



Until recently, print reporters wrote stories *only* for the newspaper; deadlines were dictated by printing-press schedules. TV and radio reporters produced stories *only* for broadcast during regular newscasts. The Web was just an afterthought, something you worried about *after you finished your REAL work*.

But that's changed. As media columnist Chris O'Brien observed: "While print will have a long future, it needs to be one of many platforms, rather than the

THE NEW MOTTO IN MODERN NEWSROOMS: THINK ONLINE FIRST

◆ **Story planning:** While gathering the news, reporters and editors need to decide *when* and *where* each story should run — and just as importantly, *how* it should be packaged. Adding multimedia and interactivity takes time and teamwork. The most effective online stories are tailored to the Web right from the start.

◆ **Story posting:** In the competitive world of 24/7 journalism, you want to be *first online* with news, whether it's a bulletin, a brief, a blog post or a Twitter feed. Web users demand news *now*, and if you don't scramble to feed their need, someone else will. So file early and often. **Online reporting = constant posting.**

(Not all stories are equally time-sensitive, though. Features, profiles, columns, reviews — it's best to wait until they're polished and finished, *then* post them.)

Writing for the Web

In the battle for your attention, text is often the loser

Ever notice how reading long stories online can be . . . *distracting*? Web sites are often teeming with ads, images and splashy colors. Plain ol' text gets overwhelmed by all the distracting eye candy — the *noise*, in other words. Sure, some sites are more sedate than others, but most are way noisier than traditional print media.

If that's not bad enough, you're constantly urged to abandon what you're reading so you can click [this link](#). Or maybe [this one](#). No matter where you are, there's always something better just a click away.

Some critics say that the Web discourages prolonged concentration. And studies show that when people read text online, they often just scan impatiently. In bits and chunks. So if you hope to inform and entertain this restless Web crowd, you may need to rethink some of your old assumptions about what "good writing" really is.

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WHAT'S THE EASIEST WAY TO POST BREAKING NEWS?

Follow a foolproof template, advises media consultant Paul Conley. "Smart editors should create a story structure that will allow reporters to churn out copy at wire-service speed," Conley says.

To minimize deadline stress and delay, Conley suggests that online reporters adapt the format pioneered and perfected by Bloomberg, the financial news service:

First, post a **headline** the instant news breaks. Add a sentence or two of detail if you can.

Minutes later, post a **two-paragraph brief** that quickly summarizes key facts.

Then write a **four-paragraph story** using this structure:

GRAF 1: What happened and why.

GRAF 2: A statement or quote from an authority.

GRAF 3: What's at stake / why readers should care.

GRAF 4: Additional details.

Revise and update this four-paragraph brief as new information comes in. Then post a longer, more polished story once you gather enough material.

QUOTED

"We can't stress this enough: Long, rambling text frustrates audiences. The word count for Web content should be about half of that used in conventional writing."

Jakob Nielsen,
Web readability expert

"It used to be that we all thought of the Web as a place where we could write longer. Now, after revealing reader habits through research, we know we have to write shorter — either that or we have brilliant users who can finish a 15-inch story in 17 seconds. As a result, the majority of our stories written for online are 5 to 8 inches."

Tracy Collins,
senior director of operations,
The Arizona Republic

"I remember working with Carl Bernstein on Watergate, and we'd do a draft of the story on six-ply paper through a typewriter, and the copies would go to the editors. They would look at it; they would call us, and they would ask questions. We could work two to three weeks on a story before it would be published."

"Now, if it looks like you have the inkling of an advance on a story, they say, 'Can we get it on the Web at 10 a.m.?'"

"The consequence of this can be fatal. Good reporting requires weeks, months, sometimes years to get to the bottom of something. If it can be shortcut every moment we say, 'Oh, let's put this on the Web' — you can't have even a day, let alone a week or month to work on it — our product is going to be a series of incremental snapshots of what we think might be going on according to conventional wisdom. There won't be confidential sources; there won't be documentation; there won't be the kind of digging that a good story requires."

Bob Woodward,
legendary investigative reporter
at The Washington Post

"CHUNK" YOUR INFORMATION

Research repeatedly shows that Web users are far more likely to scan stories than read them line by line. In a recent Eyetrack study, stories with *short* paragraphs received twice as much attention as those with *longer* paragraphs.

In short: Long paragraphs discourage extended viewing.

As Crawford Kilian said in "Writing for the Web":

Good writing is good writing, whatever the medium. The difference in Web writing is that good writing is also usually very brief writing. It's clear, concrete, easy to understand without being dumbed down. . . .

When the unit of discourse is the chunk — the 100 words that fill up a computer screen — every paragraph has to stand on its own without leaning on what the reader may have seen in some other chunk.

So how does this apply to news reporting? As you write, try to limit yourself to shorter paragraphs.

Shorter sentences.

Chunks.

But effective Web writing isn't just a matter of sentence length. It's *how you organize your material* — how you coax and steer readers through your content.

Since long stories discourage Web users, you'll need to rethink how you present complex material. Just as we've broken *this* story into smaller chunks, divide that long school budget story into shorter, separate sections. An index of headlines can link users to each section:

- ◆ **Where the money comes from**
- ◆ **How it affects class schedules**
- ◆ **Budget winners and losers**



3 WAYS TO MAKE ONLINE STORIES MORE READABLE

ADD SUBHEADS, BULLETS AND LISTS

Big blocks of gray text make online stories look boring, even if they're *not*. That's why it helps to think like a typographer.

For instance, notice how we used three big, bold subheads to divide this story into chunks. See how they organize the material and make it easier to scan?

Next, we've added three bullet items below. Notice how:

- ◆ **Short lists** like this one show readers at a glance the main points you're trying to make.
- ◆ **Boldface type** grabs your eye. Using a bolder, thicker font helps emphasize *key words*.
- ◆ **Bullets (or dingbats)** are really just a typographic gimmick that makes lists easier to track.

As you plan and write every story, look for ways to highlight your main points, to organize your content in a visual way. Don't expect an editor to do this after you've finished writing; take charge on your own.

RETHINK WHAT A "STORY" IS

For most print reporters, a "story" means *one long, linear block of text*. But since that's not what Web users seem to want, you'll need to approach Web reporting differently.

Your goal should be to produce not just a story, but an online *package* — a combination of Web pages and new-media options linked together.

It's vital to understand that effective online journalism *transcends* text. Yes, text is a valuable tool — it still does

most of the heavy lifting — but Web reporters have other powerful tools they can add, too.

Different topics will require different storytelling techniques. As digital news pioneer Jonathan Dube recommends:

- Use print to explain.*
- Use multimedia to show.*
- Use interactives to demonstrate and engage.*

Smart online journalists find ways to enhance their stories with Web extras every chance they get. You're limited only by time and creativity — and by your staff's ability to produce.

The more complex the topic, the more you need to include:

THE THREE ESSENTIAL WEB EXTRAS

- ◆ **Links**
- ◆ **Multimedia**
- ◆ **User participation**

Over the next six pages, we'll examine these three essential Web extras in greater detail.

THE WEB IS SMART. SHOVELING STORIES ONLINE IS DUMB.



Web developers use a sarcastic term, *shovelware*, to describe text that's lifted from a printed publication, then dumped onto a Web site without adapting or enhancing it.

It's easy to shovel (or just shove) stories online. But it's lazy. It's a clear indication that you're behind the tech curve, that you're not thinking *online first*. And if you keep shoveling text-heavy, old-school, dead-tree material onto the Web, users will decide that either you don't care — or you *just don't get it*.

The Web has extraordinary storytelling potential, but you'll never tap it if you limit yourself to old print-journalism models. So put down that shovel. In the pages ahead, we'll explore the three essential online extras every smart news site should incorporate: links, multimedia and user participation.