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Entertaining People Who Like to Read



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Webzine Articles

There's a lot of writing posted on the Web...that just does not get read!

—Randy Scasny, *Website Flow*

Writing with voice means going for the gonzo, the rough-edged, the over-the-top. And editors need to resist filing it down, polishing it, editing it away.

—Constance Hale, *Wired Style*

A good Webzine article deliberately provokes questions and discussion, raises the reader's temperature, connects to sites around the world, and ends in an exclamation point because a webzine is different from a paper magazine. Compared to paper magazines:

- Webzines act **faster**. Users expect comment on current events within 12-24 hours. Editors respond by return e-mail. Readers post questions and discussion points within minutes of publication.
- The **lag time** between delivery of a piece and publication is a lot **less**, averaging about a week or two, compared with two to six months.
- Every chunk is **shorter**: paragraphs, sentences, headings.
- The **pieces are shorter**, overall: 250 words is a respectable length for an article, 500-750 words are stretching it, and 1,000 words or more will only fly if broken up into shorter sections. Very few articles run the length of a *Harper's* piece—2,500 to 3,000 words.
- Instead of sidebars, you have **links** to related resources.
- As the writer, you are now responsible for creating or finding **audio clips** to supplement the piece. (Sometimes you also have to locate video.)
- As the writer, you are responsible for finding, capturing, and editing **art**.
- You must develop even more of a **personal voice** than you might use on paper.
- You are paid to **provoke discussion**. Your article is a cue to readers to send in their thoughts, which are what they really like reading. You launch a conversation, rather than capping it.
- And yes, you have to do a **little HTML**. But most sites provide templates you have to follow, so you rarely have to write any complex code.

But compared with many other sites on the Web, Webzines are for people who really like to read. People often stick around a Webzine for 20 minutes, half an hour. The articles are thicker, dense with in-your-face style, aggressively “written.” And for people who want entertainment, mixed with a little learning, a few stunning facts, occasional arousal, and raw passion, Webzines act as a forum for launching into the fray, a focal point for catching up and plugging in—the Web way.

Webzines often violate reasonable rules

No matter what the Webzine, there are probably going to be a bunch of stories that are straight factual narratives like those in a conventional paper newspaper or magazine. These stories follow usability experts’ guidelines for informative sites; they are fast, neutral, simply put.

But if you choose to write for one of the more controversial sections of a Webzine, follow these guidelines:

- Get intensely personal.
- Reveal intimate details.
- Write emotionally.
- Play subtly with language: indulge in metaphor, puns, irony, and double entendre.
- Admit your ignorance at times.
- Be conversational.
- Rant, occasionally.
- Provoke a lot of discussion, on purpose.

In the next few sections, we’ll explain why, and how.

Get intense, expressing yourself

The best newspaper journalists are those who assemble the facts and write the story so it just seems to flow, while they keep themselves out of the story, distancing themselves by taking on the persona of “the reporter.” This faux-objective approach works fine in newspapers, but is death on a Webzine. Some of the best writing in Webzines steams with emotion and attitude. Why? To get the readers’ attention.

Let’s face it. Reading a lot of text on the Web can be a drag.

*Writing, when properly managed
(as you may be sure I think
mine is) is but a different name
for conversation.*

—Laurence Sterne,
Tristram Shandy

So you have to engage the reader. The more outrageous, the better. Being out there works on the Web. Not surprisingly, the sites with the strongest voice tend to have loyal readers.

Reveal your anger, lust, envy, greed, gluttony, jealousy, and zits

Emotions sell. Don't think so? Why do you like that particular beer ad? What worked, in the ads for those politicians who won big? Why is it that you find the commercial for that big electronics store so offensive, but drive by the store nonetheless? All these spots stirred something emotional within a lot of people.

When writing for a site, take a look at its audience. What rattles their chains? What pisses them off? What makes them smile, laugh or roll their eyes?

Figure this out, and you'll have them eating out of your hand. Of course, you have to dig deep and find these emotions within yourself first so you don't sound condescending.

Provoke argument and discussion

Ever notice how many sites have talk-back or reader comment sections after an article? People like to put in their two cents and then see their prose up in lights. These same readers will come back the next day to see what *other* readers had to say about *their* comments, and so on. The best way to augment this kind of discussion is to say something controversial. We're not saying that you should write mean or nasty rants. But instead of playing it safe, get off the fence and say exactly what you feel. Hold nothing back... like you're writing in your journal. Be honest and go for it. You'll probably provoke some interesting (and wild) discussion, which is a very good thing.

Organize strenuously and intellectually with subheads

Web readers have gotten to the point where they start out looking for the meat of the story, article, newsletter or product description. Now, just like when ordering a steak, one customer might think "rare" is the way to go, while another might prefer well-done; the

I write in order to attain that feeling of tension relieved and function achieved which a cow enjoys on giving milk.

