

Writing for the Web: What Every Writer Needs to Know Transcript

This is a transcript of the seminar, edited slightly for easy reading.

You can find the video and audio versions at www.writershuddle.com/seminars/may2013.

Hi, I'm Ali Luke, and this is the May seminar for Writers' Huddle – *Writing for the Web: What Every Writer Needs to Know*.

Whether you're writing fiction or non-fiction, or whether you're published online or in print, or at the start of your career, or partway through your career as a writer and looking to go further, being able to do web writing well is really important.

What Does Web Writing Involve?

For some people, writing for the web means doing paid work, so perhaps you write website copy for clients, or you edit their website copy, or you write content for their blog or an online magazine.

For other people, writing for the web means creating their own work, perhaps promoting a book or an ebook, and that could be through guest blogging, it could be having your own website, it could be through social media, and so on.

For anybody who's a writer or an aspiring writer, being able to write well and effectively for websites (and also for social media like Facebook and Twitter) is really important. It lets you build a platform, and your platform, [as we covered in last August's seminar](#), is your ability to reach people, to get your message out there in the world.

If you're writing non-fiction, then your platform would be people interested in your particular topic. If you're writing fiction, you might have a platform of

people who perhaps enjoy that genre of fiction, or who have been reading bits of your work in progress or short stories by you.

So, even if you don't see yourself as a web writer in the sense that the majority of your writing is for the web, being able to write online is a great way to promote yourself and to promote your work.

The internet is definitely not going away, it's a growing market for writers, and content is becoming ever more important online. If you're familiar with the concept of search engine optimisation (getting a website to rank highly in Google, and in other search engines) then you may be aware that content is becoming ever more important to Google and to other search engines. Companies, big and small, are looking for writers who can produce really good content to help them rank well in the search engines so that customers can find them easily.

Why the Web is a Great Place to Get Started

The great thing with the web is that there's no barrier to entry, so rather than having to go through agents or publishers or magazine editors in order to produce an audience, you can create a website for free.

You can put stuff up on your site almost instantly, and you can start having readers from day one, so it's a much less frustrating process than in the past for writers who are trying to build an audience.

It's also very cheap now to experiment with getting your writing online, so it doesn't cost much to have an internet connection nowadays, and you can get a website for free or, if you want your own domain name, quite cheaply. You also don't need to know a lot of technical code, or have a lot of ability in that area, in order to be able to get your work online.

And, of course, you don't even have to have a website of your own. It might be the case that you use other people's websites in order to spread the word about your new novel, or about your work as a freelance writer. You could write guest posts for someone else's blog, you might be featured on a website

in a text interview, you might write perhaps an opinion piece for a magazine site, and so on.

There are a lot of options, and **even if you don't think that writing online is going to be a large part of your writing, it's still useful to learn some of the skills involved**, and some of the style that you will need online.

In general, the sort of style that you will use on a website can translate very well into other sorts of writing, so it might be that you develop a very conversational, natural, direct style when you're writing for the web, and that helps you when you want to pitch articles to magazines.

I know when I wrote my "*for Dummies*" book, *Publishing E-Books for Dummies*, the style that Wiley wanted for that was very similar to the sort of style that I use online, so it's very personal, it talks directly to the reader, it maybe throws in a few jokes, and it's quite light-hearted. That made it an easy step to go from what I was used to writing – blog posts and fiction, and the occasional magazine article – to writing a whole non-fiction book.

Two Key Points About Writing for the Web

So, what we're going to cover in this seminar is some of the really key points to keep in mind about writing for the web. I've tried to keep these as generally applicable as possible, so a lot of this will apply whether you have a blog of your own, whether you're writing website copy for yourself, so to promote your own services, or whether you're writing copy for a client. These tips should also help if you're using Facebook and Twitter to put out updates and to connect with an audience.

#1: Don't Get Hung Up on "The Rules"

So, the first thing, and this is something I have found a lot of writers have trouble with, is to forget a lot of what you learned in school.

Depending on the particular educational system you went through, and to a certain extent how old you are, you may have been taught a lot of rules like not splitting infinitives, or [not putting a preposition at the end of a sentence](#) – that's a discussion we had recently in the forums.

A lot of these rules are very much relaxed online. You can start a sentence with “and” or with “but”, you can have really short paragraphs and really short sentences. You can write something that wouldn't go down very well in an academic context, at school or university, but which resonates really well with an audience, and that's what matters here – being able to tailor your writing to the people reading it.

Obviously don't forget some of the good stuff you've learned, about choosing words with care, finding words with the right resonance for what you want to say, and so on, but don't get too hung up on pernickety rules that have become a bit outdated.

