Battling the Blah-Blah-Blah-Blahs

7 Tips for Making Websites Readable

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The Quest for Meaning

WHAT ARE YOU DOING, PIG? I STARTED A WEBSITE TO SELL GOODS TO OLDER PEOPLE. YOU KNOW, LIKE THE CLAPPER, LIFE ALERT, CANES, WALKERS.

THAT'S A LOT OF ITEMS CRAMMED ONTO THAT ONE WEB PAGE. YEAH, I KNOW. SO I HAD TO SHORTEN SOME OF THE PRODUCT DESCRIPTIONS.

I DON'T THINK I'D SAY, 'GET THE CLAP.' YEAH, IT HASN'T SOLD WELL.
Quick Stats: Readers on the Web

**Scanning:** 79% of test users scan a new page; “only 16% read word-by-word” (1997)

**Bouncing:** “Users often leave Web pages in 10–20 seconds...you must clearly communicate your value proposition within 10 seconds” (2011)

**Missing:** Readers “miss big chunks of content based merely on how text flows in a column. The skipped phrases and words are often as important—or even more important—than those words that are read” (2017)

—*Nielsen Norman Group*
Excuses for Blah-Blah-Blah

- “If you have space to fill, why not fill it?”
- “Users need every detail to understand.”
- “Nobody reads anymore, anyway.”
- “Not my fault! I’m a designer, not a writer.”
- “That's what the template calls for.”
Writers are a throat-clearing species.

It often takes a long time to figure out what you really want to say.

Websites suffer from first-draft syndrome.

Designers and users think of text as filler rather than meaningful in itself.

Upshot: blah-blah-blah-blah.
### Useful Abbreviations for the Time-Pressed Online Reader

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TL;DR</td>
<td>Too long; Didn't read</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VS;SDR</td>
<td>Very short; Still didn't read</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR;PW</td>
<td>Should read; Probably won't</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RB;GB</td>
<td>Read a bit; Got bored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR;MP</td>
<td>Skim-read; Missed point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RH;PAC</td>
<td>Read headline; Posted angry comments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Image**: Illustration of people on their phones, indicating the user-content mismatch.
Journalism Best Practices

- Relevant content
  - inverted pyramid: big news first
- Easy to skim
  - columns and headlines direct users
- Active, not passive
  - people *do* things in stories
  - juicy details engage; generalities bore
The Elements of Web Style: 7 Tips

1. Keep it short
2. Add snappy headings
3. Find your focus
4. Make a list
5. Get specific
6. Adjust the visuals
7. Use your words—wisely
Homemade Pies for Every Celebration

Pie in the Sky Bakery is your source for fresh, home-baked pies for every occasion. Our pies are made with only the freshest fruits and other wholesome fillings. We make our crusts with vegetable shortening and no trans-fats, so you can enjoy high quality and delicious taste in every bite.

Testimonial

Thank you, Merilee, for all your help in making my daughter’s birthday party a success. Her allergies make it difficult to find safe choices for her. You made it so easy! Everyone loved the gluten-free Apple Crumb pie, and of course, the Chess Pie.

SHARON LEROY

Mother’s Day

Don’t wait to reserve your Mother’s Day pie, complete with “Mom” on the crust!

Menu

Join us for a slice of pie, with or without ice cream, and coffee at our Main Street location.

Donations

We are grateful to Merilee and everyone at Pie in the Sky Bakery for donating 20 pies to Relay for Life. They were delicious and very much appreciated by all.

DARLENE HUSTON,
CHAIRPERSON

More gluten-free pies

Order now!

Eat more pie!
"Pie in the Sky Bakery is your source for fresh, home-baked pies for every occasion. Our pies are made with only the freshest fruits and other wholesome fillings. We make our crusts with vegetable shortening and no trans fats, so you can enjoy high quality and delicious taste in every bite. "
Tip 1: Keep it short

- Eliminate throat-clearing and “happy talk”
  — so you can enjoy high-quality...blah-blah-blah
  — Pie in the Sky Bakery is your source...blah-blah-blah

- Keep in mind optimum reading widths
  — fixed width for web text: 50 to 70 characters

- Cut whole paragraphs, when appropriate
  — why not just delete it all?
"Pie in the Sky Bakery is your source for fresh, home-baked pies for every occasion. Our pies are made with only the freshest fruits and other wholesome fillings. We make our crusts with vegetable shortening and no trans fats, so you can enjoy high quality and delicious taste in every bite."
Homemade Pies for Every Celebration

Home-baked pies for every occasion: only the freshest fruits, vegetable shortening and no trans-fats.

