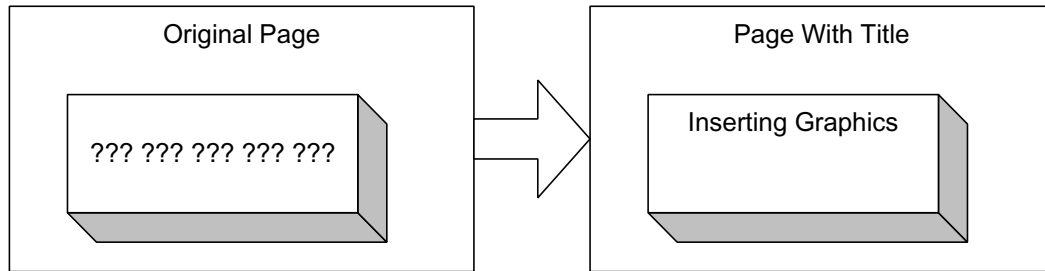


Create a Meaningful Title



BACKGROUND |

Make a title that can survive out of context

The first time most people see your title, they may be looking at a menu elsewhere on your site, or they may be zipping through a list of search results. Your title has to make sense outside of its own page, jostling with similar titles grouped together on a menu or a random assortment of titles on the hit page.

Ironically, that means you may need to include more text, not less. Your title must include enough words to stand on its own, making sense within its menu or search list

Start with the words that show why this particular page is unique. Don't start every title with the same word (such as your company name) because then every item in the search list will look almost the same, particularly if the user's screen cuts off the titles' tail ends, where the differences show up. (If you must include your organization's name, move it toward the middle or end of the title).

Compare your title with the other items on whatever menus it appears in. Make sure yours stands out, asserting its difference at the same time that its text hints at its solidarity with the other items in that menu. Guests should be able to tell why it belongs in that menu, and how it differs from the other items.

Mr. Swinburne is famed or infamed for having used a great many words which express nothing but “color” or “splendor.” It has been said that he used the same adjectives to describe a woman and a sunset.

—Ezra Pound

Test the first few words as a rollover

Here’s another weird context where the title may appear. If the user minimizes the page and hovers over its tile in the Windows task bar, only a few words will appear in the rollover text. Make those first words key.

Simple page titles that start with a salient keyword help users pick out pages from the minimized tiles.

(Nielsen, 2000b)

Use the same title everywhere

When guests click the title in a menu or search list, they expect to see that very same title appear at the top of the page. Don’t get creative. Writing different versions of the title confuses people and makes them reach for the Back button, thinking they made a mistake and came to the wrong page.

If possible, use the title verbatim in every location, so guests know what to expect when they click it.

Make a title that gives advance notice of the contents of the page

Web visitors are suspicious of your text. In fact, they aren’t sure whether to read your page or not. Before they decide to settle down to read, they want to know whether they have come to the right page. To check, they scan the title, any headings at the top of the page, and the introductory sentences. Only when all those confirm the “rightness” of the page do they begin to read. So create a title that accurately describes the content. Nothing sly. No jokes. No puns.

The title is crucial because the page title is often the first thing visible to users using slow Internet connections, and because the title becomes the text for any bookmarks the reader makes to your pages.

(Lynch and Horton, 1997)

Make the title echo what users already know, with a twist

The more your visitors know in advance about the topic you are discussing, the more successful they will be in understanding what you say. Seems simple. But your title ought to remind them of that prior knowledge, because any familiarity improves comprehension. In fact, if your title tickles the user's long-term memory, echoing some mental framework they have built earlier, that intellectual schema will help them read more successfully.

Web pages should contain some explicit content that can help readers to orient themselves; access relevant prior knowledge; access relevant content and structural schemata in Long Term Memory, or construct new schemata; and identify content relationships within and across pages. (Spyridakis, 2000)

Just do all that in 64 characters (to make sure people can see your title at the top of an average window), and, hey, for an additional challenge, try to show how your approach gives a new spin to the old ideas.

Recheck your title in its context

After you've written the whole page, make sure that the title still describes the content accurately. You may not know exactly what your point is going to be when you start, so if you wrote the title first, it may be out-of-date, inaccurate, or misleading.

EXAMPLES

Before

Introduction

After

LugeNet—A Technical Overview

Before

Your Geophys Web Site: Tutorial: Learning to Calibrate a GPS

After

Calibrating a GPS—a Tutorial on Your Geophys Web Site

Before

Los Alamos National Laboratory: Division of Nuclear Stewardship: Remarks on Measuring and Understanding the Science of Diffusion of Plutonium into Materials such as Stainless Steel at Room Temperature over Long Time Periods

Los Alamos National Laboratory: Division of Nuclear Stewardship: A Study of the Rate and Intensity of Radiation Spreading from Uranium 235 under Standard Conditions

After

Plutonium Diffusion—Measurement and Science (Los Alamos, Nuclear Stewardship Division)

Uranium Radiation—Rate and Intensity (Los Alamos, Nuclear Stewardship Division)

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

Not so relevant. Visitors to webzines and game sites tolerate inconsistency and unpredictability, even look for it. They welcome a title that doesn't make sense until they read the article.

TO LEARN

Very relevant. Predictability and accuracy help reinforce the structure you are building in the user's mind.

TO ACT

Critical. Without a revealing title, users may conclude they have clicked the wrong link, and back out, never to return.

TO BE AWARE

Writing a meaningful title is like doing kitchen yoga. Not very glamorous, but a real challenge for your unruly mind.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

What this guideline urges is simple courtesy.

See: Ameritech (1997), Ausubel (1986), Berners-Lee (1995), Bricklin (1998), Dumas (1988), Frisse (1987), Lawless and Kulikowich (1996), Levine (1997), Lynch & Horton (1997), Meyer (1984), Nielsen (1996, 1999f, 2000b), Rosenfeld & Morville (1998), Uncle Netword (1999b), Spyridakis (2000), Voss and others (1986), Waite (1982), Wallace (1985), T. Williams, (1994).

For your review only.

Excerpt from *Hot Text: Web Writing that Works*.
(New Riders).

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ISBN 0-7357-1151-8

Library of Congress Catalog Card: 2001089176