by
jessamyn
west

Practical Technology

▶ Tools Everyday Librarians Can Apply

Tools for Writing for the Web

Writing well for the web is a subset of writing well generally. It's similar to learning to use technology—once you feel as if you're getting a handle on the ins and outs, the landscape changes. Those of us who started writing for print have had to learn blog style, Twitter brevity, hashtag syntax, and emoji etiquette. And yet, we still get emails from patrons in ALL CAPS or ones that contain one-sentence Word document attachments.

Best practices exist, which David Lee King wrote about in *CIL*'s Jan./Feb. 2016 issue. Better yet, tools exist to help us communicate effectively in a variety of online media.

Writing for the Web

I recently took over a website that has entries for all the Carnegie Libraries in New England. It was created using Microsoft Word's Word to HTML feature, which means that the writing was originally done for print, not the web. There were a few immediate differences that I needed to fix to make the site look "current" textually:

- Remove the five-space indentations at the beginning of paragraphs.

- Remove the double spaces after periods.

- Break up the paragraphs into shorter pieces, and put a blank line between them.

A good find-and-replace feature on a text editor can help with the first two, but it takes human eyeballs to look out for the last item.

If you'd rather toss money at a problem, there are a number of readability tools ranging from basic free ones (such as The Readability Test Tool) to low-cost stylish apps (such as the Hemingway Editor, which is both a simple text editor and a text analyzer).

Accessibility and Usability

When teaching my students how to write effectively for the web, I often explain that writing with accessibility in mind makes webpages more usable for all readers. World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative does a great job outlining accessibility principles based on how people with disabilities actually use the web. The diversity of users online nowadays includes people with not just visual and auditory impairments, but also those with cognitive and neurological disabilities. This can affect their abilities to process information quickly, understand complex navigational schemes, and locate obscured or hidden links to other content.

One of the best ways to achieve usable online content is to create it with good authoring tools. These are designed to produce accessible content in the first place so you don't have to retrofit your content once you realize it doesn't meet accessibility guidelines. Beyond access, you should also consider style. And I want to be clear: There is nothing about accessibility that precludes good design. It just may be more complicated to make sure you're encompassing both style and accessibility for your writing. For people wanting a quick immersion in online style, consider reading Matthew

Butterick's free (donation appreciated) online book *Butterick's Practical Typography*. He focuses on how design should be project-specific, that there is no "one size fits all" design.

Twitter

However, there are exceptions to the general rule of making the style fit the project—and that's when you're already working within a tightly constrained, rule-governed space such as the 140-character landscape of Twitter. We've all seen libraries that have their Facebook accounts posting directly to Twitter using a tool such as Hootsuite, resulting in tweets such as, "We're really excited to announce that the library is finally starting the big project we've been dreaming about all this time with some of …" Not so useful. There's a pretty short list of things to do and a much longer list of don'ts. Most of the best practices depend on what you're actually using the account for, so it's worth giving some serious thought to that topic:

- Announcing events

- Raising awareness of the library's programs and services

- Interacting with other libraries

- Interacting with other local people and businesses

- Answering reference questions and hold requests

Librarians who are experts in searching and finding are not always as mind-

ful about specific word choices for their tweets—word choices that might make their Twitter interactions more findable and relatable. Speaking of automated processes, libraries might also want to consider writing Twitter bots, a project that sounds difficult but is actually not. There are many literary Twitter bots, including a fun one that just tweets examples of chickens in literature.

Snapchat

As someone over the age of 40, Snapchat is a somewhat mysterious beast to me. However, it's one that I enjoy using to interact with other librarians and to get news about recent political goings-on without having to turn on a television or interact politically on Facebook.

The trick for me was paying attention to Snapchat's stories feature, creating my own stories, and interacting with those of other people. Taking advantage of major geographical or calendar-based events such as the Chinese New Year or the Super Bowl can give the library an additional method of low-stakes interaction with their populations.

Instagram

The big news with Instagram was the announcement that it now supports account switching. This means it's easier for library staffers to use their mobile devices for posting to the library's Instagram feed as well as their own. While Instagram isn't as restricted textually as Twitter, it's still got its own vernacular,

The @chickensinbooks Twitter bot is always interesting.

