

Channel Surfing: An Online Writing Guide

Tips for maximizing your blog, email, and social media.



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In today's rapid-fire digital landscape, we find ourselves writing for multiple electronic platforms— websites, blogs, emails, Facebook, Twitter, and more—during any given day (or hour).

When we're short on time and funneling content to so many different channels, we naturally take shortcuts. Yet with a hasty cut and paste from one to another, we miss opportunities to expand our audience and boost the impact of our work.

We've designed this guide to maximize the power of your online activities by helping you efficiently prioritize your time and tailor your content to each digital medium. It's also meant to help you and your staff to brush up on some basic principles, dos and don'ts, and key tricks of the trade.

Principles to Live By Online

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE No matter what you're writing, identify your target audience. Who are you trying to reach? What will they gain from your message? What, in particular, is likely to pique their interests? When you have a specific audience in mind, write in the same way you'd speak to them. You'll find it easier to craft concise messages that strike the right tone, speak your reader's language, and resonate with shared values.

SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF You can bet your readers are regularly bombarded with all kinds of competing messages, making it easy for yours to get lost in the shuffle. But when you treat the "little" details of your writing as more than mere afterthoughts, your work can rise above the din. In fact, it's the small stuff—like creative headlines, intriguing subject lines, subtitles, search engine optimization, or even thoughtful Twitter hashtags—that truly represent your chance to grab attention.

LOOKS MATTER We live in a world of "skimmers": typical visitors only read 20 percent of the words on a web page, thousands of new tweets fly by every minute, and email inboxes fill up faster than anybody can read. To be noticed, your messages must be short, scannable, and get straight to the point. And by taking the time to make sure that all of your online messages fit the appropriate channel—tone, style, pace, etiquette—you lower your risk of being blown off. Cutting and pasting isn't forbidden but be sure to give your paste a quick makeover before you post.

With these basic principles in mind, let's look at some of the most common digital platforms.

Blogging

Blog posts give readers a reason to keep checking back for fresh and dynamic content on your site. This is where you can highlight recent work, feature staff voices, and build your organizational personality.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Speak their language. If you're writing to gurus, use guru terminology. If you're writing to non-experts, avoid insider jargon and provide appropriate background on new or complex topics.

Check your tone. Effective blog posts often use a familiar or conversational tone, while a printable issue backgrounder might be more formal. If you've garnered a close, committed group of blog readers, you might be more casual than when writing for new visitors.

SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF

Invest in the headline. Headlines often appear without much context—in search engine results, RSS feeds, social media, links from other blogs, or even on your own homepage or email. It's important they make sense on their own and make readers want to click to learn more. Here are a few tips:

- **Keep it short and informative.** Limit headlines to one line of text. An effective headline is clear and tells the reader what's to come.
- **Tell the reader what's in it for them.** Beyond being descriptive, a compelling headline promises some kind of benefit or reward for the reader. Will they learn a new skill? Find out something newsy? Be entertained?
- **Make it stand out.** Being clever, provocative, surprising, or timely can make your headline stand out. Puns, pop culture references, and alliteration are often winners. But don't trade clarity for cuteness.

*Without a good headline
“the rest of your words may
as well not even exist.”*

—Copyblogger

Sightline's 5 most popular headlines (and why they work)

1. Lessons I've Learned from my Rain Barrel (personal and informative)
2. Two Wheels and High Heels (clever and rhymes)
3. Dogs vs. Cars (provocative and personal)
4. Alley, Alley In Come Free (“punny” and focused)
5. The Great Diaper Debate (informative and playful)

Make your first words count. A common blogging mistake is leaving the best insights for last. But most readers won't make it to your conclusion, so don't bury it. Get to your brilliant insight quickly, and then explain how you got there. (Note to editors: Sometimes the fix is as simple as moving the last paragraph to the top.)

