
UNIT 32 WRITING FOR THE WORLD WIDE WEB

Structure

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32.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will allow you to:

- understand the Internet as a medium of communication,
- identify the main elements of the World Wide Web,
- understand how writing for the Web differs from writing for print media, and
- learn how to create simple content for the Web.

32.1 INTRODUCTION

We now know how the computer can help us communicate with people around the globe and those not as far away, and how networking has made a difference to the ease and speed of such communication in both professional and personal spheres. In this chapter we will go on to talk about one aspect of computer networking—the World Wide Web, or the Internet. Creating content for the Internet is an increasingly important activity, as more and more people look to this medium as their main source of information and entertainment. This unit introduces you to the process and principles of writing for the Web.

32.2 THE WORLD WIDE WEB: WHAT IS IT?

We live in a world where communication happens in many different ways, across multiple channels and in many forms. Our relationships are held together by speech, writing on paper, images on screens transmitted by satellite links, words in text

messages on cell phones and emails, as well as face-to-face conversation. But perhaps the biggest transformation in our communication landscape has come from the development and spread of the Internet—or what we now know as the World Wide Web.

The Internet, which was first developed in 1982, is a “mega” network of computer networks spread across the world. Originally used mainly for information sharing between research institutions, the Internet gradually became a popular medium for communication, first among universities, then spreading to the information technology corporates before hitting the general public in the mid-1990s. Since then it has grown rapidly, and current estimates are that nearly 1.8 billion people use the Internet for some form of communication and research (www.internetstats.com). In India, perhaps similar to the rest of the world, more than 60 percent of users are below the age of 30, and about 25 percent are below 21 (www.sify.com).

The World Wide Web is the part of the Internet that is visible to us—it provides the ‘face’ of this network and links the thousands of information sources contained on the computers that form the network. It is organized in a way that can be accessed easily by users. It provides the interface between the physical network of wires and satellite and microwave links and servers and the information contained within, and the user. Now, however, we tend to use the terms ‘Internet’, ‘Web’, ‘Net’ and ‘Cyberspace’ more or less interchangeably to mean the online space that we access to find information, communicate with friends and colleagues, or be entertained through multimedia content.

While we do not need to know much about the technical details that make the Web possible, it does help to understand how information is organized in this medium, so that as writers we can create material that best utilizes its capabilities.

Activity

Observe and discuss: What are the different kinds of ‘sites’ that one finds on the Web? How is your reading experience different on the Web as compared to other texts such as books, newspapers, or magazines? Which do you prefer and why?

32.3 THE WEB AS A MEDIUM

One of the things that makes the Web different is the fact that it is not just text we are dealing with; it brings together text, sound and images and in a way that allows us to switch from one to the other easily. This is why the Web is called a ‘**convergent**’ medium, because it brings together the characteristics of other media—print and audiovisual—onto a single platform. We therefore refer to people who make use of the Web as “users” rather than “readers” because they not only read text, but view pictures and listen to sound on this medium. This makes the reading or “using” experience quite different from say, reading a newspaper, or a magazine.

Readers can also move through a web text in different directions, accessing information in “layers” of detail according to need and convenience. What does this mean for a writer? It means that the structure of the writing must take into account how a Web user approaches a piece of writing. If, like most media writers, your

