

Principles of online style

March 2008

Developed by the Style Working Party under the auspices of the Learning Material Design Sub committee (LMDS) of the Information and Learning Systems Committee (ILSC)

Note: the Principles of Online Style provide a theoretical background to the Online Style Guide.

Location of both documents:

<http://www.csu.edu.au/division/landt/interact/help/onlinestyle.html>

Feedback to Stephen Relf, CELT.

Introduction

This Style Guide is a set of guidelines to assist academic and administrative staff develop and design educational materials that are consistent and professional in appearance. The introduction of *CSU Interact* increases the options available for pedagogic communication between staff and students, and amongst students. *CSU Interact* has also bought with it the ability for academic staff to write and design their own learning and teaching materials.

The style guide has four objectives:

- To promote consistency, usability and accessibility in the design of learning and teaching materials.
- To integrate the University style guides in the Web style policy and Style 2000 for print educational materials.
- To integrate scholarship about style for the development of educational resources.
- To provide assistance in writing and designing online study resources.

CSU Interact

CSU Interact is designed to provide an online, scholarly environment for academic research, learning, teaching and professional development. This environment has been designed with the following characteristics:

- Technical and functional integration enabling the integration of research with learning and teaching activities.
- Consistency of the platform for research and teaching.
- Silo-less spaces that can operate across organisational boundaries.
- Supportive of ad-hoc usage enabling staff and students to create spaces which support their activities in a simple and efficient way.
- Single point of access for the many services across a range of systems. (CSU, 2007)

Learning and teaching

For learning and teaching purposes, *CSU Interact* is an Online Learning Environment that enables the implementation of Flexible Learning through the provision of existing CSU applications such as the Forums, as well as a collection of new learning and teaching tools within one environment.

Writing and style for education

Writing and the style guides for educational and online uses are different from the normal standards of the publishing industry. Educational reading is slower than recreational reading (Lockwood, 2005), as a result the design of educational study materials is more open to facilitate the non-continuous reading whereby students read and leave the text to consult other resources such as a textbook or laboratory equipment, then return to the study material to continue reading (Hartley, 1987 and Misanchuk, 1992). The need for an open design style is further highlighted when the study materials are online because of the inherently dense nature of academic learning resources, the visual nature of online texts (Kress, 2003), and the potential for access to multiple sites directed from CSU learning resources.

Online readability practices are different. Online readers scan and browse rather than read in-depth (Nielsen, 2007). These practices then inform the style to be adopted for the design of online study materials. Readability and accessibility issues guide the principles of the Style Guide.

Guidelines

There are general principles for writing that apply across the educational media used within CSU. In print, online in Interact and in multimedia, there are traditions of writing instructional text that are compatible with research into the presentation of educational information. Writing and designing educational resources have similar principles to the recommendation of writing online. These principles are described in the 'Writing' section below.

- **Organisation of text or site**

The traditional way of presenting complex text for ease of understanding for students as novices in the discipline is through the application of organisational processes. In print this has traditionally been conveyed in the use of headings. In digital media, multimedia and online it is conveyed in the use of headings and the organisation of the site as a whole.

- **Colour**

The use of colour has not been an issue in the publication of print based educational media except in special circumstances relevant to the special printing of particular colour material pertinent to the educational goals of a particular subject. In digital media, online and multimedia, the use of colour is more diverse. In general the use of colour should be guided by accessibility principles in the CSU Accessibility guidelines and the CSU Web Policy.

- **Typeface**

Typeface refers to the style of the letters used in a text. Print and digital media online and multimedia have separate recommended typefaces that are best suited to reading in that media. It is recommended that for online writing sans serif fonts such as Arial and Verdana be used.

- **Image, audio and visual files**

The use of images, audio and video files require clear production practices for qualitative production and for accessibility.

