Writing for the Web

1. Consider your audience.
   - Walk in the shoes of your visitors. To help, we created Personas or fictional characters representing the different types of people who visit Northeastern’s website.
   - Think through the goals of your content.
   - Identify the top tasks visitors will want to accomplish.
   - Be inclusive. Consider accessibility and those who speak English as a second language. Avoid idiomatic expressions and cultural references. Use gender-neutral language.

2. Make it easy to scan.
   - Break your content into manageable sections.
   - Start with the content that is most important to your audience, and then provide additional details.
   - Provide information the reader is seeking, not on what you want to say.
   - Use meaningful, brief headings and subheadings.
   - Use bulleted lists or numbered lists for sequences.
   - What words will visitors use to search and find your page? Use these keywords in your writing. This will make it easier for search engines like Google to direct visitors to your page.

3. Be brief.
   - Cut your writing in half. Sentences on the web should be half the word count of conventional writing - twenty words or less per sentence.
   - Clear out words or phrases that can be omitted without a loss in meaning.
   - Break long sentences in two.
   - Convey one idea per paragraph and keep them to 2-3 sentences.
   - Begin your sentences with strong subjects and active verbs. Tell the reader who is acting and what the actor is doing.

4. Show. Don’t tell.
   - Get to the point. Empty, promotional text fills up space. Avoid it.
   - Use pictures, images, diagrams or illustrations to visually represent ideas in the content.
   - Speak objectively.

5. Select voice and tone.
   - Write in a way that is informal, easy to digest and active.
   - Speak to (not about) your audience. Address them with “you, your, we, our students, our programs.”
● Reserve academic or formal language for when the content requires it, such as institutional policy, federal guidelines, or academic research results.

● Use simple, concrete words. Help visitors create tangible images of what it’s like to be at Northeastern. Instead of using general marketing terms, find ways to describe the Northeastern experience.

● Use the active voice unless the passive voice is required.

6. Avoid:

● Internal jargon or acronyms.

● Passive voice.

● Fluffy, promotional language.

● Lots of complex or compound sentences.

● CAPS. They are considered rude. Use bold for emphasis.

● Exclamation points (!)

7. Always proofread.

● Always proofread copy before posting. Check for correct information, as well as spelling, grammar and punctuation.

● When uncertain, reference the Merriam Webster dictionary and AP Stylebook.

● See our Editorial Standards for guidance on commonly used words or phrases at Northeastern.

Two items of note:

○ Use “Northeastern Illinois University” the first time and shorten to “Northeastern” or “University” after that. Avoid NEIU.

○ Refer to blue and gold (not yellow) as Northeastern colors.

More resources:

Websites:

● Writing for the web (Usability.gov)

● Yahoo Guides for Writing for the Web

● Anatomy of a Webpage (Bethel University)

● Superfluous Phrases (and their brief replacements)

● Web Content at HowTo.Gov

Books:

● Content Strategy for the Web (2nd edition) by Kristina Halvorson, Melissa Rach

● Web Style Guide (3rd edition) by Patrick Lynch, Sarah Horton

● Letting Go of Words (2nd edition) by Ginny Reddish