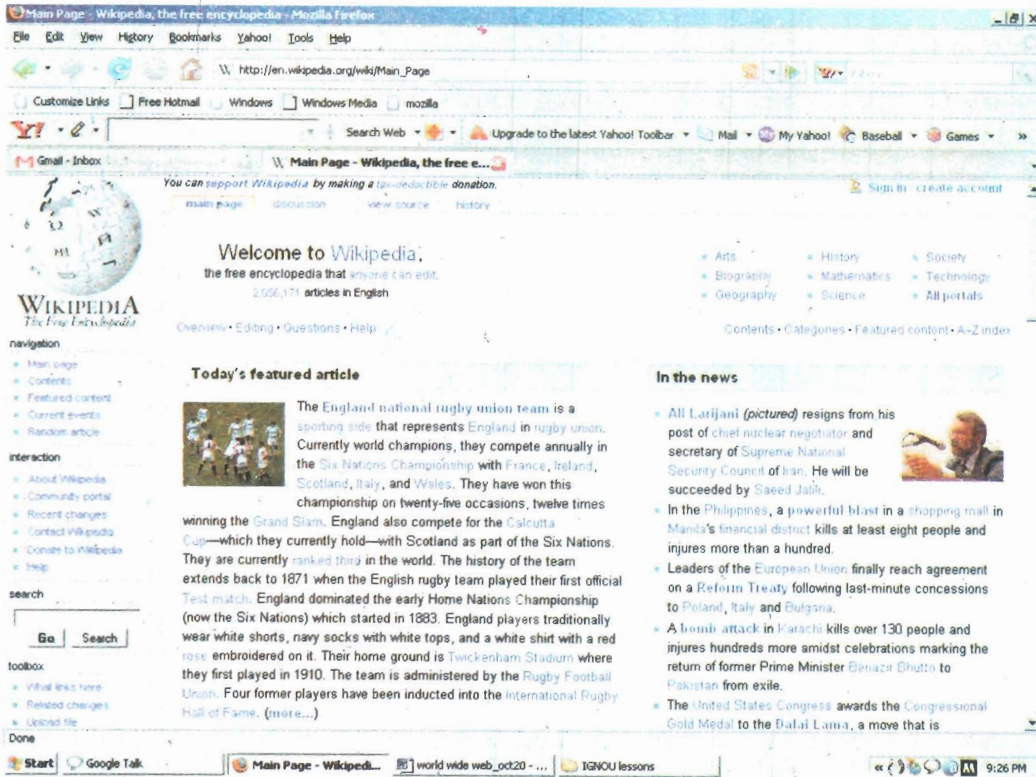
intention is to keep the reader on your page, then the page must be written and presented in a way that keeps the reader interested enough to not switch to another site.

The writer must also consider the potential of the medium and make full use of it. So while in a printed text, one can illustrate ideas or enhance them with pictures and graphics, on the Web, you can use not only illustrative graphics, you can also animate them, you can plug in video and sound, and link to other resources that will help you explain your subject better.

However, this convergence also can be a bit distracting. A person who is reading something on the computer screen, on the Web, can have at any moment several windows open, engaging in a different kind of interaction in each. He or she could be simultaneously reading the online version of a daily newspaper, searching for information on a certain topic using a search engine like Google, listening to music from a digital radio channel or from a CD, and chatting with a friend on an instant messaging service, all while working on a document using the computer's word processor. The text on your web site competes with all these things for attention, all of which are available on the same physical interface, all instantly accessible to the user. Attention spans therefore, are considerably reduced. So the writer must be able to package information into small, easily digestible units.

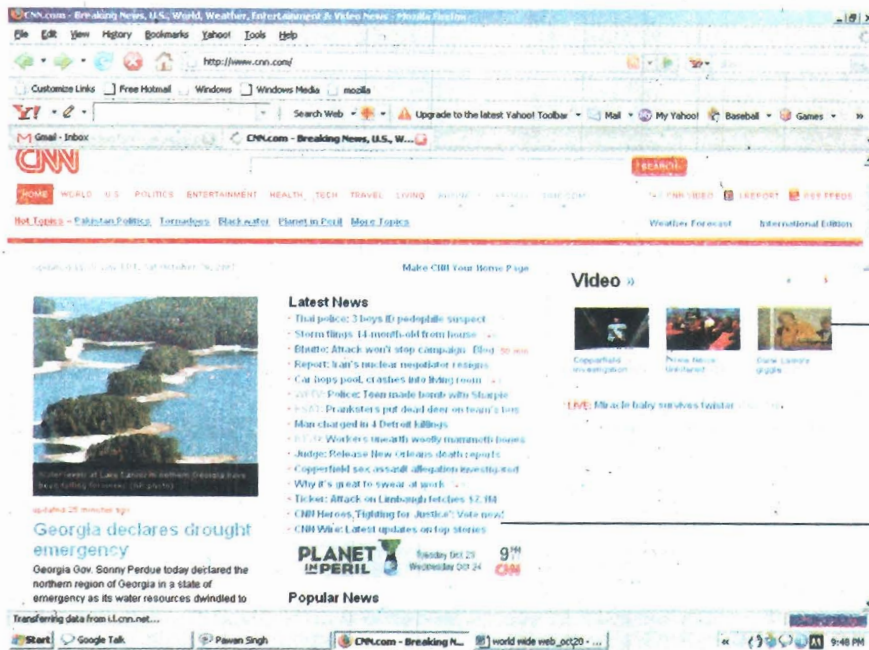
Another major distinguishing feature of the Internet is its **non-linearity**. This means that a text can be constructed in small units that do not necessarily flow in a sequential order, and which may link to other short units in related but separate subject heads. The same property which allows a user to go from text to image to sound also allows the user to go from an article on sports in India to a related piece on cricket, to another on politics and funding in performance sports, or yet another on the history of women's cricket, all beginning with the same set of key words. This movement can happen either because a search engine such as Google will throw up a variety of related articles or because articles are linked to each other and to extended bits of text (called **hypertext**). You may have noticed certain highlighted terms in a Web document that show up as "links" when your cursor moves over them. Each of these highlighted terms leads to an article that expands the term or explains it further or leads to related information—these are **hyperlinks**.

