chapter 6

Idea #2: Make Text Scannable!

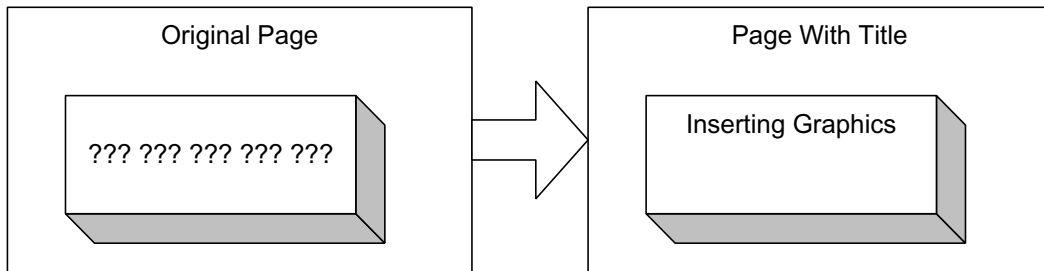# Create a Meaningful Title

BACKGROUND |

Make a title that can survive out of context

The first time most people see your title, they may be looking at a menu elsewhere on your site, or they may be zipping through a list of search results. Your title has to make sense outside of its own page, jostling with similar titles grouped together on a menu or a random assortment of titles on the hit page.

Ironically, that means you may need to include more text, not less. Your title must include enough words to stand on its own, making sense within its menu or search list

Start with the words that show why this particular page is unique. Don't start every title with the same word (such as your company name) because then every item in the search list will look almost the same, particularly if the user's screen cuts off the titles' tail ends, where the differences show up. (If you must include your organization's name, move it toward the middle or end of the title).

Compare your title with the other items on whatever menus it appears in. Make sure yours stands out, asserting its difference at the same time that its text hints at its solidarity with the other items in that menu. Guests should be able to tell why it belongs in that menu, and how it differs from the other items.

Mr. Swinburne is famed or infamed for having used a great many words which express nothing but "color" or "splendor." It has been said that he used the same adjectives to describe a woman and a sunset.

—Ezra Pound

Test the first few words as a rollover

Here's another weird context where the title may appear. If the user minimizes the page and hovers over its tile in the Windows task bar, only a few words will appear in the rollover text. Make those first words key.

> Simple page titles that start with a salient keyword help users pick out pages from the minimized tiles. (Nielsen, 2000b)

Use the same title everywhere

When guests click the title in a menu or search list, they expect to see that very same title appear at the top of the page. Don't get creative. Writing different versions of the title confuses people and makes them reach for the Back button, thinking they made a mistake and came to the wrong page.

If possible, use the title verbatim in every location, so guests know what to expect when they click it.

Make a title that gives advance notice of the contents of the page

Web visitors are suspicious of your text. In fact, they aren't sure whether to read your page or not. Before they decide to settle down to read, they want to know whether they have come to the right page. To check, they scan the title, any headings at the top of the page, and the introductory sentences. Only when all those confirm the "rightness" of the page do they begin to read. So create a title that accurately describes the content. Nothing sly. No jokes. No puns.

> The title is crucial because the page title is often the first thing visible to users using slow Internet connections, and because the title becomes the text for any bookmarks the reader makes to your pages. (Lynch and Horton, 1997)

Make the title echo what users already know, with a twist

The more your visitors know in advance about the topic you are discussing, the more successful they will be in understanding what you say. Seems simple. But your title ought to remind them of that prior knowledge, because any familiarity improves comprehension. In fact, if your title tickles the user's long-term memory, echoing some mental framework they have built earlier, that intellectual schema will help them read more successfully.

> Web pages should contain some explicit content that can help readers to orient themselves; access relevant prior knowledge; access relevant content and structural schemata in Long Term Memory, or construct new schemata; and identify content relationships within and across pages. (Spyridakis, 2000)

Just do all that in 64 characters (to make sure people can see your title at the top of an average window), and, hey, for an additional challenge, try to show how your approach gives a new spin to the old ideas.

Recheck your title in its context

After you've written the whole page, make sure that the title still describes the content accurately. You may not know exactly what your point is going to be when you start, so if you wrote the title first, it may be out-of-date, inaccurate, or misleading.