> '[A] NECESSARY SIDE EFFECT OF MEDIUM'S HOMOGENEOUS DESIGN IS THAT EVERY STORY LOOKS THE SAME. IF YOU AGREE THAT THE ROLE OF TYPOGRAPHY IS TO ENHANCE THE TEXT FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE READER …, THEN IT STANDS TO REASON THAT DIFFERENT TEXTS DEMAND DISTINCT TYPOGRAPHY.'
>
> —*Matthew Butterick*

RESOURCES

New England Carnegies
necarnegies.com

Readability Test Tool
read-able.com

Hemingway App
hemingwayapp.com

How People With Disabilities Use the Web
w3.org/WAI/intro/people-use-web/principles

World Wide Web Consortium (WC3) Authoring Tool Accessibility Guidelines
w3.org/WAI/intro/atag.php

Butterick's Practical Typography
practicaltypography.com

Twitter Analytics
analytics.twitter.com

Writing a Twitter Bot
j.mp/twttrbt

Hootsuite
hootsuite.com

Tweet Analyzer
analyzewords.com

Poynter: "What Twitter Teaches Us About Writing Short & Well"
j.mp/1oafEsJ

Using Hashtags Effectively on Twitter
j.mp/20v3V4p

Snapchat Stories
support.snapchat.com/ca/stories

How to Snapchat Like the Teens
j.mp/1PuCuV6

Instagram Now Supports Multiple Users
j.mp/instgrammltple

Regram
regram.me

Emojipedia
emojipedia.org

Emojipedia: Eggplant
emojipedia.org/aubergine

including knowing when to use @replies and effectively using hashtags and geographic locators. Various apps such as Regram allow "regramming," if there is particularly good content that the library would like to send to its followers.

Emojis

And then there is the language of emoji. Emojis are ideograms—little pictures that you can send to people in an instance in which you might have previously sent a smiley face with a colon and a right parentheses. They were initially created for cellphones, but can now be used in nearly any technologically modulated graphical communication environment, most notably texting, email, and social media.
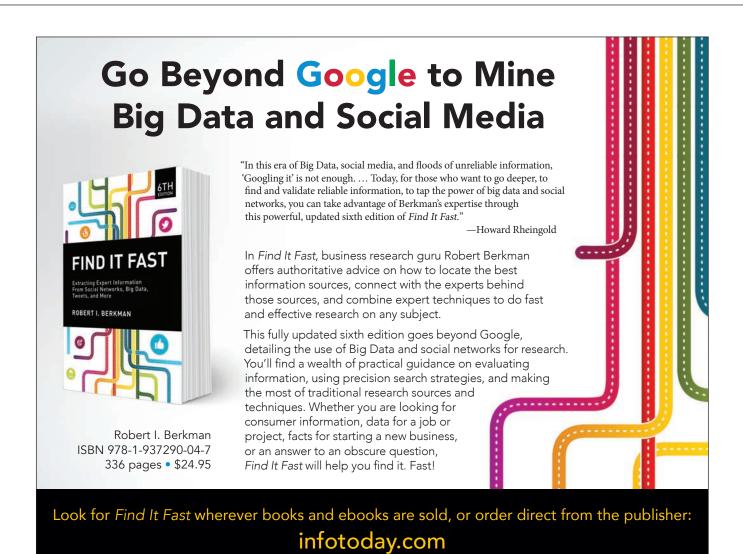
I taught my web development class at the local community college during the time when Oxford Dictionaries chose the "face with tears of joy" emoji as its word of the year. I spent some of my class time asking my students about the meanings of various emoji since many of these icons have both a literal and a figurative meaning. For example, the nail polish emoji can also mean "no big deal," if it's used at the end of a sentence. This figurative meaning can even vary depending on the local cultural interpretations.

To make sure I'm communicating effectively and not embarrassingly, I often refer to Emojipedia. This site gives the commonly understood names for the emojis and some examples as to how they are used. However, to get the full scoop, you may also have to scroll down to the External Links section to understand why Instagram has banned the eggplant emoji from its search feature.

Ultimately, writing for the web is the same as any other medium. You need to make sure that you're e-communicating accurately and practically in order to achieve your own goals. Doing a bit of reflection after you've tried some things to see if something is really working is the last step to being an effective web communicator. ■

Jessamyn West works at Open Library and eschews obfuscation. Her blog is librarian.net.