Take a look at these two web sites and see how the links to inner pages and to additional resources are placed. Most items in blue are meant to be hyperlinks, and will lead you to further information. The CNN site in addition has video links as well.



Links to other pages

Hyperlink



Video links

Links to full stories in text

Activity:
Go to a company web site or to a portal such as yahoo.com or rediff.com. Can you identify the hyperlinks? Do you come across any hypertext that pops up as your mouse goes over the words?

And what does this mean for the writer? It means that texts are not planned as single long units, but as blocks of related sub-texts that can be linked in a variety

of ways depending on how people might wish to access the information in them. This again means that writers generally create short pieces of text that can function as independent units or can be linked together to form a longer unit.

Of course, there are spaces on the Web that allow for more lengthy, detailed documents, and there are users who require these, but by and large, writing for the Web must keep in mind the characteristics of the medium and the needs and usage patterns of the majority of readers.

Activity

Look at the front page of a newspaper and the home page of the electronic version of the same paper. How are the two 'fronts' organized? What are the major differences in organization and in structure? Is the language any different? How does the 'look' of the page differ and does this influence readability in any way?

The web page of The Hindu, a daily newspaper, has a listing of the main sections on the left and a panel with short introductions to the main stories, indicating that there is more if readers want to read further. If you visit the site (www.thehindu.com) you will see that there is a ticker running below the main story much like the ones on television, giving the breaking news. Below the main story is a listing of other major stories in the issue, which readers can click on if interested.



✓ Check Your Progress 1

1. The _____ or the _____ is perhaps one of the major developments that has influenced how we access information and communicate with each other.
2. The Internet is a network of _____.

3. The first use of the Internet was in _____ for information sharing among researchers.
4. The _____ is the part of the Internet that is visible to us.
5. The bringing together of text, images, video and sound is known as _____.
6. _____ is a major characteristic of the Internet, which allows people to move in several different directions through a document.
7. Texts are planned as _____ of _____ linked in several ways.
8. Words that “pop up” as your cursor moves over text on the screen are called _____.

32.4 CREATING CONTENT FOR THE WEB

While writing for the Web is, in essence, no different from any other good writing, there are a few things to keep in mind while structuring the information for the Web user. The characteristics of the medium—convergence, non-linearity, and hypertextuality—influence the way people read, and therefore the way writers put together material.

32.4.1 Elements of the Web

First, it is important to understand the components of the Web. A few of the structural elements that make up the World Wide Web are listed below.

A **web browser** is an interface tool that allows you to see and read content from the Internet. It is a user friendly device that converts code into text and images in a way that makes it possible for us to read, listen or see material. Commonly used browsers are Internet Explorer, Netscape and Mozilla Firefox.

A **web page** is a discrete unit of content, usually limited to one screen or a little more. A web page has a specific address—a ‘url’ (uniform resource locator) that is assigned to it and that makes referencing easy.

A **web site** is normally made up of several pages of related content that are linked together.

A **home page** or **landing page** is the main introductory page of any site. It usually contains information that tells users what the site is about and links to the various parts of the site. It is somewhat like a combination of a magazine cover and its contents page.

A **portal** is a web page that leads to several other sites or information sources tied together by a theme or common structure. The term portal signifies that these pages are like ‘gateways’ to collections of information. The portal of rediff.com, for instance, does not have any introductory text, but simply links to other parts of the site and to stories of the day.

A **‘window’** is a frame that is open on your computer screen, usually corresponding to a location on the Web or a document from your computer.