EXAMPLES

Before
Introduction

After
LugeNet—A Technical Overview

Before
Your Geophys Web Site: Tutorial: Learning to Calibrate a GPS

After
Calibrating a GPS—a Tutorial on Your Geophys Web Site

Before

Los Alamos National Laboratory: Division of Nuclear Stewardship: Remarks on Measuring and Understanding the Science of Diffusion of Plutonium into Materials such as Stainless Steel at Room Temperature over Long Time Periods

Los Alamos National Laboratory: Division of Nuclear Stewardship: A Study of the Rate and Intensity of Radiation Spreading from Uranium 235 under Standard Conditions

After

Plutonium Diffusion—Measurement and Science (Los Alamos, Nuclear Stewardship Division)

Uranium Radiation—Rate and Intensity (Los Alamos, Nuclear Stewardship Division)

AUDIENCE FIT

| If visitors want this...	How well does this guideline apply?
TO HAVE FUN	Not so relevant. Visitors to webzines and game sites tolerate inconsistency and unpredictability, even look for it. They welcome a title that doesn't make sense until they read the article.
TO LEARN	Very relevant. Predictability and accuracy help reinforce the structure you are building in the user's mind.
TO ACT	Critical. Without a revealing title, users may conclude they have clicked the wrong link, and back out, never to return.
TO BE AWARE	Writing a meaningful title is like doing kitchen yoga. Not very glamorous, but a real challenge for your unruly mind.
TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE	What this guideline urges is simple courtesy.

See: Ameritech (1997), Ausubel (1986), Berners-Lee (1995), Bricklin (1998), Dumas (1988), Frisse (1987), Lawless and Kulikowich (1996), Levine (1997), Lynch & Horton (1997), Meyer (1984), Nielsen (1996, 1999f, 2000b), Rosenfeld & Morville (1998), Uncle Netword (1999b), Spyridakis (2000), Voss and others (1986), Waite (1982), Wallace (1985), T. Williams, (1994).

Insert Meaningful Headlines and Subheads
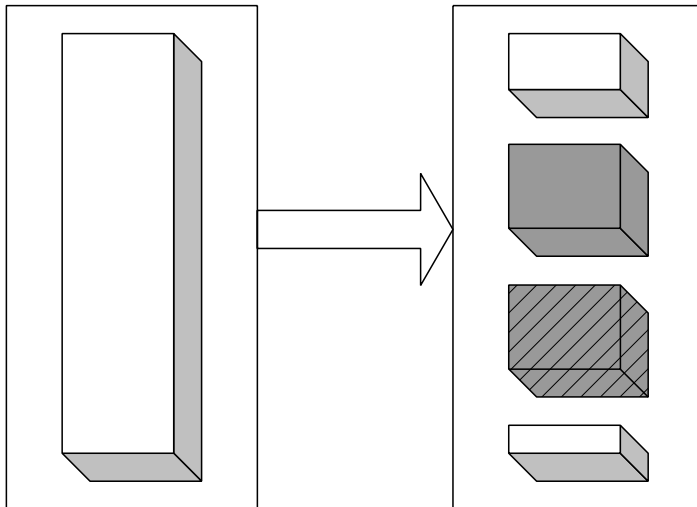
Headings should blaze the trail

In the snowy woods, making a trail that skiers could follow, we cut chunks out of big trees on either side of the route. Looking back, we could see the bright exposed wood in half a dozen trees. Those signs led the cross-country competitors through a dense forest where snow covered up the narrow trails made by animals heading down to the swamp for a drink and the wider paths tromped by humans during dry weather. Only the blazes on the trees showed where to go. Your headings and subheads should act like blazes.

> As readers scroll, they become lost, and headings help mark the way. (Spyridakis, 2000)

A good heading predicts what content will follow, letting visitors decide whether or not to read the content in that section. Headings and subheads act as visual dividers, marking the chunks along the

way and helping people skim to the next point, like skiers zipping cross country.

Use two or three levels of headings

Break your articles up into two or three levels of headings—a general page heading, plus some subheads, and, occasionally, some sub-subheads. This approach helps people skim for your main ideas, and structure.

In general, insert more headings than you feel comfortable with on paper.

