

Why Condense Online Text?

- ◆ For your readers! Most dislike reading long blocks of text online and prefer scanning for relevant tidbits
- ◆ To offset screen reading limitations, such as:
 - Low resolution of monitors
 - Screen glare
 - Small screen size
- ◆ To aid accessibility for people with disabilities

Nielsen's Advice for Condensing Online Text

"Write no more than 50 percent of the text you would have used to cover the same material in print."

Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity, New Riders Publishing, 2000

General Advice for Slicing Word Count

- ◆ Write concise text
- ◆ Make the text scannable
- ◆ Use objective language

Two Types of Strategies

My suggestions fall into two categories:

- ◆ Strategies that significantly reduce word count
- ◆ Strategies that make online text seem shorter

Strategies That Reduce Word Count

- ◆ Use more heads, tables, and lists online
- ◆ Keep overviews brief
- ◆ Eliminate unnecessary material
- ◆ Become a usability expert
- ◆ Edit your text online

Use More Heads, Tables, and Lists Online

- ◆ Delete introductory text that repeats the content in the head
- ◆ Don't begin heads with articles (the, a, an)
- ◆ Trim other unneeded words

Before: The Travel Guide for Visiting Australia
After: Australia Travel Guide

Keep Overviews Brief

- ◆ Address only the most important points
- ◆ Link to nonessential information
- ◆ Don't repeat overview information in step-by-step instructions
- ◆ If your document will be available online and in print, consider providing overview information in the print version only

Eliminate Unnecessary Material

- ◆ Unnecessary definitions and explanations
- ◆ "Nice-to-know" information
- ◆ Introductions to figures, tables, or graphics that repeat the caption
- ◆ Content that can be linked to instead of duplicated
- ◆ Redundant figure callouts
- ◆ "Legalese"
- ◆ References to the mechanism of the Web

Become a Usability Expert

- Perform usability testing to:
- ◆ Improve an online document's design
 - ◆ Determine how readers use an online document and if you can eliminate certain types of content
 - ◆ Determine how much scrolling your readers will tolerate

Edit Your Text Online

- ◆ Trim unneeded words, sentences, and paragraphs
- ◆ Break up solid blocks of text into lists, shorter paragraphs, and shorter topics
- ◆ Ask someone else to edit your text online

Strategies That Make Online Text Seem Shorter

- Readers perceive online text as information-filled but short when you:
- ◆ Divide text into short, self-contained topics
 - ◆ Link to details for readers who want more
 - ◆ Write scannable text
 - ◆ Use ample white space

Divide Text Into Short, Self-Contained Topics

- ◆ Make sure each topic answers one question about one subject for one purpose
- ◆ Label topics clearly so readers select only topics of interest
- ◆ Don't divide text too vigorously because you might create small, useless topics that force readers to jump around too much

Link to Details

- ◆ Link to long examples, overview, background, reference, or supplementary information
- ◆ Use concise summaries (“leads”) and link to great detail
- ◆ Organize by hierarchy to present general overviews that link to increasing levels of detail
- ◆ For detailed arguments in white papers, link to secondary arguments and long examples

Write Scannable Text

- ◆ Write self-explanatory heads, subheads, and link text
- ◆ Highlight key words and phrases in bold
- ◆ Emphasize main points by setting them off in their own sentence or short paragraph
- ◆ Write using an inverted pyramid style

Provide Ample White Space

To keep your page looking light:

- ◆ Use heads and subheads frequently
- ◆ Use bulleted lists and tables
- ◆ Keep paragraphs to three to five sentences
- ◆ Use short line lengths (if you can control text box size)

Be Aware of Risks of Condensing Text Too Much

Though online text should be concise:

- ◆ Do not sacrifice quality and depth of content
- ◆ Be sensitive to tone and flow
- ◆ Avoid the disappointment of readers who seek details online (and typically print long, linear documents anyway)

Online Resources

- ◆ My personal web site, with more information on online writing: homepage.mac.com/alysson/webfolio.html
- ◆ *Contentious*, a web-zine for writers and editors of online content: www.contentious.com
- ◆ Good Documents: How to Write for the INTRAnet: www.gooddocuments.com
- ◆ *Yale Style Manual*: info.med.yale.edu/caim/manual/contents.html
- ◆ Nielsen's *Alertbox* column: www.useit.com/alertbox
- ◆ CIO Communications *Web writing style resources*: www.cio.com/central/style.html

Q&A

Thanks for your attention!

If you have any suggestions on how to condense online text, please email me: alysson.troffer@sun.com