LOOKS MATTER

Make your post scannable. Readers want to quickly find the information they came for and move on. A scannable page helps readers navigate the content. Here are some techniques for highlighting key content and guiding readers deeper into your work:

- **Bold key phrases.** Emphasize the short phrases that you really want to hit home. Too much bold, however, and the effect is lost. Use it sparingly and don't bold full sentences.
- **Use subheadings.** Creating a clear roadmap for your writing helps fast-moving readers navigate. Subheadings, bullets, and numbers act as guideposts and help readers anticipate where you're going.
- **Be brief.** Blog posts are ideally 300-1000 words, and shorter is generally better. Limit yourself to one thought per paragraph. When you've said what you need to, stop.
- **White space is your friend.** Room on the page makes text look less daunting. It's OK for a paragraph to be nothing more than one short sentence.

A QUICK GUIDE TO SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

Search engine optimization (SEO) is a fancy way of saying that your content is easily found on sites like Google and Bing. Most of us use these sites on a daily basis—and if you do it right, there's enormous potential to reach new readers interested in what you have to say.

Search sites rely heavily on two things:

1. Content that's full of the right keywords and phrases, and
2. Content “validated” by links from other sites.

The logic of search engines goes that if your content matches a user's search query and is linked from other sites, it must be important. That means you should:

- Try to **anticipate the keywords (and phrases)** your target readers are likely to search for. Use them in titles, bolded text, and links.
- Try to **find specific words and phrases** that set your work apart so you don't have as much competition. For example, a term like “healthcare” is referenced by 122 million pages, “Oregon healthcare” by 287,000, and “Oregon healthcare reform” by only 16,800.
- **Solicit links back to your content** from other sites. Links from popular, high-traffic sites improve your ranking. Ask other bloggers if they wouldn't mind including a link in a recent related post.
- **Above all: Content is King.** Well-written, tailored, high-quality content should be your top priority. You'll get more return links, social shares, and higher search rankings. Do your keyword research, but make sure your content still makes for a good read.

[More: A beginner's guide to SEO.](#)

More blogging resources

- [Copywriting 101](#)
- [Writing style for print vs. web](#)
- [How to write headlines that work](#)

Email

Email is still one of the most useful ways to deliver information directly to your core audience. But the sheer volume of daily mail we all get has resulted in chronic “email fatigue.” That’s all the more reason to make sure that your email is well written, immediately delivers clear value, and stands out enough to avoid a quick trip to the trash.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Send only high-value email. Is your email helpful and interesting (and not just to you!)? When deciding whether to email your list, think about “what’s in it for them?” not “what’s in it for me?” With thoughtfulness and restraint, you’ll build a reputation as an organization that sends email your subscribers want to read and share.

Always ask permission. Know the best practices for building an email list and send only to those who have asked to hear from you. Provide a clear, one-click unsubscribe link. And keep in mind that you can do more than annoy people by being careless: if you make a practice of spamming, you could find yourself blacklisted by internet service providers.

SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF

Invest in your subject line. A snappy subject line should be a priority, not an afterthought. Like a blog headline, the subject line determines whether or not your email gets read. Some tips:

- **Grab attention.** Think about what’s most likely to pique your audience’s interest. Put the important words at the beginning. Use a subject line that is informative, provocative, or playful to make subscribers want to read more. Three to seven words is best.
- **Test and experiment.** If you can, we recommend experimenting with A/B tests to figure out what subject lines work best for your readers: grab a segment of your list, and send half one subject line and the other half a different one. When you have a winner, send it to the rest of your list.
- **It’s all in the name.** Once your headline is dialed, think about who the email comes from. You have control over who shows up in the “From:” line. Most of the time, it’s best to use a consistent sender address and a name that’s recognizable to your readers (either a person or your group’s name). Just make sure someone is checking the reply account for any responses.

LOOKS MATTER

Is your email well-designed? A good email design is second to quality content, but not to be overlooked. And common mistakes can make your email difficult to read at best, and scrambled beyond legibility at worst. Here are some email design tips:

- **Inviting, relevant images can enhance your email—but not always.** Most email programs have images disabled by default, so make sure your email looks good even if the images don’t show up. Headlines and subtitles should be text, not images.
- **Design for mobile.** More and more of us are reading emails on the go. Keep it simple, don’t put links too close together (for clumsy fingers), and consider using a one-column format.