> A single chunk of 100 words can still benefit from two or three subheads. (Kilian, 1999)

Plus, if a blind person is using a screen reader, nested headings make access easier, allowing the software to jump to the next heading, rather than narrating the entire text, one word at a time.

Headings reveal relationships

Write a series of headings and subheads so their text articulates the way their text chunks relate to each other. Guests skim your headings to get a sense of the way you have organized your page, mentally comparing one heading with another, building up a conceptual model of the structure. If you put extra thought into the relationship between the headings, you help people grok the structure without too much thinking.

Critical review: Look at your headings and subheads as a group, distinct from the text, to make sure that a casual user can see why you have arranged them in this order, and why you have grouped some and not others.

Announce a new topic

Reread the paragraph you wrote just before the heading. Can you see how the heading announces a related but **new** topic? If not, rewrite.

Reading comprehension studies indicate that you should "Use anything you can to signal the transition from one topic to the

That must be wonderful! I have no idea what it means.

—Molière

next." (Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). Headings and subheads bring that news.

Not too cute

When Jonathan was learning the "user-friendly" style at Apple, he once got his first draft back from an engineer with only two words scrawled across it: "Too cute!"

On the Web, cute headlines don't reveal the content of their chunk, and don't show the chunk's relationship with others on the page.

Watch out for analogies and metaphors, too. Users often misinterpret the comparison, take it literally, or start wondering what the heck you meant, getting distracted in their own imaginings. Also, headings based on a comparison demand that people read the rest of the text to figure out what the heading meant, a chore most folks are unwilling to undertake.

> 79 percent of our test users always scanned any new page they came across; only 16 percent read word by word. (Nielsen and Morkes, 1997)

Therefore, write headings that mean a lot, rather than showing off your cleverness.

EXAMPLES

Before

MRP can handle two kinds of manufacturing—discrete and repetitive. They differ in regularity and costing. When you need to make products in groups or batches, you use discrete manufacturing. You give each batch a job number, a manufactured part number, a quantity (for that particular job), a start date and end date. Because you have a discrete job, you can charge all production costs to that job. With job costing, you can open a job, collect the charges for a job, close out a job, analyze and report costs and variances by job. On the other

After

We Can Handle Two Kinds of Manufacturing

MRP can handle two kinds of manufacturing— discrete and repetitive. They differ in regularity and costing.

Discrete Manufacturing Works in Batches

When you need to make products in groups or batches, you use discrete manufacturing. You give each batch a job number, a manufactured part

hand, you may have to manufacture some products continuously. Instead of discrete groups, you have a nonstop flow of products through the line. You define your schedule by the daily rate of production, and you charge the cost of production to the product, on a lump or unit basis. You never close out a schedule; you just vary the rate of production. So you analyze costs by period; when the period closes, you total all charges, and divide that number by the number of products, to get a unit cost, and usage variances, during that period. You choose one method or another for a product when you set it up in the inventory. From that point on, MRP will plan production based on the method you have chosen—discrete or repetitive.

number, a quantity (for that particular job), a start date and end date.

Costing: Because you have a discrete job, you can charge all production costs to that job. With job costing, you can open a job, collect the charges for a job, close out a job, analyze and report costs and variances by job.

Repetitive Manufacturing Just Goes On and On

You may have to manufacture some products continuously. Instead of discrete groups, you have a nonstop flow of products through the line. You define your schedule by the daily rate of production, and you charge the cost of production to the product, on a lump or unit basis. You never close out a schedule; you just vary the rate of production.

Costing: You analyze costs by period; when the period closes, you total all charges, and divide that number by the number of products, to get a unit cost, and usage variances, during that period.

You Decide

You choose one method or another for a product when you set it up in the inventory. From that point on, MRP will plan production based on the method you have chosen—discrete or repetitive.

AUDIENCE FIT

| If visitors want this...	How well does this guideline apply?
TO HAVE FUN	More headlines, more fun, if your users want to jump around. But if you are offering a chance to settle into your world, absorbing your point of view, then long passages without headings work just fine.
TO LEARN	Headings help users search, understand, and recall.
TO ACT	Headings guide the user visually and intellectually to the point of action.
TO BE AWARE	Making your work more skimmable can't hurt. But face it, to put in more headings, you have to get organized... and you may not like thinking structurally.
TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE	Helpful and courteous, even in e-mail.