Writing

Writing educational material has been a version of the essayist tradition of academia (Green, 2001). This is a process of continuous writing, development of an argument, canvassing options and arriving at a conclusion. This approach had been challenged by the use of instructional text in which 'the kind of writing is quite different from anything most teachers have done previously' (Rowntree, 1986, p. 81). Rowntree's organisational metaphor for writing instructional text was the 'tutorial-in-print' – 'imagine that you are **tutoring** one individual learner' (1986, p. 82 emphasis in original). In this form of writing Rowntree recommended that writing instructional texts should be a 'friendly and informal' type of writing using personal pronouns, contractions, and simple text. The structure of the text was that the writing was to:

- Help learners find their way into and around the subject
- Tell students what they need to know to be able to do before tackling the material
- Make clear what they should be able to do on completion
- Advise them how to tackle the work
- Explain the subject matter that relates to what the learners already know
- Encourage students to make sufficient effort
- Engage them in exercises and provide feedback and
- Help them sum up (Rowntree, 1986, pp. 82-83).

Online writing also requires a different approach to writing from the essayist tradition. In a similar disjunction from academic writing, Nielsen (1996) recommended an inverted pyramid style of writing 'starting with the conclusion' rather than the traditional pyramid of the essayist tradition 'starting with the foundation and gradually building to the conclusion'. Nielsen's recommendation is that writing be 'scannable' because his studies reveal that readers of web pages do not read as such but rather they scan text. As a result Nielsen recommends that:

'Web pages have to employ scannable text, using

- highlighted keywords (hypertext links serve as one form of highlighting; typeface variations and color are others)
- meaningful sub-headings (not "clever" ones)
- bulleted lists
- one idea per paragraph (users will skip over any additional ideas if they are not caught by the first few words in the paragraph)
- the inverted pyramid style, starting with the conclusion
- half the word count (or less) than conventional writing' (Nielsen, 1997)

There are great similarities between Rowntree's and Nielsen's approaches to writing despite the independence of their scholarship and the difference of the media in which to write.

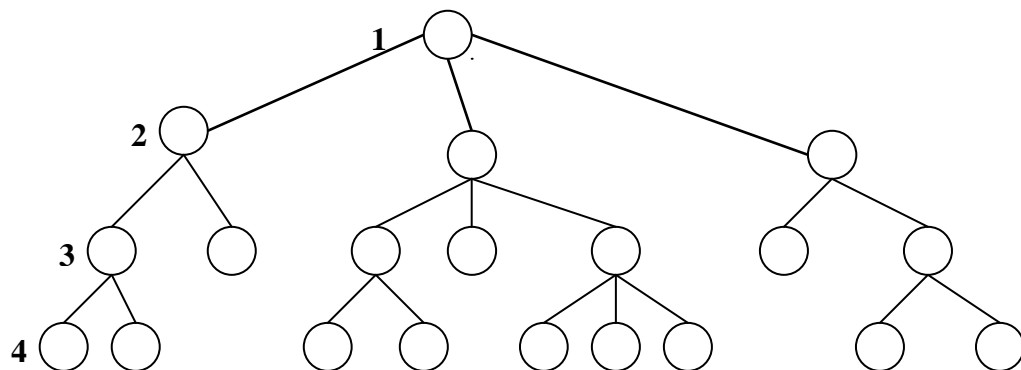
However because this is a new area of usage, Lynch and Horton (2002) recommend that the need for flexibility is of greater importance. This applies also to the advice of breaking information in writing online into digestible 'chunks' of information. Lynch and Horton recommend that it may be best to present long passages of information on one web page consisting of multiple screens length, with adequate internal breaks and enabled by hypertextual navigation through the heading structure. As found by one academic at CSU who wrote the study guide online, it was 'a different way of writing' in which 'the argument is constructed differently' (Relf, 2007) and that chunking of information was not always possible because 'it made the information too bitty' (Jones & Relf, 2004). The principle of organisation involving long pages then is that of print textual organisation with the use of adequate headings, sub-headings and sub-sub-headings.

Use of headings

Headings provide the visual conceptual and hierarchical organisation of the text.

Headings can prove to be useful in assisting writers plan their texts, as well as indicating the structure to readers. Complex structures such as the illustration below are difficult to follow and it is recommended that the number of the heading levels for

instructional text be limited to two or at most three levels (Rowntree, 1986; Hartley, 1994; and Misanchuk, 1992).



