

Writing for the Web

Training - August 20, 2025

Provided by



Agenda

1:00 - 1:15

Introductions

1:15 - 2:00

About the Website Transformation

2:00 - 3:00

Best Practices for Writing for the Web

3:00 - 3:15

Helpful Tools and an Example

3:15 - 3:45

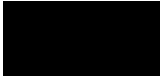
Writing Practice

3:45 - 4:00

Content Governance

About Website Transformation

Target Audiences and User Research

 main audiences are:

**Students,
parents, and
caregivers**

**High school
counselors and
educators**

**Financial aid
administrators**

Additional, occasional audiences are members of the media, law makers, and academic researchers.



Student Focus in the Site Redesign

Leaders on the project have decided to **increase the focus on students** in the website.

This will impact the site design and communication practices in several ways:

- Showcasing the student journey along the college-going process
- More youthful aspects of the design - the graphics, imagery, color
- Revisions to text and messaging throughout the site
- Careful attention to the target audience of a given page
- Updated tone of voice guidance and writing practices that help ensure messaging is on brand and focuses on the student



Student Goals & Desired Outcomes

De-mystify the college-going process, in particular the ins and outs of gaining access to financial aid.



Easily find and browse for grant, scholarship, and loan opportunities, including the ability to hone in on those that are the best fit for their personal circumstances.

Have easier access to the interactive tools on the Student Portal, including the internship job board.

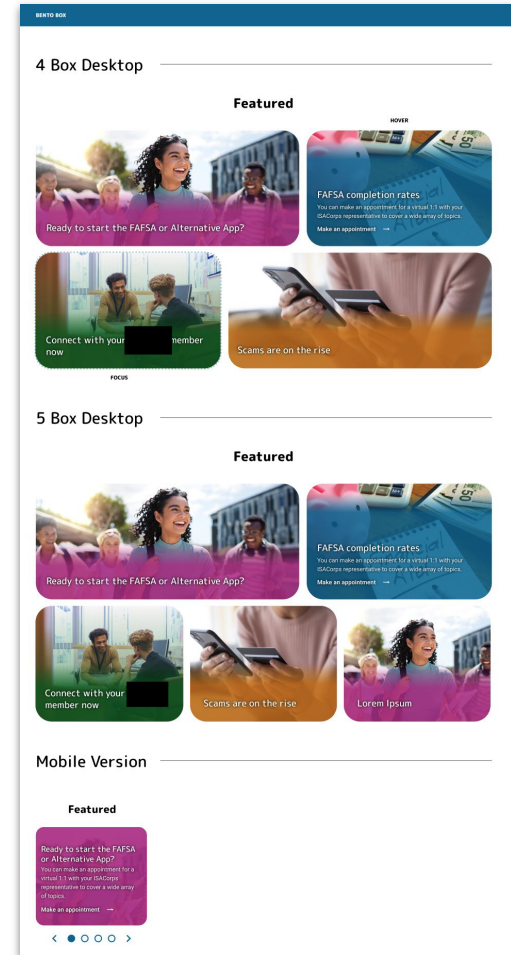


Get the 'best bang for their buck' in terms of time invested in applying for aid, relative to the aid awarded.



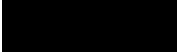
Let's Look at the Design

- Page components are reusable 'building blocks' that can be used from page to page.
- They have been custom designed for [REDACTED] with [REDACTED] communication needs in mind.
- They bring visual interest, variety, and clarity to your web communications. They will be implemented to render properly on all devices and browsers.
- Keeping them in mind while writing, so you can visualize your page and think about what displays will enhance your message, will be helpful.



Best Practices for Writing for the Web

Brand Identity and Target Descriptors

There are several qualities or descriptors that should be kept in mind when writing for  which have been selected according to how  wishes to represent itself to constituents:

 Conversational

 Warm

 Approachable

 Friendly

 Succinct

 Action-Oriented

 Optimistic

 Empathetic



Conversational

It can help to think about what Conversational is NOT. Conversational is not formal, rigid, or authoritative. Let's see an example.

ORIGINAL:

College can not only transform your life by providing a path to a career and greater earning potential, but it can help transform entire communities as well. In [REDACTED] and across the nation, those who obtain education beyond high school not only see a significant impact on their potential career prospects and future salary, but also change levels of poverty, life expectancy, crime and obesity rates in their communities.