See: Ameritech (1997), Bricklin (1998), Hartley and Trueman (1983), IBM Ease of Use (1999), Kaiser (2000), Lorch & Lorch (1985, 1995), Lynch (2000), Lynch & Horton (1997), Kilian (1999), Mayer, Dyck & Cook (1984), Morkes & Nielsen (1997), Nielsen (1997a, 1997b, 1998b, 1999d, 1999f, 2000b), Spyridakis (2000), Sun (2000), Van Dijk & Kintsch (1983), Williams (2000).

Highlight Key Words, Phrases, and Links

Original Text	Highlighted Text
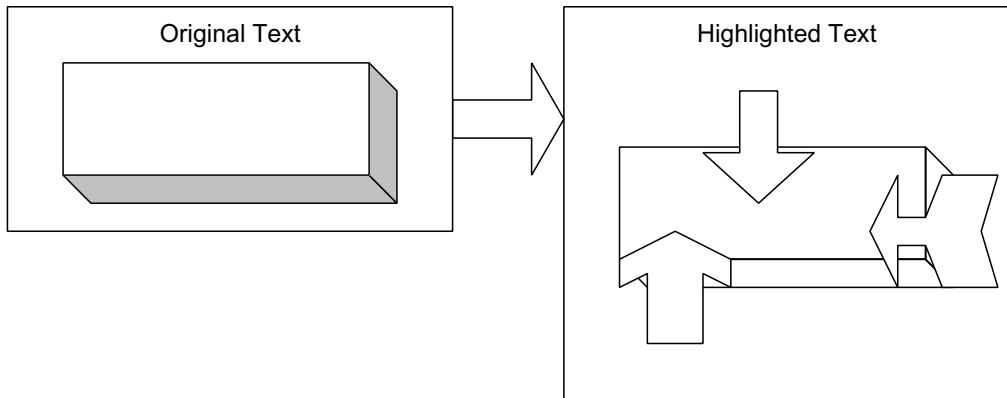
Boldface what is important

Boldfacing a word or phrase makes it **leap ou**t, so someone skimming sees it, but not the rest of the text, which is a gray blur. Just what skimmers want! They can catch the key point—if you have emphasized it—without doing any of that annoying activity called reading.

Emphasize small, **important** words. (Horton, 1990)

On-screen, *italics* get shaky, and underlining destroys the descenders (the parts of letters like *g* and *q* hanging down below the line). On paper or on-screen, ALL CAPITAL LETTERS are difficult to read. (Perhaps lawyers put software licenses in all caps on purpose, so nobody will read them). Net: use **boldfacing** as your main way to emphasize.

If you want to use color for emphasis, use only one color, because people will probably not understand your personal method of color coding, and a page with text in three or four colors looks very exciting, but unreadable.

Make links emphatic

In English sentences, we tend to put important new information at the end. So if you care enough to include a link in a sentence, put it at the very end.

> Because the link text is colored and underlined, it stands out from the rest of the paragraph, and attracts the eye. (America Online, 2001)

When you place the link at the end of the sentence—where we normally expect a big bang—the link also acts as a point of emphasis. In this way, you make important words catch the user's attention.

Don't overdo the emphasis

Too much bolding in a paragraph creates a push-me-pull-you effect, because the eye sees the bold text jumping out, making the rest of the text mere background; but then the eye takes the white space in, and tries to bring the regular text to the front—and on and on. Like a camera that struggles to set automatic focus on a cloud, grinding in and out, uncertain because it cannot spot a straight line or sharp edge to focus on, the human eye remains in doubt when your highlighting risks overwhelming its surrounding text.

One or two phrases per paragraph—that's enough to emphasize by bolding or turning them into links. If you find you are highlighting half a dozen items, reconsider. Perhaps these could be turned into a bulleted list.

Don't overdo bold words.
— Dan Bricklin, 1998

EXAMPLES

Before

What is a cookie?

A tiny text file holding information about you, such as your address and preferences. We send it along

After

What is a cookie?

A tiny text file holding information about you, such as your address and preferences. We send it along

with our Web pages, to live on your hard disk, along with the Web pages themselves (click here for more information about storage on your hard disk). When you sign in, we ask your browser to send us your cookie, so we know who you are. That way, we can recognize you, fill out forms for you, and make the site look the way you like. No other site can read your cookie, so your information stays private, if that is a concern.