- **Send HTML and plain text emails.** Most email senders will let you use multipart MIME, so the email that gets sent is tailored to the user's preference.
- **Test!** Different email clients play by different rules. Set up accounts in major clients like Outlook, Gmail, and Hotmail and send a test email to each to make sure your email shows up right. Also sneak a peek on a smartphone.

Two more thoughts on email

Are you emailing too much? Or too little? Set clear expectations about frequency when people sign up and honor them. If you have fresh, valuable content you might be able to get away with a daily email, but weekly or monthly is usually best. Conversely, don't let more than three months go by without an email, or you'll face a spate of invalid emails and spam complaints.

Deliver what you promise. Tell new subscribers what they should expect when they subscribe, and deliver exactly that. It's OK to send an unexpected email once in a while, but the bulk of your communications should live up to the expectations you've set.

More email resources

- [Storytelling and the art of email writing](#)
- [4 email list building essentials](#)
- [Check before you send: Email checklist](#)

Social Media

On a social network, you've crossed the line from speaking from your organization's official platform (i.e. your website), to speaking in the reader's space. Your message is side by side with updates from close friends, family photos, and casual banter. Since sharing is at the heart of social networks, it's easy for your followers to give a personal endorsement to your work directly to their network.

Here, we'll focus on the most widely used social media: Facebook and Twitter, but many of these tips are also relevant to other applications, like Google+, Reddit, Pinterest, and LinkedIn.

A few rules of thumb for all social media: Keep it short and sweet, don't self-promote too much, and become a part of the community by listening and engaging.

FACEBOOK

Facebook is one of the most trafficked sites on the web, and [most users are highly engaged](#). With public comments and discussions, there's a real chance to build a stronger sense of community around your organization and issues.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Write for a broad audience. Your Facebook audience is two-pronged: your fans—people who’ve “liked” your page—and your fans’ networks—the friends, colleagues, and family who may see your posts when your fans share them. Because your work might get passed along to others, take the time to make sure it makes sense to a broad set of readers.

Engage your fans. Facebook—and social media more generally—isn’t a broadcast channel where you only post press releases and your own blog posts. You build authenticity when you respond to comments, post the work of others that your fans would find interesting, and engage your audience. Ask questions, solicit photos, and invite feedback to make your audience feel personally connected to your work.

SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF

Be personal and informal. You won’t fit in very well if you sound automated. A few quick edits to status updates from other channels (e.g. your blog or press release) can strike a more conversational tone. Remember that you can edit the headline, thumbnail image, and summary—as well as adding additional introductory commentary. All these tweaks give a personal touch, put the content in a social context, and are worth the time.

Make it “likeable.” Phrase your posts so people can “like” it—there is no “dislike” option, after all. And write for a broad enough audience that your fans wouldn’t mind sharing it with their friends.

LOOKS MATTER

Keep it short. One to two lines is best. Facebook will cut off any messages that are too long—and few readers will click through to “read more.”

Use visuals. People love photos, graphics, and videos—they are the bread and butter of Facebook. Expect thumbnails and images to play an increasingly important role (the new Timeline format is a perfect example).

Don’t spam. One to three posts per day is ample. You don’t want to overwhelm your fans’ newsfeeds.

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[caption id="attachment_21060" align="aligncenter" width="563" caption="The author and her cycling companion."][[/caption] Traveling the world's great bicycle cities, I fell

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7 lessons on cycling's "softer side." What keeps you on the road?



Why We Fall in Love with Cycling | Sightline Daily
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Traveling the world's great bicycle cities, I fell in love with cycling. The ease, safety, convenience... (dreamy sigh) But as my

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With a little TLC, posts can be greatly improved. In this example, note how the first version's post gets cut off, the page title doesn't display correctly, and the article description is gibberish.

Review your posts. When posting from your blog or website, make sure your headline, summary, and thumbnail image fit Facebook's condensed format. You can delete clutter from a headline or rewrite a summary to make it sound more personal.

THIRD PARTY SOCIAL MEDIA SERVICES

Many third party services offer to save you time or make things easier when posting to social media. With one click, you can post to Twitter, Facebook, Google+, Myspace...whatever you want. And if you can't say what you need to in 140 characters, services will publish the rest on a website and link to it from Twitter.