If you're worried something's breaking the rules, or you are worried whether it's going to work or not, it can be a good idea perhaps to run it past somebody else who is a writer, particularly if they have some experience writing for the web. Get them to say, actually, it's okay to use a sentence fragment, or conversely perhaps you've written something, and perhaps they'll say maybe you should stick to a particular grammatical rule for a reason, because what you've written isn't clear.

For the most part, though, you can write very good online content that people will want to read and share without obsessing too much over some of the things which might be considered incorrect in terms of style and grammar.

#2: Make Life Easy for Your Readers

So, the second key thing to keep in mind is that, when people are reading something from the web, they are reading it from some kind of screen: a computer screen, tablet screen, or mobile phone. That will be harder than reading from paper.

Not only is it physically harder to read something that's on a backlit screen, it's also the case that people will often have multiple tabs open, and might be carrying on an instant messenger conversation. They might be checking Twitter, they might be looking at Facebook, and so on, and all of that means that you can't let your guard down, you can't write a paragraph or two that are perhaps a bit dull, or are heavy going, where the reader has to read the sentences three times to get what you are saying.

You need to keep your reader's attention, and you also need to make your writing as concise as possible, so you don't waste the reader's time or your own time writing lots of stuff that's not necessary, because people won't want to wade through it.

Tailoring Your Writing to the Web

In terms of the nitty-gritty, what you're actually going to do with your writing to tailor it to the online world, there are some changes that you may well want to think about making.

It may be the case that your writing already incorporates some of these, and that some of it comes naturally, or it may be (particularly if you have come from a literary, academic, or business background) that you find it a little harder to get into the style of this, but all of these are good changes to be at least thinking about and perhaps trying out in your own writing.

#1: Write Short Sentences and Short Paragraphs

The first thing is to write shorter sentences and shorter paragraphs. Keep things straightforward, if a sentence is becoming several lines long, and has several commas or semicolons, then it's probably worth breaking it up into two or more sentences – or even into bullet points.

In school, you may well have been told not to use bullet points, as they're not usually considered acceptable in an essay, but if you're writing for the web, when people have limited attention spans and limited time, then bullet points will help people grasp your meaning quickly.

#2: Write in an Informal Way

In general, you will be writing in a more informal style than you often would for, maybe for print media or for other purposes, so that means using simpler words. You might use the word "get" rather than "obtain", for instance.

This is something to particularly keep in mind if you are developing copy for a company's website, because sometimes you might have a client who feels that

in order for their company to look impressive they should use a lot of complicated vocabulary. They may have a lot of mission statements and quite abstract language, and this doesn't necessarily connect very well with a potential customer. You may need to convince them to talk directly to the customer, be quite down to earth, be friendly and be approachable.

#3: Use "You" and "Your"

One very easy way to accomplish this, to make the reader feel that they're reading something conversational and friendly tone, is to talk directly to them, using the words "you" and "your".

If you read blog posts, and email newsletters and so on, you will find the words "you" and "your" crop up quite a lot, often in the title or the headline, because the writer wants you to feel that they're speaking directly to you.

By doing that they are creating a connection. Despite the fact that they might be halfway across the world from you, they make it feel like they really are communicating with you. You get to feel like you know them, and they are communicating with you.

Then the flip side of this is using the first person, so talking about "I" or "we", and again this is something that you are told not to do at school in an essay, but it's absolutely fine in the majority of cases online.

You may find there are some sites, I think [Suite101](#) for instance, where they don't like you to write in the first person, they want a more objective tone, but in general it's okay to do that.

#4: Avoid Local Slang

Since you're writing online, you're potentially reaching an international audience. I'm in the UK, but the majority of my readers aren't, a large number are in the United States, and then I've got other readers in Australia and in India, and all around the world.

Because of that, you may need to be aware of any regionalism in your writing. Personally, I do throw in some British words, like "knackered" on Aliventures, which I know not all of my audience will understand, but hopefully from the

context they're clear. When I'm writing for other websites, though, particularly ones which are based in the US, I try to keep the language as straightforward as possible for an international audience.

On a similar point, it's worth keeping in mind that not all of your readers will have English as their first language. You don't necessarily have to dumb down what you're saying, but you should try to write as clearly as possible, and only use a more complicated word if it's really warranted, so it adds something to your meaning or to the tone of your writing.

#5: Use Formatting to Enhance Your Words

When you write for magazines, or write a non-fiction book, there'll be somebody on the editorial team, or in house, or maybe somebody who they contract out to, who does the formatting. You're not generally responsible for doing much more than saying "this piece of text should be in a box", for instance, or "this should be bullet-points."

When you're writing for the web, though, it's often all down to you. You're doing the writing, but you may also be doing some design.

At the most basic level, this just means putting in plenty of subheadings. These act as little signposts to the reader throughout your text, they help readers skim your article or your web page quickly and find what they're looking for. They also work to break up the text: they add a bit more colour, a bit more interest in that way.

Bold text can be used to pull out some key points, and you may end up using more features, like maybe coloured text as well, and putting in some images. If it's done well, all of this can help people to engage with your writing, and make it easier for them to maintain their focus.

You may well find if you are reading online yourself, if you come across a blog post, perhaps, that's just a big block of grey text, several dense paragraphs, then it can often be off-putting at a glance. It comes across as just too much effort to read. Whereas if you see a post that's really nicely formatted – there are bullet points, there's clear subheadings, there's plenty of white space, so it

doesn't overwhelm – then it's actually much easier to get into that and to focus on it and to read the whole thing.

#6: Craft Good Titles / Headlines

Titles (or headlines) are particularly important, because they will often be the only piece of your content that a potential reader sees. Perhaps your reader is in their RSS reader, glancing at titles to decide which posts to look at, or maybe they get your articles sent to them by email, and they only look at the title before deciding whether to even open that email. They might see your post linked to on Twitter or on Facebook, and they may only have the title to go on.

So, it's important that you get those right, and that you don't assume that a good post will be fine even if the title is a bit so-so. **For me, that means making titles clear, concise and compelling.**

If titles aren't clear, it's hard for readers to decide why should they even read that content in the first place, and it's also not good for search engines, which will use the title to help them decide what your page is about.

If titles aren't concise, they're not going to fit very well into a tweet, for instance, and in general it's better to have fewer words than more. If you don't need extra words, then there's no point having them for the sake of it, because it will just weaken the rest of the title. That also goes for sentences and paragraphs and writing in general.

And then your title does obviously need to be compelling. Perhaps it makes a particular promise, and it gives readers a sense that there's a mystery or a secret, or something that you're going to be able to teach them that they didn't know before. Maybe you raise some intrigue, you make the reader ask themselves a question, and they click on the title to find out the answer

It can take a while to come up with good titles, or good headlines for advertising copy, but it's certainly something which is worth investing some time in. This is an area where you may find it's helpful to get help from the other members of Writers' Huddle, perhaps in the [Critiques forum](#). If you're deciding between three possible titles for a blog post, or three possible

headlines for a sales page, then ask the others in the Huddle what they would choose, what seems most compelling to them.

Structuring Your Writing on the Web

Then, beyond the purely writing level of writing for the web is the structural level of your work. There's obviously a difference between the way a website is organised versus the way a print article (or a book) is organised.

In [last month's seminar](#), we were looking at a rather bad advertisement that had basically been completely copied off the website of the company in question. Content that would have worked perfectly well on the web didn't work very well in print, simply because these are different formats with different requirements.

#1: Using Hyperlinks

One structural thing that you may take for granted if you're used to using the web is hyperlinks. Obviously if you're reading a book and need further information on a particular point, there might be a footnote on it that the author has provided. If there isn't, you need to find an encyclopaedia or a dictionary, and look it up

Online, if you as the author think the reader needs some extra information, you can just provide a link to that. It doesn't slow down people who don't want to click on that and read a few extra paragraphs, but it does allow readers who do need that information to get it easily.

This means you might be able to give extra help to someone who's a beginner on a subject, so you might have a link in the introduction to your post saying that if you don't understand what such-and-such means, then read my other article here.

It also means that you can help out readers who are more advanced, so maybe you say to them, to do some more reading on this topic, here are some great resources. It's a good way to add some value and some depth to your writing.

Another great way of using hyperlinks is to help readers navigate through a website that has lots of pages. It may be the case that they wouldn't find an article buried six months ago in your blog archives, unless you provide a link to it.

If you're doing any sort of writing that's designed for search engine optimisation purposes (and in general it's a good idea for any author to consider whether people can find their work easily from a search engine) then **having links within your website to other pages helps search engines to crawl the pages**. To some extent the text that you use for those links will help your website to rank for those words, because it's a clue to the search engine as to what the page being linked to is about.

When you've finished a piece of online content, glance back through it and see whether it would be helpful to provide a few links. You don't want a link in every other sentence, because it can get distracting, but some links are often a valuable way to add something for the reader.

#2: Creating Stand-Alone Posts or Articles

Another consideration online is that, in general, the pieces that you write will need to stand alone.

Even if you write ten short articles as part of a series for a blog or for a magazine website, you still want each one to make sense in and of itself. That means having an introduction and then a body and conclusion, it means having a clear point that you make, and it means giving the reader some sort of useful takeaway.

