

# OSUL Website Content Generation Guide

(or: *How to Create Great Copy*)

So, you have some web writing to do. Hrm... not what you were trained to do. Possibly not in your job description... Heck, your job predates the web by... well... it predates it. That's okay. You've written lots of great papers, published several articles and a dissertation. For Pete's sake, this should be easy. It is. It's just a bit different than those.

You've read about page types and selected the proper template. You've read the questions and checked out the controls on the Content Management System. Technically, you're ready to go, but before we start, let's consider a few important but oft-neglected tenets of writing, Audience, Purpose and Relevance.

## *Audience*

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Anyone can show up, it's the web. But we have to write for someone, so let's imagine who is going to look at your page. Students, Faculty, and Staff are probably our first targets. Alumni, Friends and Citizens of Ohio are also within scope. Include Interested Parties from other institutions and other Random Researchers, and that is a broad net. We also have to keep in mind that they might not be native English speakers, or may be using alternative browsers to view what we publish.

**Level** - Is the topic of your page more general or specific? If general, it is likely that you are going to be addressing someone who is unfamiliar with the topic. If is specific, you can assume that this person has familiarized themselves with the background information that brought them to this point. Probably it falls somewhere in between. Also, unless you are writing internal operations documents, (and even maybe then as well!) you should assume that your reader knows little or nothing about the way libraries work.

**Tone** – As an organization, we have a need to present a unified face. No matter that we have perhaps as many authors as we have web pages, we would like them to sound like they came from one pen. We have to balance between the solemnity of an august institution and yet not put undecided undergrads into immediate slumber. The tone that we are looking for is professional, helpful and respectful.

## *Purpose*

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Someone clicked a link to get to this page. What are they expecting to find? What are you trying to communicate? There are several common reasons people visit web sites, some might be more applicable than we'd like to admit.

**Conform** – “Policy X states that we have to state Policy Y on the website and it's your job to produce the copy that explains Policy Y so that we *conform* to Policy X.” Or this could be page to *document* a procedure so that other people can follow or learn from it. Or it could be a page to *inform* users that we have started or stopped or are continuing to offer a service. These pages should be direct, thorough and to the point.

**Education** – We have the charge of educating students. We need to make sure that we are providing accurate and helpful content. We should provide links to more general content in case the level of content is too high for the information seeker. We should also provide links for further study after they have mastered what we have to offer. We don't have to cover everything on one page, it is far more important that what we provide is factual and accurate.

**Promotion** – Wait, what? Am I going to say the M word? Yes. Mmmmmarketing. It is vital to communication. We do it all the time, whether we realize it or not. If we have a quality service or great materials (and we do!) then it is our duty to get the word out about them. The most cleverly implemented service offering or most carefully composed resource is worthless if no one knows about it. If promotion is one of your goals (yes, you can have a few) then don't be afraid to brag a little. Talk it up, be confident, be proud.

**Entertain** – Alright. Seriously. I've gone too far. You're not here to entertain, you're here to educate, illuminate, enlighten. Sure, we do a lot of that: we are a serious academic institution. But a certain number of our audience are looking for entertainment. And certain areas of our site are geared more towards that than others. The more that your page fits this description, the more informal you can become, keeping in mind your audience

## *Relevance*

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Relevance is a general measure of how well something meets the needs of its goals. Is your content relevant to the goals of the site, to the page, to the reader, to the writer?

**Title well** – This is likely the first thing that someone will see, hopefully it will address the question ‘What is this link about?’

**Accuracy** - Write accurately: factually and grammatically. I'm not terribly worried about this one from our organization, but even I use a spell-checker. Citations are not amiss.

**Focus** - Stay on your specific topic, keep copy short and direct. The OSUL website is designed around the premise that each topic has a page, separate and unique with it's information. If you need more pages, you can either add them, or contact the person who you think is best responsible for such a page. In “Don't Make Me Think” by Steve Krug, he suggests writing your copy, going back and removing half the words, and then going back and removing half the words again. (Yes, I know, ‘Physician, heal thyself!’)

**Link** – Link to your best sources. We need to point to the right information, not necessarily write it. If you are the best source, then we'll all link to you!

**Maintenance** – One of the key ideas in Information Literacy on the web is to look at when the content was last updated and judge accordingly. If the information doesn't change, then great, but you should probably schedule some time to review the pages that you are responsible for on a monthly, quarterly, yearly basis, making sure the facts are still so, the links still go where you thought, and that you can't provide the information in a better manner.

## *Review*

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Audience, Purpose, Relevance, get all that? I've tried to condense this into something easy to read, and applicable to the OSU Libraries' website, but there are literally books and books written about this. Here are some of them:

“Don't Make Me Think” by Steve Krug – This is a usability book, but copywriting is an important part of that as good usability.

“Building Findable Websites” by Aaron Walter – A search-engine strategy book, but again copywriting is vital to that as well.

“Web Resources” – <http://www.osu.edu/resources> This is the University guide to providing web content, and contains many of the more technical aspects of what we are about here.