Testimonial

Thank you, Merilee, for all your help in making my daughter’s birthday party a success. Her allergies make it difficult to find safe choices for her. You made it so easy! Everyone loved the gluten-free Apple Crumb pie, and of course, the Chess Pie.

SHARON LEROY

Mother’s Day

Don’t wait to reserve your Mother’s Day pie, complete with ‘Mom’ on the crust!

More gluten-free pies

Order now!

Menu

Join us for a slice of pie, with or without ice cream, and coffee at our Main Street location.

Eat more pie!

Donations

We are grateful to Merilee and everyone at Pie in the Sky Bakery for donating 20 pies to Relay for Life. They were delicious and very much appreciated by all.

DARLENE HUSTON,
CHAIRPERSON

Let us donate to your cause!
Tip 2: Add snappy headings

- Make headings short and active
  — rule of thumb: writers are bad at titles

- Create a logical heading structure
  — weight headings to convey what matters most

- Cut unnecessary headings and chunks
  — rethink labels like “Testimonial”
  — does “Donations” belong on the home page?
What’s the real tagline?

"We Love Pie"
We love pie!

Home-baked pies for every occasion: only the freshest fruits, vegetable shortening and no trans-fats, delicious in every bite.

Testimonial

Thank you, Merilee, for all your help in making my daughter's birthday party a success. Her allergies make it difficult to find safe choices for her. You made it so easy! Everyone loved the gluten-free Apple Crumb pie, and of course, the Chess Pie.

SHARON LEROY

Mother's Day

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Join us for a slice of pie, with or without ice cream, and coffee at our Main Street location.

More gluten-free pies

Order now!

Eat more pie!
We love pie!

Home-baked pies for every occasion: only the freshest fruits, vegetable shortening and no trans-fats, delicious in every bite.

Thank you, Merilee, for all your help in making my daughter's birthday party a success. Her allergies make it difficult to find safe choices for her. You made it so easy! Everyone loved the gluten-free Apple Crumb pie, and of course, the Chess Pie.

-SHARON LEROY

Mother's Day

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Menu

Join us for a slice of pie, with or without ice cream, and coffee at our Main Street location.

Eat more pie!
Tip 3: Find your focus

- **Ask yourself:**
  - what’s the point of this page?
  - what are users supposed to do?
  - why should users care?

- **Arrange information into chunks**
  - paragraph chunks: 2 to 3 lines max

- **Revise chunks that are distracting**
  - who the heck is Merilee?
We love pie!

Home-baked pies for every occasion: only the freshest fruits, vegetable shortening and no trans-fats, delicious in every bite.

Thank you, Merilee, for all your help in making my daughter’s birthday party a success. Her allergies make it difficult to find safe choices for her. You made it so easy! Everyone loved the gluten-free Apple Crumb pie, and of course, the Chess Pie.

—SHARON LEROY

Mother’s Day

Don’t wait to reserve your Mother’s Day pie, complete with “Mom” on the crust!

Menu

Eat more pie!

Order now!
Tip 4: Make a list

- **Convert text to bullet points**
  — or numbered lists, if sequence matters

- **Identify any missing list items**
  — add new material, if necessary

- **Revise text to match new format**
  — think like a *Buzzfeed* listicle
We love pie!

- Homemade pies for all occasions
- Fresh fruit—always
- Flaky crusts—no trans fat, no lard
- Whole pies or by the slice
- Order online—why wait in line?

Mother's Day

Don't wait to reserve your Mother's Day pie, complete with "Mom" on the crust!

Order now!

Menu

Eat more pie!
Merilee Wilbur
"Sometimes great things come from humble beginnings. For Merilee Wilbur, that beginning came in the form of a request from her 8-year-old son, Jake, who needed a snack to take to his chess club meeting. Merilee flipped through her recipe box and pulled out her grandmother's recipe for Chess Pie. Perfect!