REVISED:

Going to college can open doors for your career and benefit other aspects of your life as well. In [REDACTED] and across the country, attending college can help you earn more. It also positively impacts health outcomes and strengthens neighborhoods.



Warm

What would be the opposite of warm? Cold. Distant. Unfeeling.

Here is an example for us to consider...

ORIGINAL:

If you are a mom or dad with a student(s) who is college-bound or already in college, you will find information in this section to assist you in helping your child navigate the college process.

REVISED:

Parenting a student heading to college can be exciting, and may also be overwhelming. Here, find tools and guidance to help you and your student navigate the journey together.



Approachable

The opposite of approachable, as we intend it, would be intimidating or unsupportive. This descriptor is related to being warm and conversational. Let's try this example.

ORIGINAL:

The State of [REDACTED] periodically offers college savings bonds that are zero-coupon bonds (instead of paying periodic interest, these bonds offer a fixed-cash payment at maturity). No [REDACTED] College Savings Bonds have been sold since the fall of 2002. This page will be updated if the Governor's Office of Management and Budget announces a future sale of [REDACTED] College Saving Bonds.

REVISED:

[REDACTED] sometimes makes College Savings Bonds available to help families save for education. These are zero-coupon bonds, meaning you don't get interest payments over time, but you receive a set amount when the bond matures. The last sale was in 2002, and if another is announced, we'll post the details here so you don't miss it.



Friendly

Content that isn't friendly is unfriendly, cold, or impersonal.

ORIGINAL:

The number of awards made through programs administered by [REDACTED] as well as the individual dollar amount awarded, are subject to sufficient annual appropriations by the [REDACTED] General Assembly and the Governor. The State of [REDACTED] offers help with student loan repayment for [REDACTED] residents who qualify based on certain eligibility requirements. Typically, qualifying borrowers are those who have made an obligation to work in [REDACTED] for a specific amount of time in a field that has experienced a shortage of workers (for example, teaching or nursing).

REVISED:

Each year [REDACTED] awards financial support to students, based on funding approved by the state. In addition [REDACTED] can help with student loan repayment for residents who qualify. These programs are often designed for people who choose careers where the state needs them most—like teaching or nursing—and who commit to working here for a certain number of years.



Succinct

When content isn't succinct, it tends to be verbose and long-winded.

ORIGINAL:

By receiving the tuition waiver, you must teach in [REDACTED] in the field of special education. If this teaching commitment is not fulfilled, the amount of benefits received converts to a loan, and you must repay the entire amount plus interest. It is recommended that you monitor your college billing statements to keep track of the amount waived, in the unlikely event the tuition waiver converts to a loan. You can estimate loan payments by accessing Federal Student Aid's Loan Simulator.

REVISED:

The tuition waiver requires you to teach special education in [REDACTED]. If you don't meet this commitment, the amount awarded becomes a loan you must repay with interest. Keep an eye on your billing statements to track waived amounts, and use Federal Student Aid's Loan Simulator to estimate potential payments.



Action-Oriented

Content that isn't action-oriented is usually passive.

ORIGINAL:

Verification of eligibility, and announcement of an estimated award amount (if any), is performed by the college each academic year.

REVISED:

Each academic year, your college will verify your eligibility and confirm (via award letter) whether you'll receive a MAP grant, including the estimated amount if you do.



Optimistic

When your content isn't optimistic enough, it can read as cautionary and negative.

ORIGINAL:

Completing a financial aid application is often considered the first step in making education after high school possible for Illinois students. [REDACTED] student who completes a financial aid application may be eligible to receive as much as \$15,459 if they qualify for the Federal Pell Grant and the [REDACTED] Monetary Award Program...

REVISED:

Completing your financial aid application is your first step toward college, and could unlock up to \$15,459 in Pell Grant and MAP funding. If you need help, we offer free support to guide you through it.



Empathetic

Messaging that lacks empathy may come across as aloof, distant, and stiff.

ORIGINAL:

To receive this scholarship, you must agree to begin full- or part-time employment as a licensed practical or registered nurse in [REDACTED] within six months of graduating, and remain employed for a period equivalent to the educational time supported by the scholarship. If you terminate studies or fail to become employed, the scholarship converts to a loan, and you must repay the entire amount, plus interest.

