

## Best Practice for Web Contributors

To make a website more attractive to its visitors, there are some guidelines to consider when publishing your material. None of these is a hard-and-fast 'rule', but all are generally accepted as Best Practice in this specialist area<sup>1</sup>.

1. Your article is important, so ensure the largest number of visitors reads it.
2. The most good-looking and well-written narrative document will be a disaster as a web page.
3. Very short sentences or bullet points make a better impression than paragraphs.
4. Make your statement, point or story short, and elaborate later with references.
5. Consider the amount of screen space available and construct your article accordingly.
6. Always think in terms of 'sound bite' television rather than literature.
7. Large showy graphics take a long time to render on-screen; keep them small.
8. Use benign colours, trying to match the general 'look and feel' of the site.
9. Your article is competing for visitors' attention, and they invariably have busy lives.



Boundary for your material (see notes)

### The above points discussed:

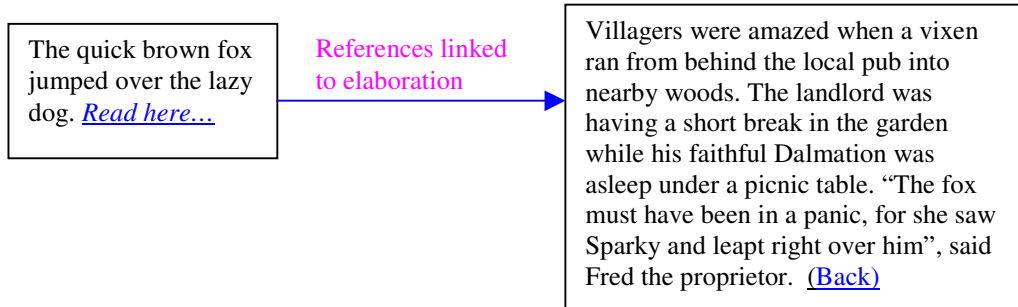
**Your article is important:** The site's Editor has determined that what you want to say deserves public exposure on the web. Visitors won't read it if it is hard work to do so.

**The most good looking...:** Not all books translate well into film, theatre or television, and similarly a full-page (A4) document will be ignored by most site visitors. Reading a long article on a computer screen is hard work, even for computer 'geeks'. Casual visitors and those seriously interested in the information will quickly abandon anything resembling hard work.

<sup>1</sup> Many articles can be found on the web with a Yahoo search for 'web publishing guidelines'. Perhaps the shortest, most informative and non-technical can be found at <http://www.cam.ed.ac.uk/webpublishing/>

**Very short sentences and bullet points...:** In parallel with the item above, it is all about a visitor's attention span. So...

**Make your statement...references:** To really get a reader's attention, keep it short. In your article, assume the reader has a basic grasp of the material, but provide a link to a pop-up that elaborates on an item. Consider the example:



**Consider...screen space:** A web page *isn't* A4, it's much smaller. In most cases, screen space is even more restricted because of navigation buttons, headers and other standard impediments. Ideally, a page of your article should fit into the red box in the diagram on page 1. Even better, a really well constructed page will avoid the scroll bar seen at the right of the diagram. Visitors will usually avoid scrolling – they will assume the article ends at the bottom of their screens.

**Think in terms of 'sound bite'...:** or television, the ancestral home of superficiality. The *keep-it-short* theme is woven through these guidelines for the simple reason that you want your audience to be entertained and informed by your material. Don't make them work too hard for it. Try breaking your material up into single-[screen]page topics, with links to 'next' and 'previous' or pop-up elaborations.

**Large showy graphics...:** When browsing the web, the visitor's screen will usually first be populated by textual material, followed by graphics<sup>2</sup>. A small 'thumbnail' image is much more effective to grab the reader's attention, and a larger version of it can be linked via pop-up.

**Use benign colours...:** Dark print on a light background is the normal way we read information. Lurid typeface or overly contrasted combinations are off-putting to viewers. Further, every website has its own 'look and feel' or motif, which should remain consistent among all its pages. With a collaborative-style site, it is important to avoid personalising any particular subject area.

**Your article is competing...:** Referring again to the *keep-it-short* theme, even a site visitor who is intensely interested in your subject will give up if your article is too long-winded. The new word '*infotainment*' has insinuated itself into our language, largely due to the technology revolution and our seemingly slavish reliance on it. We are not obliged to approve of the situation, but it is essential to tailor communication to this new reality.

**A technical consideration** (not in the original points): A very large or complicated page can take a long time to load for a user with a dial-up connection to the web. You may have the fastest broadband available, but not everyone has. Most dial-up users will just go somewhere else, rather than wait and assume the site is dead.

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<sup>2</sup> Technical note: When loading a web page, a small 'placeholder' for a graphic is put on the browser screen, then text is displayed followed by the actual image. When the large image finally loads, the text 'jumps' downwards, creating a distraction or annoyance for the viewer.