Before

Databases spawn Web pages in three ways. The old-fashioned way is that the database spits out a report in ASCII, and the user reformats that report in HTML and posts it on the site.

More recently, databases have begun to be able to turn out reports in HTML itself. But the information in such a page is only as good as your last report. It is static.

Better are pages built on the fly. In this third scenario, the Web page sends a request to the database, and the database pours the latest data into the correct template, then the browser displays that brand-new page. In this scenario, you do less work, once you get the delicate communication set up between your Web pages and the database. That's where our new database comes in handy.

Before

Why do I have to fill in a profile?

We are able to provide free e-mail because we are supported by advertisers. (Click here if you would like to see a list of advertisers).
They want to put their ads on e-mail you send—but

with our Web pages to live on your hard disk. When you sign in we ask your browser to send us your cookie. That way, we can recognize you, fill out forms for you, and make the site look the way you like. No other site can read your **cookie** so your information stays private.

After

Databases spawn Web pages in three ways. **The old-fashioned way** is that the database spits out a report in ASCII, and the user reformats that report in HTML, and posts it on the site.

More recently, databases have begun to be able to turn out reports in HTML. But the information in such a page is only as good as your last report. It is static.

Better are pages **built on the fly**. In this third scenario, the Web page sends a request to the database, and the database pours the latest data into the correct template; then the browser displays that brand-new page. In this scenario, you do less work, once you get the delicate communication set up between your Web pages and the database. That's where you'll find a use for our new database.

After

Why do I have to fill in a profile?

We are able to provide free **e-mail** because we are supported by advertisers.
They want to put their ads on e-mail you send—but only if you fit their profile of a potential **customer**.

only if you fit their profile of a potential customer. To know which ads to drop into your e-mail, we need to know more about who you are. That's why we need you to fill in the profile. Please click here to return to the profile, to get started on your free e-mail.

To know which ads to drop into your e-mail, we need to know more about who you are. That's why we urge you to fill in the profile.

AUDIENCE FIT

| If visitors want this...	How well does this guideline apply?
TO HAVE FUN	Bold is beautiful, loud, exciting, as long as you don't litter the page with highlights.
TO LEARN	Look at a textbook. Key terms are bolded, so clever students know they will be on the exam. (Dull students skip all the other cues, too).
TO ACT	A link is a dramatic cue to act. Make sure the reader can see it, putting it at the end of the sentence or paragraph.
TO BE AWARE	Signaling the mind what you consider important helps get your point across, even before someone reads. Using these tools means you are sensitive to the user's state.
TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE	Yes, like emoticons, boldfacing and links raise your voice and give a little bounce to your prose.

See: America Online (2001), Horton (1990), Lynch (2001), Morkes & Nielsen (1997, 1998), Nielsen (1997a, 1997b), Williams (1990).

Turn Any Series into a Bulleted or Numbered List
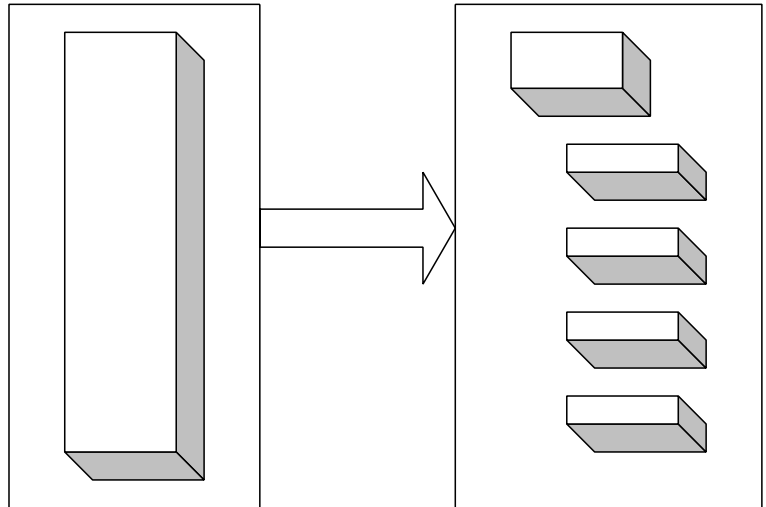
Let people skim

Breaking out a list allows people to skim through it quickly, skipping past the items they aren't interested in and spotting the one item worth reading.

By setting off these items in their own short paragraphs, preceded by some kind of dingbat (arrows, checkmarks, circles, pointing hands, or numbers), you show the user that:

- These items are all similar in some way.
- Each item is distinct.

The visual layout lets people "get" what the items have in common and skim for a specific item without having to read the irrelevant ones. That's true, to a degree, on paper. But when you move material onto the screen, you should turn any series into a bulleted or numbered list, to save users' time.

Boldface the lead-ins or headings in the list

If you have a sentence or two about every product in a series, make the list out of the product names in bold and then insert the descriptions in regular text, indented, so they are clearly subordinate (and can be skipped past).

> One format that works well on-screen is lists of **short**, **bold headings**, a few words long, followed by a sentence or two of summary in a lighter, perhaps smaller, font. (Bricklin, 1998)

The bolded items can be on their own lines, as individual paragraphs or as boldface text leading into the rest of the explanations.

Good fit: a list of shortcuts to popular areas on your site, best-selling items, or important links.

If you have a long list...

To help people scan quickly past large chunks they don't care about, turn a long list into several groups, each with its own subhead.

How many items are too many? No one knows. But, depending on your situation, you might set a limit of nine items per group, in no more than two levels—primary and secondary (Sun, 2000). That way, people can usually see most of the group within one screen, and can compare all the items without having to scroll around.

Usually, you are creating a list because you want to allow people to compare the items in some way. So make sure that people can see at least three or four items at the same time.

> Strike a balance between the number of items users can view simultaneously and the amount of information you provide for each item. (IBM, 1999)

No need to be absolute about these numbers, though; for example, if guests know in advance they are going to get a list of a hundred items in alphabetical order, they can handle the volume, because they understand the organizing principle.

Put the longest item last

If you can, put the longest item at the end of the list, so it does not interfere with reading the others.

EXAMPLES

Before

A bridge connects two local area networks (LANs). The bridge physically joins separate LAN segments, such as two Ethernet cables. We offer four main types of bridges: transparent, encapsulating, translating, and source routing.

After

A bridge connects two local area networks (LANs). The bridge physically joins separate LAN segments, such as two Ethernet cables. We offer four main types of bridges:

- Transparent
- Encapsulating
- Translating
- Source routing

Before

New in this release are additional items of information about each song, such as encoding options, handheld devices that play these formats, genre, total length of the track, name of the original album the track belonged to, and a summary of any preferences you set in your download profile.

After

New in this release are additional items of information about each song:

- Encoding options
- Handheld devices that play these formats
- Genre
- Total length of the track
- Name of the original album the track belonged to
- A summary of any preferences you set in your download profile

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...	How well does this guideline apply?
TO HAVE FUN	Lists work well for choices, but if someone just wants to roll through your torrential prose, soaking it up all in one breath, forget the bullets.
TO LEARN	Very helpful as an organizing device, showing that the items all belong together, as a sequence or collection.
TO ACT	Numbered steps increase the effectiveness of any instructions. (Only use bullets for actions that are optional.)
TO BE AWARE	Rarely used in this field, so some users may find lists uncongenial, with overtones of business and technical writing. But, hey, they can get over it.
TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE	Probably a bit too formal for messages on your discussion list, but very helpful in e-mails, because the lists overcome the lack of visual structure afforded by ASCII text.

See: Bricklin (1998), Brusaw, et al (1997), Bush and Campbell (1995), Hackos & Stevens (1996), IBM (1999), Kaiser (2000), Kilian (1999), Lohse & Spiller (1998), Morkes & Nielsen (1997, 1998), Nielsen (1997a, 1997b, 1999d), Price & Korman (1993), Sun (2000), Tarutz (1992).

POST |

My Idea:

Post to HotText@yahoogroups.com

Express your own idea on:
HotText@yahoogroups.com

Subscribe:
HotText-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

Unsubscribe:
HotText-unsubscribe@yahoogroups.com

Visit:
http://www.WebWritingThatWorks.com