REVISED:

With this scholarship, you're helping fill vital nursing roles in [REDACTED]. And in return, you receive support during your education. Within six months following graduation, begin work as a licensed practical or registered nurse in the state. Part- and full-time positions qualify. We understand life can change, so if your path takes a different turn and you don't fulfill the employment requirements, your financial aid will convert to a loan (which needs to be repaid with interest).



More Considerations for Writing

It's not only the words and wording that impacts your clarity and efficacy, when writing for the web.

- Reading level and plain language - aim for grade 8!
 - ◆ Content targeted exclusively at professionals can aim for grades 11-12
 - ◆ Hemingway Editor can help
- Know your audience - who are you writing for and what do they need from this page?
- Make sure your page has a clear action or next step
- Chunk up your pages with subheaders and visual interest



More Considerations for Writing (continued)



- Make sure your title makes sense and is not duplicated elsewhere in the site.
 - ◆ Consider the [REDACTED]
- Planning example
- Aim for hard-working, topic-specific pages. Avoid sparse or 'stub' pages that offer little value as well as those trying to do too much. No 'catch all' pages.
- Prioritize your message - we can't be all things to all people!



Technical Details for Writing

This is a sampling of formatting and grammatical rules to keep in mind. The written tone of voice guide will cover these in more detail.

- Use serial commas when enumerating lists of three or more things in a sentence.
 - ◆ **“I dedicate this book to my parents, Oprah Winfrey and Dwayne Johnson.”**
 - Meaning implied: your parents are Oprah and The Rock.
 - “...to my parents, Oprah Winfrey, and Dwayne Johnson” would mean you dedicate your book to all of them.
- Use primarily first and second person terms - use ‘we’ and ‘us’ when referring to [REDACTED] and ‘you’ when referring to the audience. You will still occasionally use third person terms, such as referring to students when speaking to professionals.
- This is the proper formatting of a date and time:
 - ◆ Tuesday, September 21, 2005 at 9:30 a.m.
 - Spell out the weekday, the month, include the year, include the minutes on the time even if the reference is to a particular hour, and apply this spacing and formatting to the a.m./p.m. designation.



Helpful Tools and an Example

Some of Our Favorite Tools for Writing and Web Usability



[Nielsen Norman Group](#) - the industry leaders in user experience



[Hemingway Editor](#) - an interactive tool that provides helpful feedback and actionable changes to improve your writing

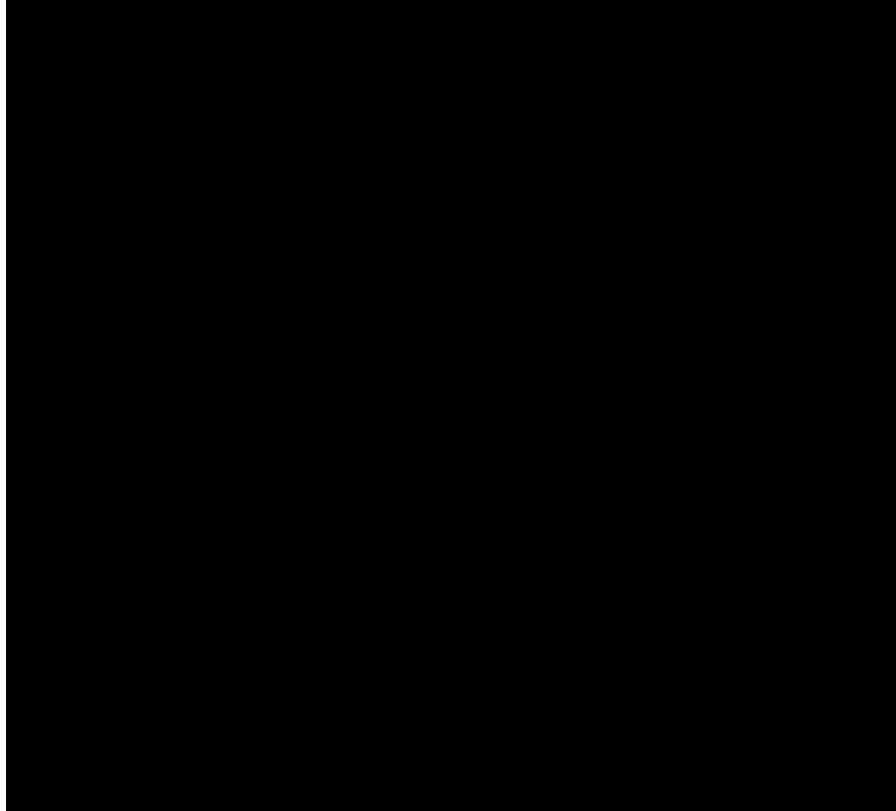


[Perplexity](#), [ChatGPT](#), and other AI-based tools - can be extremely useful for providing suggestions and examples when prompted to evaluate content.