—H. L. Mencken

I write when I'm inspired, and I see to it that I'm inspired at nine o'clock every morning.

—Peter de Vries

“meat” of your content will be different for each reader. Being Web readers, though, they’ll want their orders quick. That’s where a little thought about organization and subheads comes in.

Let’s say you’re writing a monthly column for a philanthropic organization. Find four pearls of information that you want to polish and display. Organize by date, importance, or flash and dash. Give each point a paragraph, or in the Web lingo, a chunk. Then give each chunk a subhead. Someone reading the column may not be interested in points two and three, but want to read more on one and four. They can skip whatever seems irrelevant to them.

Depending upon how the Web site is designed, these subheads may also appear on the left margin, making it even easier for a reader to skip right to the meat. So, make the headings descriptive, not cute. Short but informative.

Provide links that add to the story

Because you can so easily link to another story, going right to the source, the Web has (except in academic circles) done away with the dreaded footnotes. You know those little numbers that refer to some article or book that you have to leave room for at the end of each page? Now instead of burdening your reader with the task of looking up the other document, you can simply link to the article. Quoting statistics from a recent survey? Just give your reader the results and link to the survey for more in-depth figures. Referring to a historical speech? Link to the text and just report the gist of it.

Using links in your story is another good way to keep it short and readable.

Fit within the word count, or die

One of the biggest problems we had when we were Web feature editors was that many writers were unable to turn in a piece at or near the assigned word count. We wish we had a dime for every time we heard, “Oh, I just couldn’t do it in 500 words. You edit it the way you want to.” Well, thanks, but no thanks.

We do our best to respond to all inquiries, but be aware that we are sometimes inundated. If you have not heard back from us after three weeks, please assume that we will not be able to use your idea or submission.

—Salon.com

Slate's audience is educated, affluent, and influential. 61 percent of Slate readers have a college degree or higher. 69 percent of the audience is between the ages of 25-54. The mean income is \$90,108 and the median income is \$73,728.

—Slate.com

If you are coming from print journalism, it will take you some time to craft a 500-word piece from research that cries out for 3,000 words. But that's the task. Web editors don't have a lot of time to drastically cut your articles. And, besides *you're* the one who did the research, so you are in a better position to know what's vital to the piece and what isn't. When you just can't seem to come in at the word count, use these helpers:

- Bullets (use one or two words, instead of one or two sentences)
- Captions (use art, photos or screenshots to convey a chunk of information)
- Links (refer to a survey, study, speech, rather than rambling through a long description)
- Subheads (they can serve as information, a question, or statement)

Follow the template, so the editor doesn't have to clean up after you

Unlike print, content for each Web site has to fit into a predefined template, often with tight limits on length and constraints about structure. There is absolutely no way to change this template because each “page” has to work well with the other “pages.” In other words, when the site was designed, each page is basically the same as the other, so you can link from page to page and to the information listed in the margins. Everything you see on the Web page has to go into a template that was created by the design or editorial team.

Some editors will give you the template and ask that you put your content into it. Here's where a basic knowledge of HTML comes in handy because if you have a grounding in the tags, you can make sense out of the template (most of it, not all of it, probably). For example, `<p>` means the start of a paragraph, and `</p>` means the end. Forget those little marks, or neglect to put your text within those marks correctly, and you'll get running text that looks awful. Another common tag is `<h2>` meaning the start of a subhead, and `</h2>` the end of a subhead. You can see why this is important. (For more information on HTML, go to HTMLGoodies

While we still very much believe that content on the web can support itself, Automatic Media is not able to succor us until we see that day. As of today, we are in suspended animation, cooled to a temperature at which our metabolic rate is near zero.

— **Stefanie Syman and Steven Johnson, *Feed Magazine***

at <http://www.htmlgoodies.com>.)

Some Web editors will ask that you not use HTML and not use their template because they find it easier to edit your work without your attempts at tagging or fiddling with the preset form. That's the kind of editors we were (and our writers loved it). But as more and more writers are becoming savvy about HTML, we think the tide will be going towards using templates, particularly ones with tags indicating what each chunk of content means, using the eXtensible Markup Language (XML). If you are given a template, stick to it religiously. Even if you think you know better (and you might), resist the temptation because you will just make more work for the editor who has to undo all your "improvements." Stick to the template and gain the gratitude of your editor.

Pitching a Webzine

Ethical considerations—such as clearly distinguishing editorial content from commerce content—are of the utmost importance so as not to confuse or deceive users.

—CNET, *Policy and Guidelines for CNET Networks Editorial Content*

Studying a Webzine

Study a Webzine as a virtual organization, to see how you might fit in. Read several entire issues and explore the discussion threads for several hours.

