WRITING FOR DIGITAL MEDIA

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4 HEADLINES AND HYPERTEXT

Everything that is needless gives Offense.
Benjamin Franklin

We must abandon conceptual systems found upon ideas of center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity, and replace them with ones of multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks.
George Landow, educator and author of Hypertext 2.0

Each of us literally chooses, by his way of attending to things, what sort of universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit.
William James, psychologist

Chapter Objectives

After studying this chapter, you will be able to:

• write effective headlines, deckheads, subheads and sub-subheads;
• use hyperlinks correctly to organize information, facilitate navigation and help users access information;
• organize information in lists, both ordered and unordered, and better understand what kinds of information lend themselves to lists;
• understand how essays, long writing and text-intensive stories and articles should be presented online.

Introduction

In the last chapter, we explored online style, writing style and visual style. We drill down further in this chapter by discussing in the context of style some specific writing techniques such as hyperlinks and headlines, and how these techniques can help readers navigate in and through our content. Other tools to facilitate scanning and surfing include “chunking” text—breaking text down into smaller, usually paragraph-sized chunks—and presenting subheads, deckheads and lists. Also considered is how to break up and present longer writing pieces.
Hypertext

In Chapter 1 the book and the process of printing are described as technologies that have shaped our understanding of scholarship and of composition. Hypertext, or computer text capable of taking the reader somewhere else on the Web with the click of a mouse, is changing this understanding. “Hyper” comes from the Greek root meaning “beyond” or “over”; when clicked, hypertext takes a reader beyond the page he or she is visiting to somewhere or something else.

Hyperlinks, or links, are the most common form of hypertext. Because links change the direction of the reader’s experience in or through a page or document, as opposed to the linear activity of reading promoted by books, a new rhetorical style is needed that recognizes this non-linearity. This new style must acknowledge that the user, not the author or producer, dictates the order in which the information is read or accessed. Navigational hyperlinks take visitors to other pages or sections within the site. Content hyperlinks take visitors to other sources of information, as addenda to what is being read.

The question becomes: To what kinds of information should a Web writer link? The sea of information available to a user can easily lead to confusion, so the Web writer should very carefully consider his or her links. Some of the more common destinations for links in journalistic writing include primary sources and public records, interview notes and excerpts, related or archival stories and information, definitions of terms and brief explanations, and multimedia. Many if not most of these forms of links can be conceptualized as footnotes, or the kinds of information footnotes have traditionally contained, only with the new benefit of proximity. To access resources footnoted in print, you would have to, say, visit a library and check the resource out on loan. In online environments, these resources are proximous. The once solitary main text has a potentially infinite number of neighbors.

[99] Chicago American, Editorial, 8.

[70] In the Davis article, Elston Howard is quoted telling the St. Petersburg Times that white players could make all their arrangements in advance through an agent. Howard, however, had to wait to see what living conditions he could secure before bringing his family down. And Robinson, in Baseball has done it, tells the story of another player whose wife left because of his fear of going into town and facing discrimination (115). "Most black players kept their families isolated from these problems by simply leaving them at home," Davis wrote (156).

[71] Baseball historian Bill James conducted a fascinating statistical study in 1987 comparing 54 black rookies with 54 white rookies, expecting to find "nothing in particular or nothing beyond the outside range of chance." (In Jon Entine, Taboo: Why black athletes dominate sports and why we are afraid to talk about it [New York: Public Affairs, 2002]: 20). James found that the black players went on to have better playing careers in 44 of the 54 cases, played 49% more games, had 66% more hits and clubbed 66% more home runs. "Nobody likes to write about race," he said, but "the results were astonishing."


Hyperlinked footnotes in an online document, demonstrating the proximity of resources online.
How to Hyperlink

Hyperlinks should be obvious and unambiguous; readers should know exactly what they will find by clicking, enabling them to decide whether to click now, later or not at all. The links themselves should be explicit about the type of content to which they lead, and they should be consistent in appearance. (Repetition was discussed in the previous chapter.) Conventions online call for hyperlinks to be approximately the same size as the main body text.

Hyperlinks should not appear merely as labels or pointers to content: they should be regarded as content themselves, much as headlines are. “Click here” is the equivalent to a headline in print that states, “Important story below.” Such a pointer does not provide enough helpful information; it merely points to content. Here are a few examples:

*Bad:* For more information on the Boeing 777, click here.
*Good:* The company has more than a dozen Boeing 777s in its fleet.
*Bad:* The commission’s report is available, click here.
*Best:* Read the commission’s report.

