

# Effective Writing for Online Instruction

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## Abstract

*Despite the promise of Broadband Internet access and media rich learning experiences, online learning still is administered predominantly through text-based medium. Proliferation of re-purposed content from traditional instruction and the expertise of existing online instructors also suggest that text will remain a major force for many years to come. Yet not enough research is available to shed light on what makes online textual content work effectively. Our paper is an attempt to further the understanding on how to employ text effectively in online instruction..*

## 1. Why are online courses boring?

A recent article in Wired.com, *Online Training 'Boring'*,<sup>1</sup> reported the failure of some online training programs. Citing a Forrester report, the article informs:

*Many of the managers who responded to Forrester's survey said they were struggling to convince employees to utilize "boring, text-heavy content," and were meeting real resistance from employees who preferred traditional person-to-person training methods. According to the report's author, John P. Dalton, much of the problem is caused by firms who simply convert standard instruction manuals into Web pages.*

One reason for some courses being 'boring', is their failure to appreciate the uniqueness of the Web medium. The Internet presents itself with its own unique set of affordances, and constraints. The New York Times, Washington Post, and numerous other print publications have long found out that duplication of print on the Web just doesn't cut it.

The same ought to be true for online instruction. Let's take an example. The *Webmonkey* course on *Javascript*<sup>2</sup> is considered to be a gem of a course. The expressive ability of this course seems to make instant connections with its readers. They don't feel like they are taking a course at all. For most, it would be like reading a regular Wired<sup>3</sup> article or, reading articles from

CNN.com<sup>4</sup> or FastCompany<sup>5</sup>. This is how Webmonkey introduces the course:

*Learn the basics — including variables, if-then statements, link events, and image swaps — in what's been called the best JavaScript tutorial on the Web*

This course has all the ingredients that go into any regular course:

Introduction  
Learning Objectives & Advance Organizer  
Topical presentations  
Practice Examples  
Review, and even  
Homework!

Now, the obvious question would be, if most regular courses also contain the above ingredients, what are the factors that make the Webmonkey course a cut above?

Answer: It's the quality of the written instruction (content).

## 2. Delivering the Communicative Intent

Roger Schank, in his book, *Tell Me A Story*, describes the process of storytelling. Shank writes of the ability of a storyteller to communicate different versions of the same story depending on his/her communicative intent:

*In the first telling of the story, a teller decides what to leave out. This decision is based upon a number of factors that include whom he is telling the story to, why he is telling it, and how he perceives what has happened to him. After all, one cannot say everything that has happened. A story about a two-week vacation could take two weeks to tell. A teller must decide what aspects of the gist are likely to be of interest to the hearer. (p. 176)<sup>6</sup>.*

Thus, a good storyteller can tell two different hearers (depending on the communicative intent) two different versions of the same story. Similarly, a good instructor should be able to

instruct two different learners in two different ways.

There are three important points here:

- Knowing who am I telling the story to. Or, knowing my hearer.
- Knowing what I am telling about. Or, my subject matter expertise.
- Knowing how to tell (delivering my communicative intent). Or, my communicative expertise.

Or, in instructional terms:

- Knowing the learner characteristics.
- Knowing the subject matter.
- Knowing the affordances of the communicative medium to deliver the communicative intent.

From this, it seems online instructors need to know how to tell stories (deliver their communicative intent) for the Web.

As writing is the most common way to deliver online instruction on the Web, we need to know the affordances of the Web that can create effective online instruction, as is exemplified by the JavaScript course. In the next section, we aim to analyze the JavaScript course with regards to its quality of written instruction for the Web.

### 3. Analyzing the Webmonkey Style

*Good writing is about being able to take a subject and breathe life into it. And all the style manuals, dictionaries, and thesauri in the world won't help you do that if you don't properly research and grapple with your subject. Yet, if you do the work and find a way to write about your subject persuasively and interestingly, then no doubt your audience will be interested too. The bottom line is that Internet users are curious, information-driven people. And if you can give them content that's written with energy, passion, and vitality ... they'll think, and smile, and love you for it. (From Effective Writing for the Web<sup>7</sup>).*

#### 3.1. Bite-sized Bits

*This one's really important when writing for the web. People don't read -- they skim. Nobody*

*likes to scroll through a long narrative looking for the "good stuff." (From Be Succinct!<sup>8</sup>).*

*Be generous with paragraph breaks and headings - they make pages a little more eye-friendly and easier to scan quickly. If appropriate, don't be afraid to use things like bulleted lists and tables - anything to make the information jump out at the reader, instead of making them sift through long paragraphs to get at it. (From Writing for the Web: Cut it down and open it up<sup>9</sup>).*

All of Webmonkey's courses are split into lessons, and lessons are further split into pages. Each page tackles one specific issue/objective. Paragraphs on these pages are normally five lines long, and are around 80 columns wide. Further, these pages in themselves are not disjointed in anyway, rather they are a part of a trail, and make semantic connections with other pages.