Figure out who the audience is, as you would in a regular magazine.

Find out how the Webzine was invented, to understand its slant:

- Heavily funded by people who want to be a portal, such as America Online, Microsoft Network.
- From scratch, by writers, as with *Salon*.
- To exploit a niche on the Web, as with *Womens Wire*.
- To give the paper magazine a presence on the Web, as with the *Atlantic* (whose electronic version is called *Transatlantic*), *Family Fun*, or *Playboy*.
- To get rid of paper altogether, as with *Omni*, *Progressive Architecture*, *Millennium Science Fiction*.
- As part of a magazine conglomerate's site, such as those from Hearst or Condé Nast.
- As content to give extra value to an online store, like KBKids.com
- As a public service or vanity operation that doesn't pay a dime, run and written by hobbyists, public-spirited people, or folks with too much time on their hands

Analyze the topics the Webzine usually covers.

- Which ones are already written by the staff? (No hope there, until you are hired fulltime.)
- Which ones seem to be written by invited guests, VIPs, and celebs? (Forget these topics, unless you are already a star.)
- Which ones seem to be contributed by non-staffers? (These are often short news items, reviews, service articles.)

- Of those, which topics come close to topics you would like to write about?
- Therefore, what topics could you provide, that come close to the ones the webzine already covers, but offer something new—a new slant, a new perspective, or a new angle?

Get right into some of the discussion. (This is the fastest way to get noticed by the editors).

Analyze the Webzine's tone and style. Ask yourself questions like:

- How personal and intimate is this?
- How elaborate is the verbal artifice required?
- How loud do I have to get?
- How much concrete detail do they like?
- How long do they make sentences and paragraphs?

How to write a query to the editor in an e-mail message

Sound like the zine right away. The first sentence of your e-mail proposal should sound as if it were lifted from one of their articles. In fact, the first few paragraphs of your query should demonstrate that you can handle their style.

Cover your idea in the first paragraph, give details in the next one or two paragraphs, and end with a paragraph saying why you are the person to do the story.

- Include a title, early.
- Within that first paragraph, name the word count you have in mind.
- Give details. The numbers, statistics, or quotes that an editor can drop casually at lunch, to good effect.
- Why you? You know the subject, and you have already been published here and there. (Online, we hope). Stress that you meet deadlines.
- Identify your topic in a way that makes it clear how it is different from anything they have already covered.
- Mention the department you think this story would fit in.

Idea: Mention an earlier article you like, and show how your piece goes beyond it, goes into more depth, and gives a new topic in that line.

By the way, after six years of publishing, if there is anyone out there who can give us some suggestions on how we can make some money out of this magazine—please let us know.

—*The Virtual Gardener,*
gardenmag.com

A query is a job of writing

Writing good Web queries (essentially asking “Would you be interested in this idea?”) is just as important as writing the article itself. Study the site for style and make sure that your idea doesn’t rehash a recent article. Most Web editors prefer e-mail queries. However, sending in a proposal by e-mail can be tricky. Follow these guidelines to minimize any problems:

- If you want your query to be read, write it in the body of the e-mail because editors are suspicious of opening up attachments from unknown sources. When we were Web editors, we NEVER opened up such a query.
- Check the site to see if there are submission requirements. Some editors may want you to send in your query in HTML format; others prefer plain text.
- Don’t send in full, unsolicited manuscripts. The editor is busy and doesn’t have time to read these. A short query is much better. (It also shows that you are a professional.)
- Include all of your contact information in your e-mail. Use a signature line with some of your best credits (and links).

Style

It always amazed us how many professional writers proposed long, long articles to us that would have been perfect for, say, *Child* magazine, but almost useless for BrainPlay.com or KBKids.com. Each medium has its own rules. The Web is extremely visually oriented. With the exception of some academics, very few people want to read long, rambling articles on the Web. They can pick up *The New Yorker* for that.

Style counts even more on the Web. Paragraphs should be around three sentences. The text should be broken up into chunks or sections with a subhead. Bullets can do wonders for presenting a lot of information in a small amount of space.

When querying an editor, you should use Web style to show you “get” the Web.

Length

All editors are extremely busy. Make your query no longer than three paragraphs—plus a paragraph about yourself at the end. (This tactic also shows how you can take a lot of information and distill it—a skill the editor is looking for.) To save space, use links whenever possible.

What about clips?

Samples of your work—clips—are your calling cards. In your query, you *tell* the editor how good you are by including a brief bio and the names of a few places you've been published in. Clips *show* how good you are. We never used new writers without seeing some of their previous work. But how do you send clips when you are e-mailing a query?

