

Web text guidelines: Writing for people who don't "read"

Purpose of this guide

Assume your website is people's first choice for information about your area. They decide how well your department meets their needs based on the quality of your site.

These guidelines for effective web writing are meant to help you ensure that you're giving your audience the information it needs and leaving people with a positive impression.

Above all, remember this: It's NOT about what you want to tell people. It's about what people want to know.

What users want

Think about *your* online reading habits. You set out looking for specific information. You judge sites by how effectively they give you that information.

The visitors to your website are no different:

- They want specific information – and expect it fast
- They ignore ["blah-blah" text](#) such as Mission Statements, official welcomes, etc.
- they don't read – they [scan](#) to cherry-pick information
- **if they don't see what they want, they click away in a nanosecond**

Don't "write" – bundle

Break your web text into succinct, discrete chunks of useful information:

- use bulleted lists
- emphasize the key words your readers are scanning for
- **bold** key words
- sentences fragments are okay

Avoid large blocks of text

People don't read them – too much work. Break long paragraphs into shorter ones.

Use explanatory headings

As we did here. They should be ["pearls of clarity"](#)-- clearly describing the content they introduce.

Provide answers

It's NOT about what you want to tell people. It's about what people want to know.

Give people the information they want, right up front. Put the secondary and background information where it belongs – in the background, on secondary pages.

Layer the information

Brevity is a virtue. But if you know that some users want richer, more detailed content you can provide it through links that allow them to "drill down" to secondary pages on your site or to pages on third-party sites.

Weak: It's important to budget carefully for your time at college.

Better: It's important to budget carefully for your time at college – here are some [budgeting resources](#) that can help.

Know your audience

It's essential to know what information your users want.

Sometimes, your experience gives you confidence. Maybe you hear the same questions repeatedly at information sessions or from email or phone queries.

But if you're not 100% certain what information users want, then it's smart to do some research, using surveys or other techniques. If you're not sure how to begin, ask a CMO representative for help.

Key words count

Users (and search engines) scan for **specific** key words in headers and links as well as at the start of paragraphs and even individual sentences. Use specific, prominent key words that give off a pungent "[information scent](#)".

Here is an example that underlines the need for precise content:

In a test environment, several students scanned our College's program list looking for a link related to "Computer Science". All of them passed over the link "Computing Science and Information Systems" – in fact they didn't even see it. Why? The word "computing" is sufficiently different from the word "computer" that users who were fixated on finding the former didn't see the latter.

Additionally, research finds that the [first 2 words of a link are most important](#), so get those key words up early in your links and headers. For example, on the Douglas College home page, we changed the link:

Discover information sessions

To: Information sessions

Creating links

Users understand links – there's generally no need to say "click here". Just embed those links in the relevant keywords. That way, the user has a clear idea what the link leads to. Search engines also appreciate meaning-rich links.

Bad: For more information about transfer options, see the BC Transfer Guide. [Click here](#).

Weak: For more information about transfer options, go to the BC Transfer Guide's web site at bctransferguide.ca.

Better: Get more information about transfer options from the [BC Transfer Guide](#).

Keep links simple and double-check that they work.

More tips for better web writing

- use [digits for numbers](#): '3' instead of 'three'
- banish jargon unless it's appropriate for specialized audiences
- in general, avoid acronyms unless they are incredibly common; e.g.: use "David Lam Campus", not "DLC"
- one concept per paragraph

- one concept per heading
- revise any imported text you “copy and paste” – and be aware of copyright rules
- in general, keep content on each page under 400 words
- edit ruthlessly

Case study

Compare the latest version of the Community Social Service Worker program home page to the previous version. See how the revisions put users first and make it easier for them to scan and find information. Research confirmed that the information categories provided answers users’ main questions.

Previous version

"Remember that the happiest people are not those getting more, but those giving more."
H. Jackson Brown Jr.

Do you believe that every person is a valuable member of the community? Do you understand the importance of supporting people as they face challenges, helping them acquire the skills they need to move forward with confidence? If you do, then Douglas College's Community Social Service Worker (CSSW) program may be for you.

As a graduate of our program, you'll be employed in the broad field of social services, working with people who are dealing with issues such as physical or emotional abuse, job loss, drug abuse, adjustment problems due to immigration, life skill and decision-making problems, emotional and mental health problems and more. There is more information about community social service work available on the [BC Work Futures](#) Web site.

[Courses](#) cover topics such as human growth and development and working within culturally diverse environments. You'll develop your interviewing and interpersonal communication skills as well as problem-solving and supportive counselling techniques, as well as your ability to work as part of a group.

[Practicums](#) during the program allow you to put your theory into practice. You'll get hands-on experience in [work sites](#) such as employment centres, transition homes, immigrant centres, Downtown Eastside agencies, group homes, mental health day programs and senior's health and housing centres.

A big part of our program involves learning about [yourself](#). As your work will most likely involve close dealings with people who have had very traumatic life experiences, our personal wellness and self-awareness courses are very important. We'll help you identify and manage your own biases and help you ensure that your issues don't interfere with your ability to help others. We'll show you ways to avoid getting your "buttons" pushed, help you understand the limits of your abilities, and ensure that you are not subconsciously using your clients to meet your personal needs. All of these skills will help you deal with job stress, prevent burnout and vicarious [traumatization](#), work with groups, manage your time and set priorities and goals.

New - Co-Occurring Disorders Citation

The Community Social Services Worker department also offers the Co-Occurring Disorders Citation. This advanced new offering - the first for British Columbia - will equip you to deal with the co-occurrence of mental health and addiction problems, which has emerged as a critical issue for field practice. [Read more.](#)

Get informed: attend a CSSW information session.

The Classroom and Community Support Worker program offers free information sessions. Come and [find out more](#) about the program, meet some prospective classmates and talk to some of the instructors.



New version

Start a career helping people and families deal with personal and social problems through social and community services.

Program highlights

- [Employment](#) rates for graduates are over 90%
- [Excellent instructors](#) share experience and knowledge
- Gain real-life experience in [worksite learning](#)
- Opportunities for [international experience](#) in Africa

Cost

Tuition fees for the 2-year diploma are approximately \$5,000. Books and student fees are extra. Rates subject to change, so [check current costs](#).

Location

New Westminster Campus, steps from the New West SkyTrain Station. Worksite placements at various Lower Mainland locations.

Part-time studies

Students with jobs and/or family responsibilities can study [part-time](#) to complete this program.

Start dates

September for both full-time and part-time studies.

How long does the program take?

Full-time students: 2 years/4 semesters/60 credits
Part-time students: 4 years/8 semesters/60 credits

Get more information

Got more questions?
Read the [Program Overview](#)
See the [Calendar](#) for program details
Attend a free [Information Session](#)
Contact us at 604-527-5136



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