Example from Lesson 2: *Introduction to variables*<sup>10</sup>

That's all the JavaScript that's in the header of this example. After JavaScript has executed all this code, the above variables will be declared and given values. That's very nice, but we haven't really done anything with the variables yet. That's what happens in the body of the example. On to the body of the example!

#### 3.2. Inverted Pyramid

Writing the most important information first (What's in it for the reader?), then branching out into the less important background details. (From Inverted Pyramids in Cyberspace<sup>11</sup>).

If you're covering an event or an abstract topic, you want to write a compact overview that includes all the liveliest tidbits right up front--suspense and deferred gratification have much more limited appeal on the Web. (From How to build web-resource pages<sup>12</sup>).

Note: An important point on the inverted pyramid for online instruction is the apex of the pyramid--representing the "closure" of the topic under consideration. Every lesson of the JavaScript course has a "Review" section that provides this closure.

Example from Lesson 2: *Introduction to variables*<sup>13</sup>

If you've taken algebra, you've seen variables. If you haven't taken algebra, don't worry about it. Variables are simply the way JavaScript stores information. For example, if you write "x=2," "x" is a variable that holds the value "2." If you then say "y=x+3," "y" will hold the value "5."

Example from Review to Lesson 1<sup>14</sup>:

*Topics covered today:*

*The greatness of JavaScript  
Browser-compatibility problems  
Other ways to learn JavaScript...  
Today was just an introduction to give you a feel for how things work. Next time we'll start getting serious.*

*Topics for next time:*

### **What sorts of information JavaScript knows about**

*How JavaScript stores that information ...  
See you next time.*

### **3.3. Writing Style**

A good writer writing in first person can be very powerful, very strong—in the same way that a good speaker can move you in ways you'd never imagine. The assumption I like to make is that the writer is a smart person; therefore, we care about his or her views. (From *Writing for the Web with Derrick Story*<sup>15</sup>).

Be Yourself. Write Conversationally. It's the most natural way to write -- try writing the same way you speak to a friend. You'll end up being more concise, clearer, and more engaging. Use You instead of I or We or They. (From *Let's Talk about Writing Style*<sup>16</sup>).

Example from *JavaScript Is Your Friend*<sup>17</sup>:

One of the best things about JavaScript is that you can do a great deal with very little programming. You don't need a fancy computer, you don't need any software other than a word processor and a Web browser, and you don't need access to a Web server; you can do all your work right on your own computer.

Example from *Intro to Lesson 5*<sup>18</sup>:

The Image object has lots of other interesting properties. For example, you can have your JavaScript check to see if an image has been completely loaded before doing anything. However, these interesting properties will have to wait for later lessons. Gotta keep you coming back somehow, right? Today, we'll be focusing entirely on forms and how to use them in JavaScript.

### **3.4. Hyperlinks**

Including links to related content shows readers that you've done some research, and that you are willing to let them check out other viewpoints. Most importantly, it simply makes your article a more extensive resource. An article that includes lots of appropriate links can be like a mini-cyclopedia of a particular topic. (From *Writing for the Web: Links Aplenty!*<sup>19</sup>). In general, if another page already does a decent job of covering one of your subtopics, you can just link it (with a brief summary, ideally) rather than having to cover it again yourself. This implies a new composition-strategy that starts with a Web survey of available resources, shaping each new topic-page first as a framework for these links... plus whatever special value you can add. (From *the, The future of academic publishing on the Web*<sup>20</sup>).

Most of the hyperlinks within the JavaScript course are links to *JavaScript examples*<sup>21</sup>. There are not many links to external sources.

A good example of hyperlinking is this page you are reading! We know that there are several external resources (credible and dependable) that do a good job in explaining the different elements of effective online writing. So, instead of having it cover it ourselves, we use them as scaffolds to enhance our communicative intent.

### **4. Summary**

- The Web presents a unique set of affordances and constraints. If you want to instruct effectively through the web, you must understand and acknowledge them.
- Affordances include the ability to hyperlink, while a major limitation is the difficulty in retaining reader's attention. We have addressed

these issues and presented recommendations in the context of a Webmonkey tutorial.

- Our analysis and recommendations imply a need for a overall strategy for composing instruction on the web. This includes creating a structure for information, sequencing of topics, a web survey of related resources, framework for presenting these external links in context, adopting a direct and engaging style of writing and laying out everything in an eye-friendly and easy to scan manner.

- Effective online writing is not an unimportant and independent link in the overall instructional design strategy. Rather, it plays an integral part in making the instructional design process itself successful. After all, what's the use of a professionally done instructional design when its intent cannot be communicated effectively?

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