Let’s look at another example of good hyperlinking, from an undergraduate student’s blog:

The news media, including journalists, editors and executives, largely agree that the core principles of journalism are getting the facts right, getting both sides of the story and not publishing rumors. According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, journalists increasingly agree with public criticism of their profession and the quality of their work. About half of news media executives and journalists rank lack of credibility with the public as a major reason for declining audiences. In 1989, only one-third of the press said this. Americans’ evaluations of the news media’s credibility have declined since the mid-1980s.

The poll was conducted in coordination with the Committee of Concerned Journalists from November 20, 1998 to February 11, 1999. Lack of credibility is the single issue most often cited by the news media as the most important problem facing journalism today.

Note a few attributes of the student’s hyperlinks:

- They take readers to the supporting evidence and primary source material in such a way that they do not interrupt the flow of main body of text.
- They help readers predict at least generally where the link will take them.
- They each are only a few words, or the shortest possible amount of text. Long, hyperlinked phrases are difficult to read, and likely will not get read. They also clutter the Web page.
The student’s links also make use of two common Web conventions for links—blue text color and underlining. Although still in currency, however, these conventions are in flux. The explosion of blogs and the increased style capacities of CSS relative to HTML have fueled a move away from underlining and from blue link text. Underlining has given way on many sites to same-sized text presented in a secondary color, one typically lighter than the main body text color. An example (links appear in a lighter tint):

The specific text and link color choices are not that important (provided they are legible, of course), but consistency and repetition are important. If one hyperlink is deep green, all of the hyperlinks should be in deep green.

Hyperlinking should be viewed as the quickest way to get a reader to the most relevant information that reader might be interested in. In an online presentation about the hazards of childhood smoking, for example, appropriate would be links to clinical studies, to resource centers and to related articles on smoking among children. Readers do not have to rely solely on the one story, but neither are they likely to be distracted by the links to the supporting information. To this same end, where possible the Web writer should state or summarize the conclusions of a clinical study or supporting details and source information.

Because they typically are a different color, links are similar to words in boldface. They promote scanning, then, which Web writers should consider when composing them. An example from the home page of the Association of Lighthouse Keepers (www.lighthouse.fsnet.co.uk/) below demonstrates links’ function as guideposts in surfing and scanning.

The **Association of Lighthouse Keepers** was formed in 1988 by a group of serving and retired keepers, with the aim of maintaining contact between its members and enthusiasts throughout the world who share an interest in lighthouses and other coastal and inland aids to navigation. Our aims are to forge links with other lighthouse associations, to act as an information exchange, to expand our growing archive on lighthouse-related material, and in the long term, to establish a museum/study centre to promote the growing interest in pharology.
Readers can, and likely will, scan the boldface words quickly to discern the purpose of the site and its organization. Hyperlinks should be handled in much the same way. Linking entire sentences or long phrases, then, is verboten. A scanning eye can only pick up two or three words at a time, and readers’ habits and tendencies should not be ignored.

In summary, ask the following questions when developing hyperlinks and presenting them in online environments:

- How can I assure and orient readers when they first arrive on or at the page?
- How can I help them read efficiently and with pleasure?
- How can I help readers to retrace the steps they have taken in their reading paths, or to return to any one step or level in any one of those paths?
- How can I describe or signal the destinations for the links in the document?

Types of Links

Embedded links and, as sub-sets, inline links and anchors are the main kinds of hyperlinks you will find on the Web. Each type operates a little differently, but all will determine where a reader goes when clicking—whether to a point within the same Web page or site on which the link appears (an anchor link) or off to a new page or site.

Embedded links are by far the most common type of link, and they are usually placed behind a word, a selection of words, an object (image, button, icon) or a “hot area.” If the word or object is clicked, the visitor will be redirected somewhere else. And though most embedded links you encounter are embedded in text with HTML, other elements can include embedded links, such as buttons and icons, navigation bars and image maps.

In a big departure from the hands-off approach to market regulation of the last two decades, the chairman of the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, Gary Gensler, said his agency would consider new limits on the volume of energy futures contracts that purely financial investors would be allowed to hold.

Embedded links, “Commodity Futures Trading Commission” and “Gary Gensler.”

A hot area typically is found in or on an image, diagram or other graphical object in which an HTML image map has been placed. Moving the cursor over the hot area activates one or more embedded links. Below, HTML code is