable text calls attention to key points and helps readers quickly find what they want. It also makes your text appear shorter because readers spend less time scrolling through irrelevant or merely interesting information. According to *Good Documents* (11): “The goal is specifically not to see how much time you can get the readers to spend with your

document, rather it is how little time they need to get all the information they need.” To write scannable text:

- Write self-explanatory headings, subheadings, link text, and navigation bar text.
- Write using an inverted pyramid style by placing the conclusion and a short summary of the main ideas at the beginning of the topic. The details follow in decreasing order of importance. With this style, readers can quickly locate your main points and continue reading only if they are interested.
- Provide ample white space by keeping paragraphs short, using bulleted lists frequently, and using short line lengths, when possible.
- Emphasize main points by setting them off in their own sentence or short paragraph.
- Highlight key words and phrases to make important points stand out. Highlight using bold or color (but not the same color used for links).

RISKS OF CONDENSING TEXT TOO MUCH

Avoid “Dumbed Down” Text

Lynch and Horton (2) agree that text read online must be concise and structured for scanning. However, they caution, “Web authors often cut so much out of their presentations that what remains would barely fill a printed pamphlet. Concise writing is always better, but don’t ‘dumb down’ what you have to say.”

Do Not Sacrifice Quality and Depth of Content

If your text is too short, you might not convey a well-defined concept. If your text needs to be longer or more detailed, then cutting out necessary length and detail will be detrimental. The result could be a short text that is merely confusing and incomplete.

Avoid Disappointing Readers

Drastically shortening online text might be counterproductive. Kilian (1) acknowledges that some readers seek very detailed information online. These readers typically print long, linear documents, so why redesign them for the screen or worry about cutting the word count? Instead, store long, linear documents electronically, and allow readers to download and print these archived texts as they wish.

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- (11) *Good Documents*. "Use Heads, Subheads, and Summaries," 1998. <<http://www.gooddocuments.com/techniques/usesummaries.htm>> Accessed: January 19, 2001.

Resources for Online Usability

- Nielsen, Jakob. *Designing Web usability: The Practice of Simplicity*. Indianapolis, IN: New Riders Publishing, 2000.
- Topics include page design, content design, site design, intranet design, and accessibility for users with disabilities.
- Nielsen, Jakob. *The AlertBox: Current Issues in Web Usability*. <<http://www.useit.com/alertbox>> Accessed: January 19, 2001.

Duplicates content in the preceding book, but also provides articles written since the book was published.

Rhodes, John S. *WebWord.com: Usability and Human Factors for the Internet*. <<http://www.WebWord.com>> Accessed: January 19, 2001.

Offers interviews with Internet and usability professionals, a usability column, and an annotated list of recommended books.

Schriver, Karen A. *Dynamics in Document Design: Creating Texts for Readers*. John Wiley & Sons, 1997.

Argues for usability testing in document design to help make documents "less ugly and confusing." Also offers a research-based view of document design and explores the design of documents people use routinely.

Spool, Jared M. et al. *Web Site Usability: A Designer's Guide*. San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, Inc., 1999.

Provides comprehensive data that demonstrates how Web sites actually work when users need specific answers. Researched and compiled by User Interface Engineering (<http://www.uie.com>).

Alysson M. Troffer

Technical Editor, Solaris Technical Publications
Sun Microsystems, Inc.
500 Eldorado Blvd., UBRM05-171
Broomfield, CO 80021 USA
(303) 272-7962
alysson.troffer@sun.com

An STC member, Alysson Troffer edits computer documentation and recently wrote a chapter on online writing style for the *Sun Editorial Style Guide*. She received her BS in Psychology from Albright College in Reading, PA and her MA in English from Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, AZ.