If you've been writing online, all you need to do is place links to some of your work in the query. If you're proud of some of your magazine writing, ask the editor for his or her fax number and fax the clips.

What to discuss with an editor who wants your story

Here are some reasonable issues to discuss:

- What software and hardware does the editor use? (You will present material in that format.)
- What HTML template does the editor use, and how can you download it?
- What format do they want art, audio, and video in?
- When rights will revert to you, if ever? (Most want electronic rights forever, but some will cave in and allow you to reuse the material on paper later, as long as the reprint is not in a competitor's site).

Case Study: Webzine Articles at *Slate*



Slate is a culture of a thousand conversations. Its writers work hard to provoke chatter, recording highlights from reader postings, inviting new comments, making their own catty comments about what other magazines, newspapers, and weblogs are saying. If *Slate* were a party, it would be one of those New York or Washington scenes that are dominated by a klatch of extremely verbal, intensely argumentative, surprisingly amusing folks who just love to talk.

The watchwords of this community are:

- **Be complete.** The *Slate* team loves to summarize a wide range of sources, rounding up political gossip, giving a snippy digest of the headlines in the major national papers, mounting a gallery of current editorial cartoons.

Find a niche, target the disenfranchised, and keep costs low.

—Jane Black,

On the Web Small and Focused Pays Off, *BusinessWeekOnline*

- **Reverse the spin.** Writers must work hard to step back from the conventional interpretation in politics (“Why Tony Blair’s underpants spell success”), TV, music, even business (“Why Jack Welch’s reputation is overblown”). When dealing with an issue the whole country is obsessing about, writers must give it a surprising new twist, reframing the story. New writers seem to get their break telling stories about stuff the rest of the team has never heard of, such as fishing for monkeys, the topic of a recent story that turned out to be, mostly, fiction.
- **Take nonsense seriously.** *Slate* writers discuss silly or outrageous subjects within standard newspaper departments such as shopping advice (“Which mints work best on nasty breath?”), Dear Abby (“What if I meet Mrs. Right after I’ve married Mr. Perfect?”), and Mr. Science (“What’s consumption and why did it kill Nicole Kidman?”). The tone is usually very serious, sympathetic, even intense—so you learn a little, get a glimpse of another world—and laugh.
- **Go long.** Lead articles run five to seven pages, single-spaced, without a single subhead—just text, text, text. But people read these carefully, and reply using the discussion boards by clicking Enter the Fray. *Slate* has some of the stickiest pages on the Web.
- **Provoke the fray.** The point is to challenge readers, tease them, drive them to write in. Then other readers write to them, and others reply to those, and soon the site is bustling with people checking to see how other people responded to their own posting, and picking up a new angle on old debates.

These articles are very “written.” They take the essay form seriously, articulating an interesting idea early, often by coining a new term such as *Wedgislaction*, proposed by William Saletan:

Neither party expects—or even intends to try—to earn enough bipartisan support to pass most of its agenda. Instead, hearings, bills, schedules, amendments, and votes will be orchestrated to create wedge issues for the next election. This isn’t legislating. It’s wedgislating.

Writers like Saletan tick off the evidence for their idea in clear, clever prose that draws attention to itself as language, while nudging the point forward past all quoted objections, reducing opponents to puffballs. These writers sound like lawyers—and some are. Because the evidence and argument grow unwieldy, the writers have to draw tight conclusions, so the art of the epigram lives on. Saletan, for instance, releases these zingers:

We provide information and a service on the Web that is not found in the print world. In a way, it's marketing 101. New products succeed when they fit an unmet need.

—Steve Waldman,
Editor-in-Chief, [Belief.net](#)

- “Politicians love the power that comes with majority status, but they hate the responsibility.”
- “The pattern in these issues is their pure symbolism.”
- “In theory, elections were a means to legislation; in practice, legislation was just another means to election.”

La Rochefoucauld, the French master of maxims, would get a kick out of *Slate*’s writers, who turn an antithesis into a riposte, and state a position with a pun.

But there’s something sensuous in all this word play—a love of the physical effect of language, a joy in the twist and turn of thought and taste and touch, as the sentences unroll. Listen to Anne Hollander talking about a Versace design:

The most perfect garment is a sleeveless black dress of tough synthetic net, ornamented with inspired beading and delicate black leather appliqués that rise from the hem in black flames (maybe seaweed) around the thighs and pelvis and descend from the neckline in uneven black clusters of grapes (maybe clouds) over the breasts and shoulders.

That kind of prose, so unlike everything that usability engineers recommend for serious information sites, proves that text still has the power to pull our attention through the loop-the-loops of

vicarious experience, even on the Web. The subject matter doesn't matter, finally. What we follow are the bright eyes, the moving lips, the subtly changing tone of voice, the heart of the conversation. Text can do that.