"The pie was such a hit with the kids - and their coach - that Merilee started getting requests to bake pies for other occasions: school events, birthdays, even a Pi Day celebration at the local library. Pie in the Sky Bakery was born.

"She got so many orders that her fledgling business soon outgrew her family's kitchen. In 2006, she rented her current location at 34 Main Street, where she and her team of bakers have served up fresh, delicious pies ever since."
Tip 5: Get specific

- Add relevant details—cut generalities
  —sweeping statements = blah-blah-blah

- Fight marketing clichés
  —Sometimes great things come from humble...

- Sound like a real person, not a brochure
  —make people active participants in their stories
  —identify mismatches in style, wording, images
About

Merilee Wilbur loves pie. She got her first rolling pin at age four. By the time she was seven, Merilee stood waist-high with Grandma Jean in the kitchen, making her own pumpkin pie for Thanksgiving.

She made sure everyone knew it was hers.

At 26, she baked a Chess Pie—Grandma’s recipe—for her son’s chess club. The coach and kids dubbed her the “pie queen.” Other parents clamored for “pie queen” originals, paying up to $20 a pie.

In 2006, Merilee left her kitchen, renting the bakery location at 34 Main Street. She hired her first employee in 2007—they came up with the “Pie in the Sky” name together—and now she has a team of ten bakers.

Her latest rolling pin? Marble. When it comes to pie, Merilee doesn’t mess around.
About

Ten Reasons to Eat Our Pies

1. Merilee Wilbur got her own rolling pin at age four.

2. At seven, she baked a pumpkin pie by herself for Thanksgiving—and made sure everyone knew it was hers.

3. At 26, Merilee baked a Chess Pie for her son's chess club. The coach and kids dubbed Mrs. Wilbur the “pie queen.”

4. By 27, she was baking pies for other parents, charging $20 a pie.

5. Those pies were worth it.

6. In 2006, Merilee left her kitchen, renting the Main Street bakery.

7. In 2007, she hired Sandra Leto, her first employee. They came up with the “Pie in the Sky” name after baking 20 pies in one night.

8. That's a lot of pies and a long night.

9. Today, Merilee has a team of ten bakers, including Sandra. Pie in the Sky sells up to 250 pies a day—not to mention all those slices.

10. Her latest rolling pin? Marble. When it comes to pie, Merilee Wilbur doesn’t mess around.

Merilee Wilbur

I grew up hearing I was an amazing baker. Everyone loves pie, so that part came easy. But pie-making as a career? I had to figure that one out myself.
Tip 6: Adjust the visuals

- Use images to enhance the meaning
  —don’t get hung up on visual consistency

- Consider other design elements
  —try blockquotes, accordion tabs, timelines

- Include people, whenever possible
  —humans love to watch other humans
We love pie!

- Homemade pies for all occasions
- Fresh fruit—always
- Flaky crusts—no trans fat, no lard
- Whole pies or by the slice
- Order online—why wait in line?

Menu

Enjoy pie and coffee at our cafe on Main Street.

Mother's Day

Don't wait to reserve your Mother's Day pie.

Order now!
Tip 7: Use your words—wisely

- Take text seriously
  —words convey meaning, action, desire (really!)

- Focus on the forest, not the trees
  —get rid of whole branches, not just word “leaves”

- Revise—and push content writers to revise
  —establish a “no first drafts” rule

A clear explanation is worth a thousand jogs
“Even to a writer who is being intentionally obscure or wild of tongue we can say, ‘Be obscure clearly! Be wild of tongue in a way we can understand!’”

—Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*
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Where to get these slides:
www.slideshare.net/jen4web
Resources

- *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White (Longman, 2000, 4th edition)
- “How Users Read on the Web” by Jakob Nielsen (Nielsen Norman Group, 1997)
- “F-Shaped Pattern of Reading on the Web” by Kara Pernice (Nielsen Norman Group, 2017)
- “Inverted Pyramid: Writing for Comprehension” by Amy Schade (Nielsen Norman Group, 2018)
- *Don’t Make Me Think!* by Steve Krug (2014, 3rd edition)
- “Readability: The Optimal Line Length” (Baymard Institute, 2010)
- *How to Write Short* by Roy Peter Clark (Little, Brown, 2013)
- Hemingway App: desktop help with copy-editing