MERRIMACK COLLEGE

WRITING FOR THE WEB

A GUIDE FROM MERRIMACK COLLEGE WEB SERVICES

Know Your Readers

Most people are **scanners** when they read websites. Unlike the way they read a printed page, they tend to skim headlines and skip around on the web in search of quick answers. However, a minority of web readers are **sponges** — those who want to see and absorb everything because they're looking for in-depth information.

Consider the needs of both scanners and sponges when you write:

- Grab the reader's attention by highlighting the most important information in your first paragraph.

- Break up your content with headlines that are direct and descriptive.

- Use bulleted lists instead of wordy paragraphs when possible.

- Present more in-depth information with hidden/collapsible content such as accordions and tabs.

- Bolster the credibility of your content with citations and quotes from students and experts.

- Create a PDF of a complete print document and post it on the page (for sponges).

Be Clear and Concise

As easy as it is for a reader to click on your webpage, it's just as easy to click away to another site. That's why it's important to be clear, direct and concise. Don't waste the reader's time or make the reader work hard to find information, and avoid using big words and complex arguments.

Keep in mind that your audience:

- Is not your professor or your boss

- Is made up of people with diverse levels of education

- Is most likely hunting for a quick answer

- Doesn't care if you sound smart or clever
- Prefers simple language confirming that your website has the answer they need
- Is looking for content that's straightforward and self-explanatory

Example:

Offering more than 100 career-focused academic programs taught by expert faculty, Merrimack is the perfect place to build the skills and knowledge that today's employers want.

Use Descriptive Headlines

Every headline should clearly introduce the information that follows it. Avoid using puns and clever language that might confuse people — especially foreign students who are unfamiliar with colloquialisms.

When writing headlines:

- Put keywords at the beginning

Examples:

✓ *Social Justice Degree Teaches Compassion*

✗ *Fighting for the Less Fortunate*

- Use questions that include pronouns:
  - "How Do I" for tasks and procedures

    Examples:

    ✓ *How Do I Apply for Graduation?*

    ✗ *Applying for Graduation*

  - "Can I" for policies

    Examples:

    ✓ *Can I Graduate in Three Years?*

    ✗ *Graduating in Three Years*

Be Conversational

Use a casual, friendly and upbeat tone. However, avoid trying to be too funny or playful because it can undermine your site's professionalism and credibility.

- Use you/your when referring to students, applicants and parents.
- Use us/we/our when referring to Merrimack College.
- Use active voice instead of passive voice.

Examples:

✓ *You will take five courses in our program.*

✗ *The student will take five courses in the program.*

✓ *Our students study equations.*

✗ *The equations are studied by our students.*

Avoid Academic Jargon

Think about an 18-year-old prospective student. Does he or she want to read dense paragraphs of academic jargon? Probably not, so it's best to avoid using ambiguous phrases like these:

✓ *We are committed to helping you succeed academically.*

✗ *We are committed to upholding high academic standards.*

✓ *Our curriculum is designed to help you learn.*

✗ *Our curriculum utilizes a rigorous pedagogical approach.*

Simplify with Bullets

A bulleted list is a great tool for attracting the eye, reducing wordiness and breaking down complex ideas. However, be careful not to overuse bullets or they might lose their effectiveness.

Here are some tips for using bullets:

- Introduce a list of bullets with a phrase that's clear and succinct.
- Begin each bullet with the same part of speech (verb, noun, etc.).
- Use the same type of phrase for each bullet (sentence or fragment).
- End each sentence (but not fragment) with a period.
- Keep all of the bullets in the list at a similar length.
- Use a numbered list only when the sequence is essential.

Keep Paragraphs Focused

In general, a paragraph should cover a specific topic and be roughly 100–200 words in length. If your paragraph is longer than that, look for ways to cut content, link to subpages or use collapsible tools such as accordions and tabs.

Keep these tips in mind when writing paragraphs:

- Be sure that each page contains at least one paragraph.
- Address only one topic in each paragraph.
- Feature the most important content in the first paragraph.
- Use bold and italic formatting (sparingly) for emphasis.
- Use bulleted lists instead of paragraphs when possible.

Show, Don't Tell

Whatever your topic, use concrete examples. Highlight your program's awards, and be specific about career advancement by sharing job success and salary ranges after graduation. Provide statistics and offer student testimonials when possible.

Example:

✓ **99%** *of last year's incoming class received a grant and/or scholarship.*

Use Visual Elements

Visual elements are essential for breaking up dense content. Merrimack's web services team can help you create callout boxes, tables, infographics and more. This team can also answer any questions you have about font size, webpage length and colors.

Here are a few guidelines for using some basic visual elements:

- <u>Underlining</u>: Underline links only.
- *Italics* and **Bold**: Use these sparingly.
- CAPS: Don't capitalize all letters in a headline.
- Scrolling: Limit content length to three or four scrolls.

Example:

✓ **Important Notice:** *As of fall 2017, the concentration in international business was renamed global management.*

Support the Reader's "Journey"

Someone might land on your page at the beginning or near the end of his or her search for information, or somewhere in between. To help facilitate the reader's progress, make sure your page points back to major content areas and also includes a specific call to action so he or she knows where to go next.

Avoid "Click Here"

Using a link that's labeled "click here" has become outdated and it's not helpful to people with disabilities who use screen readers. A better approach is to embed the link directly into content by highlighting the words that best describe the new page where the link will take the reader. Keep the length of linked phrases to five words or less.

Example:

✓ *All business administration majors must satisfy the College's* <u>*general education requirements*</u>*.*