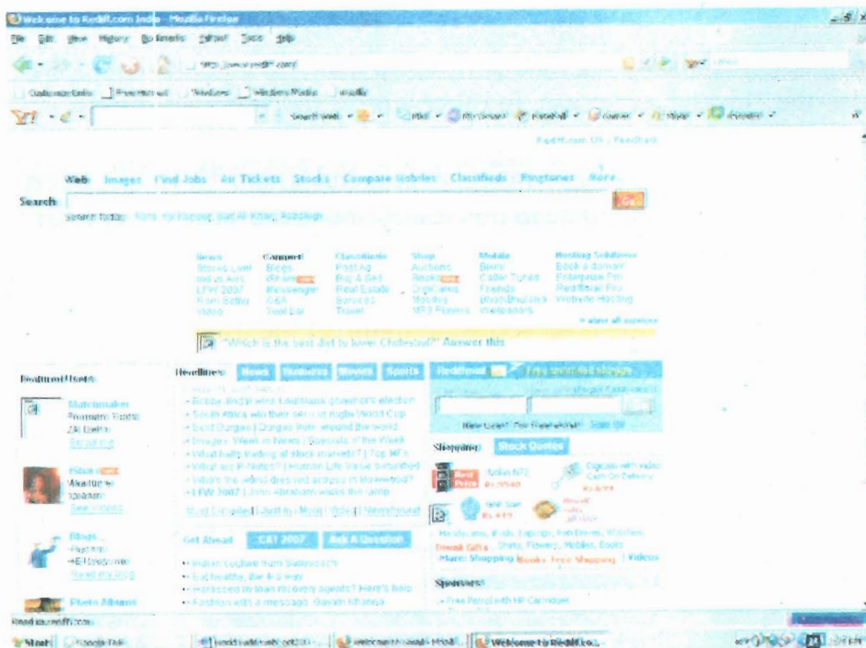
“**URL**” is **uniform resource locator**, an ‘address’ on the Internet that identifies the location of a document. The URL helps us access material on the Internet. It



usually appears as a string of letters and numbers following the term `http://www.` in the address box of your browser. In the web site above, for instance, the address of the rediff site is given in the search bar at the top.

Hypertext is information linked to a word, image or phrase that appears as a pop-up box inside the page you are viewing. Sometimes this appears even as you move your mouse over (known as a 'mouse over' effect) the highlighted term, or it may appear only when you click on it.

A **hyperlink** is a link to another page or a document related to the one you are currently viewing. When you link on a highlighted term or an image, the browser takes you to this other document, or other 'location' on the Web. Hyperlinks represent a method of cross-referencing that allows you to easily access related content on the Web.



Activity

Spend some time browsing the Web and see if you can identify these various elements. Write down the urls of some web sites that you like to visit often. Can you see how the home page differs from the “inside” pages of a site?

So when you create content for the Web, you must think not only of what information is going into the document, but how it is to be organized and linked with other information.

Check Your Progress 2

9. The main characteristics of the Web as a medium are _____ and _____.
10. A _____ allows you to see and read content from the Internet.
11. A discrete unit of content usually limited to one screen or a little more is called a _____.
12. The introductory page of any web site is called the _____ or _____.
13. A page that leads to several other sites or units of information is called a _____.
14. URL stands for _____.
15. _____ on a web page are devices that allow you to move from one page or document to another and represent a form of cross-referencing.

32.4.2 Building a Site Map

The first step in creating material for a web site is to build what is called a site map. This is an outline of all the elements that will go into the site, sort of like a list of chapters in a book.

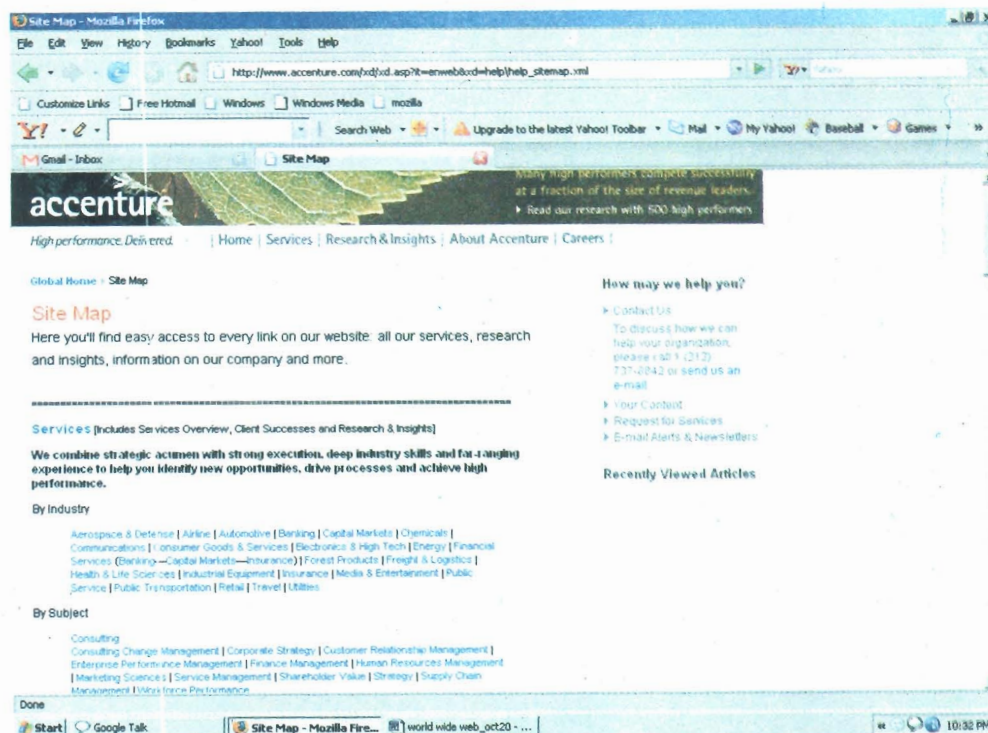
The site map not only shows the listing of topics that will be included in the site, but also the “levels” of access. In other words, the site map shows which will be primary links direct from the home page, and which pages will be linked through the secondary or inside pages, and so on. The main effort in creating content for the web lies in this stage—once the structure is clear and makes sense, then filling in the details.

At this stage you must decide how you want to direct the user through your site, and also how most people might ‘navigate’ or make their way through the site. Your decision on how to build the site map may take into account the following—

- What information are most people likely to want?
- What information does the organization want people to have at first glance?
- What is needed to show people at first glance what this site is about?

- What kinds of information can be put together?
- What level of detail is required in each part of the site?

The following image is a part of the site map of Accenture, a business consulting firm with varied operations. You can view the complete site map at www.accenture.com



In the site map above, you can see that the creators have taken trouble to organize the information in a logical fashion, to help users who might need specific kinds of information arranged in a certain way, with related “chunks” of information linked clearly.

Someone who wishes to hire the company’s services would be interested either in the kinds of industries it serves, or the kind of products/subject areas it has expertise in. Other heads you will find on the map, if you scroll down further under the “Services” heading, include “by role” and “by research organization”. This is followed by other major sections and sub-sections. Some of the sub-sections may be listed under more than one major heading (such as “Locations”) for ease of navigation.

32.4.3 Writing in Screen-sized Chunks

Once you have built a site map, the next step is to fill in the outline. Each section of the site map will have a specific **url**, which means that a user may come directly to that page if his or her search has used keywords present in the section. This means that the writer must include enough context that allows the reader to understand how this page relates to the rest of the content on the site. At the same time, this section of the site must make sense to a reader without having to go back to the first page, or the home page.

Basically, writing for the web is like packaging information into small, related chunks which fit with each other—people can then take the chunk they want and go into more detail if they wish. But each chunk should make sense in itself. This is why

it is important to have a good, logically organized site map that can direct the way you write up the content.

Ideally, each section should be no more than a screen in length—this is about 250 to 300 words. If more detail is required, then encourage the interested reader to go to one more level in the site rather than burdening all readers with too much information. Suppose you were writing an article on career options in the broad field of communications. If you were writing this article for the education supplement of a newspaper, you would perhaps plan a 500 word article that began with a general overview of what the study and practice of communications is all about, and then lead into specializations and sub-specializations, and what sorts of career opportunities exist in each of these, ending with a summary of future directions in the field.

If you were to convert the same topic for use on a web site, you would first section the whole article into meaningful units, then write the units in a way that they can make sense independently. This would mean a small amount of repetition in terms of setting the context and providing a sense of linkage with the other links. The introduction would necessarily have to include a mention of the other sections so that they can be hyperlinked either directly through the text or listed as links on the side or at the bottom/top of the screen. The outline may look something like this:

Career Options in Communications
Overview of the field
The study of human communication
Interpersonal communication
Mass communication
Advertising
Public relations
Journalism
Print journalism
Electronic journalism
Communication for social change
Film studies
Audio-visual production
New media and their applications
Media convergence and its impact on the job market
Profiles
Future outlook
Frequently asked questions

When you expand this site map, the first section may read something like this, with the terms in **blue** linking to **inside pages**:

Careers in communications
Communications is a broad and diverse field of study and practice. It ranges from the study of interactions between two or more people in various settings, to information and entertainment targeted at large groups. It includes commercial applications such as advertising and public relations , as well as public service or public interest applications like journalism and communication for social change . It occurs over a variety of media, from print to electronic (radio and television) to new technology (the Internet)....

Of course, there are sites that offer lengthy content under a single link, for instance, stories in online newspapers and magazines. These too tend to have short (one or two line) descriptions on the home page of the publication, with the word “more” at the end for users to click on in case they wish to read further. These lengthier links assume that only interested or dedicated readers would read on further and therefore would not mind scrolling down the screen to read the whole article.

Activity

Take a long feature from a newspaper or magazine and see how you can rewrite it for a web site by breaking it up into sections. Then go to a web site and see how a long piece of text has been cut into screen-sized segments. Try to reconstruct the outline based on the structure of the units. Can you comment on the logic of the structure and how it reflects a web user's preferences?

32.4.4 Hyperlinks and Pop-up Windows

As you create content for a web site, you must keep in mind that it is not necessary to elaborate on every little detail. Details that are not important for all readers can be packaged into short notes that can appear as pop up windows or linked as hypertext. This allows you to write spare, skeletal text that addresses the general reader who can go to the next level or click on these hyperlinks if he or she requires more detail.

What this means for you as a writer is that you have to think about your text at different levels of complexity. At the first level is the most basic information. The next level can elaborate on this basic information, or go into different aspects of the topic, and different levels of detail can be accommodated through hyperlinks and pop up boxes.

Activity

Look through a reference book such as an illustrated encyclopedia or a user manual. You will probably notice several boxed items and illustrations that go with each chapter or block of text. How would you recreate this text for the web? Which items would go into pop up windows or be packaged into hypertext?

32.5 WRITING FOR BROWSERS

Most web users don't really read every word on a page. They browse cyberspace looking for things of interest; they scan text and focus on small parts of it that interests them. So writing for this kind of a user is a bit different from writing for a reader of printed matter. Here are some things to keep in mind as you create content for the Web.

Make it scannable

The text should use key words so that someone who is quickly going through it will be able to pick up on what the main theme or topic is. Think about how users might search for this kind of information. What are the key words they are likely to search by? Who is your article or web site aimed at and what are their key interests? Because information on the Web co-exists with so much material, it is often difficult to get people to stop and look at your material—unless it is clearly marked out by common key words that most people interested in the topic would use. Another device that makes text easily scannable is good sub-headings and bulleted lists. Such highlighting pulls the eye toward the information and makes it instantly understandable.

Make good use of hyperlinks

As mentioned in the previous section, the nature of the medium allows you to package information in small clusters and not clutter up the main text with too much

detail. Use the hyperlinks function to provide detail that not all readers would be interested in, but which is important to include nonetheless.

Provide sufficient context

Remember that web users can reach any part of a web site directly without going through the home page which might have all the introductory material. So you should make sure that each page has enough context to tell the reader where they are and how this information makes sense.

Know your potential audience

Like all good writing, web writing must keep in mind the average reader; this can be difficult because the Web is an international medium, its users may be anywhere on the globe. If your web site is not targeted at any particular geographically situated community, then you can take time to ensure that it addresses the needs of a global audience. The information must be as widely applicable as possible, and understood by people from everywhere.

In summary, writing for the Web does not require any specific skills that are different from any other form of writing. It takes good organizational skills, the ability to structure information in a logical and efficient manner, and clarity of expression. Perhaps there is more emphasis on structure and conciseness than in other media, because of the nature of this medium.

32.6 TO SUM UP

- The World Wide Web is an increasingly important medium of information and entertainment.
- The World Wide Web is the document delivery system that resides on the Internet, which is a global network of computers.
- The Web is a convergent medium, which brings together text, sound and images.
- Users can access information in layers of detail, according to how a web site is organized.
- The Web is a non-linear medium, which means that readers can move back and forth and to different sites to access information, all very quickly.
- Web content takes the form of short blocks of text linked together
- Hypertextuality is a feature of the web that allows related content to be linked together and for users to navigate between different bodies of related material.
- The first and most important stage of created material for a web site is to build a site map, which is like a detailed outline.
- The site map is filled in with short chunks of information, usually no more than one screen in length.
- Each screen of information should contain key words to make it searchable and scannable.
- Use graphic devices like bulleted lists and sub-headings to help a reader scan the text efficiently.

32.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Internet; world wide web
2. computers
3. universities
4. World Wide Web
5. convergence
6. Non-linearity
7. blocks; sub-texts
8. hypertext
9. convergence, non-linearity and hypertextuality
10. web browser
11. web page
12. home page or landing page
13. portal
14. uniform resource locator
15. hyperlinks