In non-fiction, that takeaway might be some information that they gain, or even a skill that they develop through reading your piece. With fiction that might be that they get to read a complete short story, so they come away feeling that they have had a full experience from that particular piece of content.

If you want to write something that is longer and more continuous than that, so if you want to address a subject that you can't really cover in the space of a

blog post, or that you can't easily break down into separate chunks in a blog post series perhaps, then the best thing to do is write an ebook.

That way, people can put it on their Kindle, or download it onto their computer, and they can read it when they've got the time to concentrate on a longer piece of text.

With like a regular book, people are used to the idea that you can pick it up and put it down, and you don't expect to get the whole experience and the whole picture until you've finished the book.

Because readers do come to individual pages and individual posts, it's a good idea to repeat yourself. You don't want to do this too much, you don't want to have the exact same content in multiple places on your website, but it's a good idea, for instance, to have a brief description of what the site is about on the homepage.

Don't assume that readers will click on the About page and read that. It may be that you want to have your contact information on the contact page, but that you also include it somewhere else, perhaps in your header and footer, so that it's actually on every page of the site.

It's worth asking yourself, if a reader came to this particular page, would it make sense in isolation, would they be able to find the stuff that they're looking for easily?

A good way to do this without having to copy and paste big chunks of text is to use hyperlinks, so perhaps on your homepage you will have a brief description of what your site is about, or what you as a writer do, and then you have a link to the About page, and you prompt readers to go there for extra information.

You Don't Have to Dumb Down Your Writing

The concern that some writers have with all of this is that they worry they are writing down to the reader. They worry that by creating, short, concise content, or by using very conversational language, they are dumbing down what they are saying, or they're talking to the reader like the reader is a child or somebody who's comprehension is limited.

That isn't the case, you don't need to make your content seem like that. You can use complicated vocabulary, you can use interesting words, you can use more complicated sentence structures, and so on, but it's a case of being conscious of making things just that bit more clear and conversational and direct, and being conscious of what people's expectations might be and how they might be reading online.

Good writing is still really important, and it can be harder, as a writer, to produce something that is clear and concise and that just says what you want to say and no more, than to produce something that's really quite complex, with rich vocabulary, and lots of long sentences and paragraphs and so on.

I know that, when I was a younger writer, when I was a teenager and starting out, that to make my writing really good at school, I thought I needed to throw in lots of big long words, and that I should make it as hard to read as possible, and the reading grade level should be really high.

I've realised since then that a mark of maturity as a writer is when you are more concerned about making it easy for the reader than making yourself look good. My goal with the blog posts and with all my fiction and with my writing in general is for readers not to get bogged down with the words. I don't want them to really notice the words that I'm writing, but to just get the meaning of what I'm saying with as little interference as possible.

And, of course, that might not be your own personal style, or your own take on how you want to write, but I think that it's definitely better to err on the side of keeping things clear and simple. When you do want to throw in a complex sentence, or you want a particular word for effect, or you're doing something clever with language, then it can really stand out and shine on its own, and the reader will notice it because it contrasts with the text in general.

So, if you've not tried web writing before, do keep in mind that it's easy to get into, and whether that's just setting up your own website and having a bit of fun there, or whether it's writing for a charity or a non-profit, it can be a great way to start building up pieces for your writing portfolio.

If your goal is to eventually have a novel published, or to be a freelance writer working in magazines, writing online can be a good way to get started.

It's also often a bit more immediate: you can publish things yourself very quickly, or even if you're working with a client online, your writing may well be published a good deal more quickly than the equivalent piece would be in print.

It can be a bit of a shift from how you're used to writing, especially if you're used to a quite formal business environment, or quite formal academic writing, but writing for the web is a really good opportunity to develop your voice as a writer.

You can get feedback from readers on your blog from comments, from Facebook, or even from writing in web forums, and getting some feedback there.

The web is a great place to experiment and to have fun, and to maybe just push yourself into having a bit more writing as well, if you've perhaps been struggling to get much writing done recently.

Give web writing a go, if it's something you haven't tried. If it's something you're already doing, I'd love to hear your thoughts in the forums on what you consider good writing, perhaps any particular lessons you think you've learned, or any mistakes you've made along the way.

If you're at a stage where you're just getting into web writing, or you'd just like to get a bit more confident, please do post in the [Critiques forum](#), perhaps let us look at a blog post that you've written or similar, and then perhaps we can give you some feedback on where it's working well, and then maybe some areas where you need to make a few changes as well.

So, that's it for this month, and I hope to see you in the forums.