- We'll talk more about how we're using AI tools in writing-related needs later.



Let's Try Hemingway Editor Together



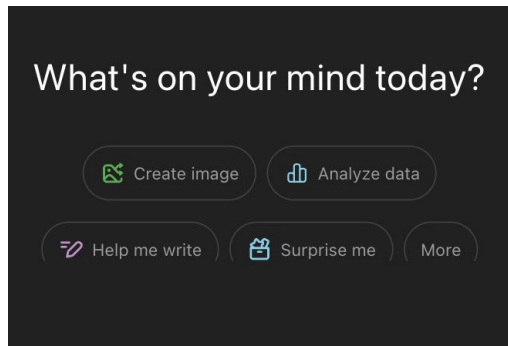
Best Practices for AI Tools

Common AI tools include:

- AI chatbots like ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Claude
- integrated AI assistants like Google Gemini and Microsoft Copilot
- writing-specific AI tools like Hemingway Editor and Grammarly

AI tools can help you:

- kickstart the writing process by brainstorming topic ideas and creating outlines
- glean insights from long documents or large datasets
- summarize content into an introductory paragraph when a page needs more context for users
- evaluate existing content against a target rubric
- by suggesting edits and rewrites to align content with target tone, style, and reading level...
 - **...with the right prompts!**



Screenshot of ChatGPT interface



Considerations for AI Tools

Things to keep in mind when using AI tools:

- AI tools give the best results when you provide clear, specific queries and adequate context.
- Watch out for “hallucinations” and AI bias:
 - Faulty models, biased training data, and lack of context can cause AI tools to present false, misleading, nonsensical, or even prejudiced or harmful information as factual.
- Review generated content to check for errors, changes in meaning, and problematic or invalid sources.
- Confirm content meets [REDACTED] writing standards and conforms with the tone and style guide.
- Never share confidential, sensitive, or personal information with AI tools.
 - It is often unclear if and/or how user data is shared with third parties or used for training AI.



Tip:

Each AI chatbot has its own strengths and weaknesses. Try tweaking your prompt, providing additional detail or reference links, or making your query more specific. If you're still not getting good results, try another tool!



Sample AI Prompts

- Brainstorm ideas for new content:
 - ◆ “Can you suggest ideas for an article about tips for students applying for scholarships?”
- Write an introductory paragraph for an existing page:
 - ◆ “Can you summarize the content on this page into a 2- to 3-sentence introductory paragraph?”
- Evaluate an existing page based on provided guidelines:
 - ◆ “Can you evaluate the tone and reading level of this content?”
- Suggest edits to tone and reading level:
 - ◆ “Can you help me rewrite this page at an 8th grade reading level? The tone should be conversational, warm, and action-oriented.”



Tip: Sometimes an AI chatbot will be unable to access the content on a page from its URL alone. If this happens, try copying the text and pasting it in with your query.



Writing Practice

Let's Put These Practices to Work

Independent exercise: Find a page that you think is a good candidate to be edited, and spend a few minutes considering the following:

- Does the page title make sense?
- Visually and for layout, what are the opportunities you see to make this page more interesting, clear, and friendly?
- What user or user types benefit from this page? What do they need to get from this page?
- What is the key action or next step from this page?
- How well do you think this page meets the tone of voice goals we've defined? What edits would help it embody  target descriptors?

Then, re-write it independently, referring to the tone of voice guidelines and the other factors that go into writing for the web.



Content Governance

Context Matters

Stepping back from what makes an individual page work well, let's step back and talk about factors that impact content fit, and other aspects of governance. When you're considering adding a new page to the site:

- What already exists in the site on this topic?
- Does this page replace other content?
- Where would this new page 'live' in the site map?
- How would it link to other pages?
- What is the expected lifespan of the page?



Thank you!