# Writing for the web – developing a consistent voice

While the *Website Style Guidelines* give specific directions on how to use grammar and written words, this document aims to give you an idea for a style, or a “voice” that is used as a consistent way to communicate online.

This guide aims to be concise, and give general pointers to help you write for the website.

Good web writing should consider all of the following:

* Self-contained writing structure
* Short sentences / paragraphs
* Cross linking words to relevant web pages
* Appropriate bolding and italics (see the Website Style Guidelines for more detail).
* Personable tone (but be aware of context)
* Lists and breakout quotes
* Active voice
* Headings, headings and headings.
* Plan before you write

### Self-contained writing structure

Users will access your site from a variety of sources: links from other sites, search engines, links from within your own website and sometimes the website’s home page. This means that every page must be self-contained – it's best to assume that the user has not seen the rest of the site.

Giving a summary of the page content, or presenting the most important information first, helps readers work out if they want to read on. The first paragraph should give a clear indication of what the rest of the page is about (see the entries in Wikipedia for an example of this technique, or subpages within the “Explore” section of the WA Museum website to show how the introduction paragraph frames that section’s content) so that the user can determine quickly if they have found the information they are looking for. Summaries don’t need to be boring: try to make them as punchy as possible.

Subheadings, which divide and label logical sections or paragraphs within a single web page, help the reader assimilate information more quickly.

As a general rule, web pages should contain 50 per cent less text than equivalent print documents – preferably even less. If you are dealing with more than about 800 words: edit to make it shorter divide it into self-contained and logical chunks that can live on separate pages

### Short sentences / paragraphs and overall structure

Short sentences and paragraphs are important as people read screens differently to print. Thus long paragraphs are often skipped or skimmed.

So, write short straightforward sentences and short paragraphs. Avoid complex multi-syllable words and choose the simplest option (for example, go with *see* instead of *visualise*, *important* rather than *pre-eminent*). Each word should have a purpose and every paragraph should convey one idea. Make sure your writing sticks to the topic and can’t be misunderstood.

In short, you are better off getting straight to the point, and keeping it brief.

### Cross linking words to relevant web pages

When some content speaks about content that is elaborated further in another part of the site – link to it. Always link on the sentence topic itself rather than ending the sentence with “click here”.

For example:

“Dinosaur footprints can be found throughout the mountains.” Is Good.  
“For more information about dinosaur footprints, click here.” Is bad.

These in-text hyperlinks differ from “navigational” or menu links that are consistent on all related web pages. Hyperlinks allow users to find out more about topics, they take users on a journey through the site, and are one of the elements that readers scan for when reading web content (along with breakout quotes, lists and headings).

Despite the usefulness of hyperlinks, you should be mindful that these do take users away from the web page. So don’t use them unnecessarily, and if all content is held on one page, there’s no need to link away from it.

### Appropriate bolding and italics

See the Website Style Guidelines for more detail.

### Personable tone (but be aware of context)

Good web text is always clear and concise and written in plain, grammatical language that users can understand easily. It is also engaging and keeps the reader interested.

In keeping with the online brand personality of the Western Australian Museum accessible, informative and engaging. Keep the writing warm, inviting, inclusive and most importantly accessible to a variety of audiences.

Avoid impersonal, overly formal corporate-speak. Address the reader directly as ‘you’, except where there is a need for formality (for example, in policy areas), and say ‘we’ instead of ‘the Western Australian Museum’.

Note that tone may vary across different sections of the website – the first 2-4 levels of navigation should always be in second person and be personable. However, specialist content intended for advanced users or specialists can be more complex and detailed or be very specific – after all if the reader is looking for definitive detail, that’s what should be delivered.

### Lists and breakout quotes

Bulleted and numbered lists also help draw attention to the most important points. The user can scan the list text quickly and take in key pieces of information.

Important quotes and sections should also be used when they summarise the content of the web page. Users will often scan web content for headings, breakout quotes and lists. Use this knowledge to your advantage and develop web content accordingly

### Active voice

See the Website Style Guidelines for more detail.

### Headings, headings and headings.

Headings and subheadings tell the user what to expect on a page or in the chunk of text that follows the heading. Strong headings provide a succinct snapshot of the content and entice users to read further, and should also be geared towards scanning readers, who are looking for specific content on a page.

The top heading (heading one) answers one simple question: what is the key message on this page? This can be difficult, but you should be able to define a single purpose of the page (if not, perhaps the content should be broken into multiple pages).

Headings should be written in plain language and describe the content in the section they apply to. Putting headings into question format can work well, but only if appropriate and done sparingly. Headings should be brief (under six words) and get to the point.

Generic headings such as ‘Overview’ not particularly engaging and don’t specifically address the content. If possible, each heading should be unique on the website, and should always be unique within a web page.

You can (and should) have subordinate and parent headings, with high-level headings that may group several chunks together.

**Chunks**

Chunks are self-contained and context-independent segments of text, each with a heading, that are grouped together for quick and easy reading. Chunks should address a specific concept or theme, be no longer than 100 words, and no more than one or two paragraphs.

### Plan before you write

Lastly, it’s good to plan before you write. Think about your audience, your purpose, the potential readers, and plan to deliver to their requirements.

Next, identify what you are trying to say, why you need to say it, and check the website to make sure the text you’re planning will fit with other content – it shouldn’t repeat information that already exists.

Finally, work out what you are going to write about, how you will structure the information and aim to get the attention of the audience, especially in the first paragraph.