Headings provide the navigational structure of the text. In print this is a conceptual navigation, while online this is a physical as well as conceptual navigation. The navigation is provided visually with the text of headings standing out from the text in the body through the use of size, font and colour of the text and by the use of different spacing around the heading. The subtle use of space with more space above the heading than below indicates that the heading is separated from the preceding text and relates to the text below. Because there is normally more than one paragraph in the text below a heading, the space below the heading should be the same size as the paragraph space. If colour is used for heading levels, dark shades and other attributes such as bold or italics are recommended to ensure readability so that the heading stands out (Lynch & Horton, 2002) However, it is also important to keep in mind that if students will be printing the material, black headings should be used for black and white printing.

In the online environment this hierarchical structure provides a basic structure but the application of hypertext enables more associative thinking links and the free flow of information (Lynch & Horton, 2002). More elaborate structures of sites takes advantage of the power of hypertext, though it is important that the site does not become a confusing labyrinth (Snyder, 1996 and Lynch & Horton, 2002). Lynch and Horton (2002) described the nature of textual structures in higher education as complex and non-linear. They compare textual structures by two axes: the user

contact time with the text and the narrative structure of the text. Higher education resources tend to require lengthy contact time because of the complex nature of the text. However, the narrative structure of academic texts is less linear and suitable for hypertextual uses because of their analytical nature.

Conclusion

There is an experimental nature in writing academic texts for the online environment. This experimentation relates to the conversion of established typographical traditions in print to the multimodal online medium. The experimentation also relates to the change of writing styles and uses of the modes and media in the online environment by the academic writers. This style guide is an attempt to match these dimensions of experimentation through scholarship in writing study materials in print with the burgeoning practices and scholarship of writing online which stems principally from commercial and social practices.

It is expected that the Online style guide will be continually reviewed as new tools become available and as writing higher education study materials online is subject to greater research.

References

- Green, B. 2001, English teaching, 'literacy' and the post-age: On compos(IT)ing and other new times metaphors, in *P(ICT)ures of English: Teachers, learners and technology*, eds. C. Durrant & C. Beavis, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, pp. 249-271.
- Hartley, J. 1994, *Designing instructional text*, 3rd edn, Kogan Page, London.
- Jones, P. & Relf, S. 2004, Adventures in multiliteracies: Negotiating pedagogic relations in an online era, in *Making spaces: Regenerating the profession*, ed. S. McLeod, Proceedings of the 2004 Australian Teacher Education National Conference, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, pp. 359-367.
- Kress, G. 2003, *Literacy in the new media age*, Routledge, London.

Lockwood, F. 2005, Estimating student workload, readability and implications for student learning, retention and progression, Paper presented at the 2005 ODLAA conference *Breaking down the boundaries: A conference on the International experience in open, distance and flexible learning*, University of South Australia and Charles Sturt University, Adelaide, 9-11 November.

Lynch, P. & Horton, S. 2002, *Web style guide* 2nd edn, [Online, accessed 18 Dec. 2002]. URL: <http://webstyleguide.com/index.html>

Misanchuk, E. 1992, *Preparing instructional text: Document design using desktop publishing*, Educational Technology Publications, Englewood Cliffs.

Nielsen, J. 1997, Be succinct (Writing for the web), *Alertbox*, 15 March. [Online, accessed, 21 February 1999] <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9703b.html>

Relf, S. 2007, A l(IT)eracy model of professional development for writing online educational material, in *What do we know about using new technologies for learning and teaching? A ten year perspective*, the 12th Cambridge International Conference on Open and Distance Learning, 25 -28 September 2007, New Hall, Cambridge. [Online, accessed 20 Sept. 2007]. URL: <http://www2.open.ac.uk/r06/conference/index.htm>

Rowntree, D. 1986, *Teaching through self-instruction: A practical handbook for course developers*, Kogan Page, London.

Snyder, I. 1996, *Hypertext: The electronic labyrinth*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton.