
UNIT 35 LANGUAGE SKILLS FOR WEB CONTENT WRITING

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35.0 OBJECTIVES

- to show how skills in every area of language – listening, speaking, reading and writing – are required for content writers,
- to show how playing with the language allows the development of flexibility and awareness of language use, and
- to discuss some features of good writing for the web.

35.1 INTRODUCTION

Content writers for the web may generate their own material, or they may put together material from various sources. In either case, a good command over English is essential. Another skill that web writers need to have is that of reading fast and quickly assimilating what they read, so that they can provide the updates and the content at the required rate.

It is also noteworthy that you need not just good writing skills, but also good listening skills (for example, if your job involves transcription, or the writing down of speech). Translation skills are always an asset. Old fashioned skills like the ability to take dictation, and the ability to write a précis of a passage, turn out to be quite useful to train yourself for web writing. In addition, proof reading and editing skills come in handy.

In other words, you need an overall facility with the language if you aspire to be a content writer for the web.

35.2 WRITING CONTENT FOR THE WEB

Web content writing can be classified into

- News
- Lifestyle features
- Technical writing
- Medical and legal matters, and transcription

We have already discussed writing for newspapers for reporting news, or for feature writing. Technical writers write user manuals for computer applications. They may also write training material, and business reports or articles. They work with engineers to do reports and proposals, write instructions for equipment operation or manufacture, and do translation where necessary.

Medical transcription is outsourced because doctors in the USA do not have time to document their case reports. They may simply dictate the report into a machine or into a computer that stores the voice in a digital form. When the medical transcriptionist receives the file, (s)he plays it back and types the matter into the computer. These data are read, proofread and edited before they are sent back.

Legal transcription involves the ability to access relevant material from readily available sources such as legal databases. Lawyers have to have a full range of background information about cases similar to the one they are currently handling, in order to prepare their case well. The juniors who assist the senior counsel must have the ability to

- access a database by keywords or phrases,
- build up a new database indexed by such keywords or phrases, and
- keep track of new documents so that they can be integrated into the database.

35.3 SOME FEATURES OF CONTENT WRITING

Some of the desirable features of content writing mentioned most often are:

- A conversational style
- Avoiding a 'flowery' style and the excessive use of 'fancy' words
- A crisp and precise style

The need for precision and succinctness is emphasized because of a finding that reading from a computer screen may be 25% slower than reading words on paper. That is, it is more of a strain to the eyes to read from a computer monitor. This encourages readers to skim through the screen rather than read every word on it with their full attention. Add to this the presence of buttons for other sites, and animated advertisements, and you realize how difficult it becomes to hold the reader's attention on the web (as we have already pointed out in earlier units).

35.3.1 A Conversational Style

We have mentioned in an earlier unit ('Listening to spoken English') that conversational English often uses two small words – a verb and a preposition or adverb, referred to as a 'phrasal verb' – where a more formal style uses a larger, more learned

word. When we speak we say 'find out' instead of 'discover', 'live in' instead of 'reside', and so on. Learners of English often know the longer, more formal words, but do not know the equivalent phrasal verbs.

One way of developing a facility with an informal variety of the language is to play with the language, the way children do. In this unit we shall present you with a variety of language games which will serve to exercise your language ability.

√ **Check Your Progress 1**

1. Match these words with phrasal verbs that are equivalent in meaning.

postpone knock down

escape go up

increase put off

demolish get away

explode blow up

2. These jokes are actually puns. They pun on the literal meaning of a verb and preposition, and the meaning of the phrasal verb. Can you decode the pun?

i. A: I have trouble falling asleep.

B: Go to the edge of the bed and you'll soon drop off.

Drop off: _____

ii. Magician: I can turn this handkerchief into a pigeon!

Schoolboy: So what? I can walk down the street and turn into a shop!

Turn into: _____

iii. Bride-to-be: "I just came to know that my fiancé has a wooden leg. Should I break it off?"

Break off: _____

iv. Man to psychiatrist: "I keep thinking I'm a bridge."

Psychiatrist: "What's come over you, man?"

Man: "Four cars, two lorries and five buses."

Come over you: _____

v. Q: What's the first thing to take when you're run down?

A: The number of the car.

Run down: _____

vi. A: Why do they put the telephone wires so high?

B: Because they want to keep up the conversation.

Keep up: _____

vii. Did you hear about the man who stayed up all night trying to work out what happened to the sun when it went down? It finally dawned on him.

Dawn on: _____

viii. My friend Suma has got engaged to an X-ray technician. I wonder what he sees in her.

See (something) in: _____

ix. Q: What did the audience do when the lights went out?

A: They turned on the organizers.

Turn on: _____

x. Q: When is a car not a car?

A: When it turns into a garage.

Turn into: _____

xi. Son: When I grow up, I'm going to be an engine driver.

Father : Well, I won't stand in your way.

Stand in someone's way: _____

xii. A: We bumped into some old friends recently.

B: Why? Was it too dark to see them?

Bump into (someone): _____

Do you know these phrasal verbs? Look them up in a dictionary to check their meaning.

break down	turn down	put up	bring up	put off
break off	put on	turn on	turn over	take after
take in	look after	come over	drop in	run into

35.3.2 Avoiding a 'Flowery' Style and the Excessive Use of 'Fancy' Words

One might argue that style is a personal or cultural trait. It may be true that language style is personal and cultural, just as preferences in dress or food are. There may be nothing right or wrong about a particular style of language, food or clothing.

Yet it is true that in Western cultures, a less flowery style of language is preferred than is commonly seen in our country. Compare the following phrases:

We are pleased to invite you to ...

We solicit your gracious presence at ...

Which of these seems more polite to you? Which would you be likely to see in an invitation in our country?

Our experience is that people in India prefer the second expression, which most current users of English find too flowery, and so a little amusing, if not slightly insincere. Why or in what sense is your presence gracious? The speaker seems to be exaggerating your importance. It is true that for very important people, a slightly "elevated" sort of language seems appropriate. Royalty, for example, can be referred to as gracious. Similarly, the fact that a royal personage, or someone of comparable importance like a senior minister, found time to come to a function you organized is indeed "a privilege and an honour" that they confer on you. But ordinary people living ordinary lives do not need to be unduly praised, nor do they need to unduly praise others, or themselves.

Some flowery expressions are just relics of an earlier era. An adult student once asked the teacher: "Shall we pen down our thoughts?" He meant, simply, "Do you want us to write down what we think about this"? Similarly, we do not now refer to our home as "our humble abode". If someone does not merely "say" something, but "opines that ...," the reporter's language strikes us as belonging to the Victorian era.

Perhaps you are afraid that a style which is not flowery will sound rude or abrupt. It need not, if you are sincere in what you say. A simple "Do come!" or "Please come", or "We would be very happy if you could join us", can sound every bit as gracious as the more flowery expression quoted above. Similarly, an expression of thanks that puts some thought and content into what precisely why to wish to thank someone, will sound more convincing than mere fulsome praise. Flowery language and fancy words are often used to disguise a lack of meaningful thought content. This is very apparent in the way we describe or praise a person. It takes some effort to think why precisely a person deserves praise. In what way is their work or their actions deserving of mention? It is much easier to put together a lot of empty words, and describe the work as "fabulous" or "wonderful", and the person as "scintillating" or "magnetic". But in the end, the words remain empty, if there is no convincing reason why they were used. As they say in my language as well as in English, empty vessels make the most noise.

Many flowery expressions are clichés: functions are "glittering functions", performances are "fabulous", apartment blocks are called "towers" or "residencies". Some flowery expressions are malapropisms, or the wrong use of words. We often read in the newspapers that someone "quipped" instead of "said" something – but if they have not made some clever remark, this is not the right word to use. The word "malapropism" comes from a character in an 18th century play called *The Rivals*, by an English dramatist called Sheridan. Mrs. Malaprop likes to sound important, but she is not well-educated, so she uses big words which don't mean what she thinks they mean. The result is comic. One such example is her saying "a nice derangement of epitaphs" when she means "a nice arrangement of epithets". Can you see the humour in this example? An epithet is a descriptive word, like an adjective; an epitaph is what you say or write about a person who has died – it often refers to a short inscription on a gravestone. And derangement is madness, quite different from an arrangement. So Mrs. Malaprop's words are often inappropriate, which explains why she has this name. (She refers to a person as 'the very pineapple of politeness', when she means 'the very pinnacle of politeness'.)

How do you avoid malapropisms? By making it a habit to consult a dictionary (in general, this is a habit of being careful with your language), and by reading only the best writers (rather than people who write no better than you do yourself).

35.3.3 A Crisp and Precise Style

Simple reading, or simple viewing, is hard writing. The greatest compliment a writer or scriptwriter can get is for us to think that the message was so obvious that it was very easy to say or write!

Simplifying starts with choosing the right words – the shortest and the commonest words that suit the purpose. The web is not for the specialist, but for everyone. One of the challenges is to put technical or scientific content into words that every literate person can understand if (s)he is interested enough to read about that topic. Look at this phrase, which might occur in a book about rockets:

‘the trajectory of the missile through the atmosphere’

In writing for the general reader, and especially if it is a voice over for a visual, you might want to substitute each of the words trajectory (=path), missile, and atmosphere. and write

the curve of the rocket through the air.

If you are writing about a concept the audience is not familiar with, use the simplest words and diagrams possible until the concept is clear. You can later lead the audience back into the context of the subject. Big words can make the reader or listener feel intimidated, that is, frightened!

35.3.3.1 An Exercise on Nouns

In his book Living Communication, Abne M. Eisenberg describes an experiment he conducted in one of his classes, “to test the fear-producing potential of words”. He says:

“It was a week into the semester and the subject was anatomy and physiology of the nervous system. Not only was it a compulsory course (which never fails to precipitate anxiety), it also involved an extensive use of anatomical terminology. To say the very least, the students were petrified.”

Eisenberg thought that “a student could understand a lecture better if it were free from highly technical language.” In order to test this premise, he arranged with the subject instructor for two separate lectures were given on the same topic.

“In lecture 1, while pointing to various anatomical drawings of the central nervous system on the blackboard, the instructor substituted the word “thing” for each technical word. For instance, while he pointed to the encephalon (the brain), he referred to it simply as “this thing”.

After completing lecture 1, he delivered lecture 2 in which the correct terminology was used”.

The passage below gives us some idea of how each lecture sounded: To read it meaningfully, remember that the word in brackets occurs in lecture two. In lecture one, it has been substituted by the word “thing”.

ANATOMY OF A THING

This THING (a neuron) is the functional unit of the nervous system. At one end, there is this THING (a cyton) from which this THING (an axon) projects to end in these tiny little THINGS (terminal arborizations). In your body there are millions of these THINGS (neurons), which connect with each other via these THINGS (synapses).

What was the students' reaction to the two lectures? Eisenberg told us: "... they seemed to feel that leaving out the highly technical anatomical language in the first lecture enabled them to grasp the relationships more easily. Then when the technical language was inserted, it was noticeably less disturbing."

✓ Check Your Progress 2

3. Given below are two more paragraphs from Lecture 2, which include all the technical terms. Try to identify the terms that can be meaningfully substituted by the word THING. Use the words "this THING", or "these THINGS", as appropriate. Then compare your answer with the answer given at the end of this unit.

"Your central nervous system consists of the encephalon contained within the cranium and from it passes the medulla spinalis. Looking like a long cable, it extends downwards through the vertebral column to your tailbone. At succeeding levels, you will notice spinal nerves leaving the medulla spinalis sideways to provide your viscera with a nerve supply.

Partially contained within the encephalon and the medulla spinalis is another system consisting of the parasympathetic and sympathetic divisions of the automatic nervous system which automatically regulates bodily functions. The craniosacral division is so named because part of it derives from the brainstem and the other part from the sacrum."

35.3.3.2 Making Verbs and Sentences Simple

Good sentence construction is all about keeping the relationships clear: about who did something, what they did, and to whom they did it. We saw above that if we can find out what "things" there are in a sentence, it helps us to understand it. We could try a similar exercise where we leave out all the doing words (the verbs) and simply say "DO" or "DID". This may not always be a straightforward matter, because as sentences get more complex or compact, the actions appear in the form of nouns and adjectives.

Take for example the sentence:

The doctor lamented the government's decision to dismiss the striking workers and close down the hospital.

How many actions are there in this sentence?

First, there's an action of "lamenting", or expressing sadness about something, or complaining about it. This "action" – an "act of speech" – is performed by a doctor.

What is the doctor complaining about? (S)he's complaining about some actions that others have done. What are these actions, and who has done them?

The government has done the following things. It has taken a decision, or rather, two decisions. The decisions are: to dismiss the striking workers, and to close down the hospital.

What have the workers done? They have gone on a strike.

So a lot of information is packed into a sentence that is not very long, and this information has to be unpacked for the sentence to be understood. If we had written the following sentences instead, the writing would have appeared childish, or would have appeared to be appropriate in an informal conversation:

The workers went on strike, so the government decided to dismiss them and close down the hospital, but the doctor is unhappy about this ...

These sentences are actually good for a first draft of our writing. We can then make sure that all our thoughts are logically expressed. We then have to find ways of putting these thoughts together into a more compact style. This is why we began by saying that simple reading is hard writing. If we write each thought down as it occurs to us, our writing sounds childish and silly. In the attempt to pack our sentences with meaning, though, we must be careful to avoid ambiguity (as in the joke below), lack of clarity, or incoherence.

A: There's a man outside with a wooden leg named Jones.

B: What's the name of his other leg?

The exercises below, and others like them, will discipline our writing by forcing us to say what we mean in a simple and direct way.

✓ Check Your Progress 3

4. Given below are sentences that are potentially ambiguous. Try to identify the factors that give rise to the ambiguity. Then try to rewrite the sentence so as to remove the ambiguity.

1) Mr. Higgins is the only English teacher in our school.

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2) When we reached the junction, the driver took the right turn.

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3) The painting was fixed to the wall by the girl with long nails.

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4) The bird in the cage that I bought at the fair was admired by all my friends.

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5) The boss told the driver that he must proceed to the airport at once.

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6) Ravi did not finish the dissertation to remain in Hyderabad.

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7) Mary believes that John saw her duck.

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35.4 MAKING LEARNING FUN

You may have heard this expression before – the emphasis today is to enjoy your learning. As we have said, a good way to develop facility with the language is to play with it. The internet is a good resource for jokes, puns, and other very contemporary forms of language play. Below, for example, is a collection of silly warnings (perhaps put on products in order to protect the manufacturers from lawsuits), from a site called “DumbWarnings.com”.

On a child-sized Superman costume: Wearing of this garment does not enable you to fly.

On a cup of McDonald's coffee: Warning: contents may be hot.

On a bottle of mineral water: Suitable for vegetarians

On a packet of American Airlines Peanuts: Instructions: open packet, eat nuts.

Harry Potter toy broom: This broom does not actually fly.

There are also sites for lighthearted quizzes, and advice on how to deal with everyday problems; as well as jokes and anagrams, such as the ones we give below.

√ Check Your Progress 4

5. *Teacher-pupil jokes:* Can you 'explain' the jokes below?

i. Teacher : Name two pronouns in English.

Pupil : Who, me?

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.....

ii. Teacher : 'He was bent on seeing her.' Can you put that sentence another way?

Pupil : The sight of her doubled him up.

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iii. Teacher : Try this one. 'Her beauty was timeless.'

Pupil : Her face could stop a clock.

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iv. Teacher : What was the first thing the monarch did on coming to the throne?

Pupil : Er – he sat down, sir.

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.....

Customer: Waiter, this coffee tastes like mud.

Waiter: Yes, sir, it was ground this morning.

An anagram is a word or phrase made by re-arranging the letters of another word or phrase. Making anagrams is not easy at all. Just reading and understanding an anagram helps you, because looking closely at spellings and letters develops your editing and proof reading skills.

Here are some exceptionally clever anagrams, from the Internet. Can you say how the letters are rearranged?

The Morse Code	Here come dots
A Decimal Point	I'm a dot in place
Eleven plus two	Twelve plus one
Animosity	Is no amity
Desperation	A rope ends it
Slot machines	Cash lost in 'em
Contradiction	Accord not in it

35.5 LET US SUM UP

- Web content writing can be classified into news, lifestyle features, technical writing, medical and legal matters, and transcription.
- Some of the desirable features of content writing are: a conversational style, avoiding a 'flowery' style and the excessive use of 'fancy' words, and a crisp and precise style.
- One way of developing a facility with an informal variety of the language is to play with the language, the way children do.
- In Western cultures, a less flowery style of language is preferred; a flowery style is seen as a little amusing, if not slightly insincere.
- Some flowery expressions are just relics of an earlier era.
- Flowery language and fancy words are often used to disguise a lack of meaningful thought content.
- Many flowery expressions are clichés. Some flowery expressions are malapropisms, or the wrong use of words.
- Simple reading, or simple viewing, is hard writing. Simplifying starts with choosing the right words – the shortest and the commonest words that suit the purpose. The web is not for the specialist, but for everyone.
- Good sentence construction is all about keeping the relationships clear: about who did something, what they did, and to whom they did it.
- Simple sentences are good for a first draft, to make sure that all our thoughts are logically expressed. We can then find ways of putting these thoughts together into a more compact style.
- In the attempt to pack our sentences with meaning, we must be careful to avoid ambiguity, lack of clarity, or incoherence.

35.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. postpone - put off; escape - get away; increase - go up;
knock down – demolish; explode - blow up
2. i. drop off (the bed), drop off (to sleep).

- ii. turn into (make a turn into), turn into (change into)
 - iii. break off (the leg), break off (=terminate) the engagement
 - iv. What's come over you = what has happened to you, or what has travelled over you
 - v. run down (by a car), run down (= tired)
 - vi. keep up the conversation = keep it going, let the talk go on.
 - v. It finally dawned on him = the sun dawned; it finally dawned on him: he understood at last that ...
 - vi: sees in her = finds interesting or valuable in her.
 - vii: turned on (the lights), turned on (=attacked) the organizers.
 - viii: turn into (make a turn into), turn into (change into)
 - ix: stand in your way (the way of the train), stand in your way (=oppose you).
 - x. bumped into (=collided with), bumped into (=met by chance)
3. "Your central nervous system consists of *this globular* THING (the encephalon) contained within *this* THING (the cranium) and from it passes *this* THING (the medulla spinalis). Looking like a long cable, it extends downwards through *this* THING (the vertebral column) to your tailbone. At succeeding levels, you will notice *these* THINGS (spinal nerves) leaving *the long cable-like* THING (the medulla spinalis) sideways to provide *these* THINGS (your viscera) with a nerve supply.

Partially contained within *these two* THINGS (the encephalon and the medulla spinalis) is another system consisting of *two other* THINGS (the parasympathetic and sympathetic divisions of the automatic nervous system) which automatically regulates bodily functions. The craniosacral division is so named because part of it derives from *this* THING (the brainstem) and the other part from *this* THING (the sacrum)."

4.

- 1) Mr. Higgins is the only English teacher in our school.

'English teacher' could mean 'teacher of English', or 'teacher who is English', because Higgins may be the name of an Englishman. You may say instead 'Mr. Higgins is the only person who teaches English in our school' (= he is not an Englishman), or 'Mr Higgins is the only Englishman who teaches in our school' (= he is an Englishman).

- 2) When we reached the junction, the driver took the right turn.

'the right turn' = the correct turn, or = turned right. Rewrite the sentence using these expressions.

- 3) The painting was fixed to the wall by the girl with long nails.

Did the girl have long nails, or was the painting fixed with long nails? Say either 'The painting was fixed to the wall with long nails by the girl' (better still, use the

active voice: 'The girl fixed the painting to the wall with long nails,') or 'The painting was fixed to the wall by the girl who had long nails' ('The girl with long nails fixed the painting to the wall.')

- 4) The bird in the cage that I bought at the fair was admired by all my friends.

Did the friends admire the bird, or its cage? If they admired the bird, you can simply say 'The bird ...,' or you can say: 'The caged bird ...' If they admired the cage, you can say: 'The birdcage ...'

Similarly, it is not clear from the sentence if you bought only the cage at the fair, or the bird as well. Rewriting it using the expressions suggested will get rid of these ambiguities. 'The caged bird that I bought at the fair was admired by all my friends.' 'The bird cage that I bought at the fair was admired by all my friends.'

- 5) The boss told the driver that he must proceed to the airport at once.

Who does the pronoun 'he' refer to – the boss, or the driver? If this is an instruction to the driver to go to the airport (with or without the boss), we could say: 'The boss told the driver **to proceed** to the airport at once.' To mean only that the boss needs to go, we could say: 'The boss had to proceed to the airport at once, and he told the driver so.'

- 6) Ravi did not finish the dissertation to remain in Hyderabad.

It is not clear if (i) Ravi did not finish the dissertation or (ii) Ravi does not wish to remain in Hyderabad. The negative word 'not' can apply to either the main verb or the subordinate verb.

If it applies to the main verb, the sentence means: 'In order to remain in Hyderabad, Ravi did not finish the dissertation.' So we can say: 'Ravi did not finish the dissertation, in order to remain in Hyderabad,' or 'Ravi did not finish the dissertation, so that he could remain in Hyderabad.'

If 'not' applies to the subordinate verb, the sentence means: 'It wasn't with the expectation of remaining in Hyderabad that Ravi finished the dissertation.' (He expected to go to a better place once he finished his dissertation.)

- 7) Mary believes that John saw her duck.

This is a simple problem of a pun: the verb 'to duck' means 'to pop out of sight by lowering one's head,' and the noun 'duck' refers to a bird. Did Mary have a bird that John saw, or did John see her trying to avoid him? One could say 'ducking': 'Mary believes that John saw her ducking out of sight,' but it is not very elegant. Perhaps the context makes the meaning of 'duck' clear enough not to bother rewriting the sentence.

5. i. The words 'who' and 'me' are pronouns, although the student doesn't know this – he is just surprised at being called upon to answer.
- ii. 'To be bent on doing something' means 'to be determined to do something, to be stubborn about the action.' 'To double up' is associated with laughter (you laugh so hard that you bend over). So the student 'translates' 'He was determined to see her' as 'The sight of her made him laugh'!

- iii. 'Her face could stop a clock' means she was very ugly, so it is the opposite of the idea that her beauty was enduring or ageless.
- iv. 'Coming to the throne' or 'ascending the throne' have the common metaphorical reading 'assuming office as king', rather than the literal meaning of sitting on the throne, which the student assumes.

Animating technical diagrams

A very common mistake is to see a diagram in a book used for research, and assume that the diagram simply has to be transferred to the screen and animated. Book diagrams work because they illustrate text that can be referred back to. They may be studied at leisure. Also, such diagrams are often related other diagrams not on the same page.

Film diagrams have to be totally self-evident if they are to work. They must not have extraneous detail; or use words difficult to read (compound technical words) unless these words are themselves highlighted and explained.

Stan Hayward, *Scriptwriting for Animation*

NOTES