Most of the time, it's **not worth using these services**. As we've explained here, good social media posts are tailored to the platform. A post with hashtags doesn't make sense on Facebook, and a 300 character post on Facebook just doesn't work on Twitter.

You can find some services that save time but don't cut corners. HootSuite or Tweetdeck, for example, make it easy to post to and monitor different accounts, while still allowing you to tailor a message to each.

TWITTER

Twitter is more public and fast-moving than Facebook. It's an excellent way to get your work, ideas, and campaigns in front of new audiences; introduce your organization to new people; and give your staff an opportunity to engage with others who are also actively tweeting about similar issues.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Use a distinct voice. Find ways to make your tweets distinctive and recognizable. Are you snarky, funny, knowledgeable, or provocative? Or a mix...because of the fast pace, experimentation is low cost and variety is good. Find inspiration from fellow tweeters. For example, some write [entirely in rhymes](#).

Set aside "Twitter-time." Twitter can be an incredibly powerful tool, but also daunting. It's rapid-fire—conversations are often happening in real-time. But Twitter doesn't have to take over your life! Dive in and out for a half hour or so, once a day. Don't worry about staying on top of everything going on. That said, you can post much more frequently than you would on Facebook.

Be engaging. Don't be a one-way broadcaster. Engage directly with others using the @handle function (but know that any tweet starting with @ will only be seen by followers of you and the person mentioned). Include other tweeters in your post to start a conversation.

SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF

Think before you tweet. Adapt your headlines for the fast-paced, informal, and super-short format and pithier tone of Twitter. Aim to intrigue or share an important thought.

Play nice. Retweet others' tweets and interesting and relevant third party content regularly and don't forget to thank those who've shared your tweets.

LOOKS MATTER

Keep it shareable. Leave 10-15 characters of space so others can easily share your thought with a retweet.

Abbreviated words are A-OK, but don't over do it. (U dnt want 2 look dum, rt?)

Make your tweets easy to find by using hashtags (like #climate or #healthcare) to help others actively seeking content on specific topics find your tweets. Many events and collaborations now encourage live-tweeting using a specific hashtag. Use [Twitter's search feature](#) to find others who are talking about your issues and the hashtags they are using.

More social media resources

- **The basics:** [The Twitter guidebook](#)
- **More basics:** [10 ways social media writing is different from traditional web writing](#)
- **Expert level:** [Telling stories in Twitter](#)
- **Pitfalls to avoid:** [14 social media fails](#)
- [Nonprofit tips for writing Facebook and Twitter updates](#)
- [The ultimate social media glossary](#)

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In One Page



The most important things to check before you hit “Post,” “Send,” “Tweet,” or “Share”

Remember: Know your audience. Sweat the small stuff. Looks matter.

Blogging

Who’s the audience? Your writing’s tone, jargon, and depth should be tailored to a specific audience.

How’s your headline? The headline alone should make readers want to click through to read the post.

Is it scannable? A visitor should be able to get the gist of your page by skimming subheadings, bold phrases, and/or bullets.

Email

Is it worth opening? Your email should provide enough value to readers that they want to open it.

Does the subject line grab attention? It should be short, interesting, and be free of spam-triggers.

Does the email look good? Your email should be legible if images are disabled, it’s read on a phone, or the subscriber prefers a plain-text format.

Facebook

Am I only writing about me? Include interesting content from other sources, pose questions, and find ways to engage with your fans and other pages.

Is it fit for Facebook? Double check headlines, summaries, and thumbnail images to make sure content was correctly copied in, or to make necessary changes.

Is it likeable? Use a personal tone, write for a wide audience, and encourage comments and feedback.

Twitter

Is my voice distinct? Your posts should be conveying original thoughts in an informal tone and conversing with others, not broadcasting press releases.

Did I contain myself to 140 characters (or less)? Your post should obey the laws of Twitter.

Am I using hashtags and tagging other users? Use Twitter’s features to grow your audience and spark conversations.