

writing for the web

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LYNDA FELDER

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WEB CONTENT USING WORDS,
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VOICES THAT MATTER™

Writing for the Web

Creating Compelling Web Content Using Words, Pictures and Sound

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For my sister, Carol

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Start Here

Think about the last gadget you bought. If you're like most people, you felt a rush of excitement when you opened the package and couldn't wait to get your hands on the new toy. It's highly unlikely that you thought about reading the manual before you started pressing buttons and playing with your new purchase.

FIGURE 1.1

We reach for instructions when all else fails.



Don't Make Me Read

When a new object comes into your life, you simply want to point it in the right direction and make it work. The “point-and-shoot mentality” extends to everything, not just new gadgets. If the product's design is not intuitive, you're likely to think the designer was stupid or overzealous.

The same is true for Web content. When readers land on a Web page, they're not looking for *Instructions for Use*. Most don't have much time, and most don't have patience. Readers just want to land on the right page, instantly find what they're looking for, and then zoom off. When they stumble onto long paragraphs, when the text is unclear or boring, or when they find themselves studying, searching, or backtracking, they jump ship and head back to Google to search for better content.

HOW PEOPLE READ A WEB PAGE

In 1997, Jakob Nielsen pointed out that people don't typically read text on a Web page word for word. Rather, they scan, picking out words and phrases that are helpful. See Jakob Nielsen's October 1997 Alertbox column "How Users Read on the Web," which is available at www.useit.com.

Why You *Should* Read This Book

Most likely, you picked up this book because you want to better your skills at writing Web content. With many books available about this topic, why should you read this book?

- It's a thin book. Fat books typically don't follow their own guidelines, such as "be succinct"!
- It's designed to allow you to zoom in to find what you need, and then quickly skip to another topic.
- It encourages you to engage, to observe, to think, and to try various effective writing tasks. The chapters are packed with examples, challenges, and suggestions.
- It focuses on words, pictures, and sounds as story elements for your Web content rather than the mechanics of using specific software and tools. There's already a flood of good books available on how to use the latest tools and technology to capture and publish media. (You'll find suggestions for good books to read at www.write4web.com.)

How to Read This Book

As you read this book, you'll find there are no rules except to follow your own instincts. You'll get the most out of the book if you take breaks from reading to try the suggestions and challenges.

Challenges

At the end of each chapter, you'll find challenges that include writing prompts for freewriting and suggested exercises that will take more time.

Make sure you spend time on your own writing practice. As with any other discipline, the only way to get better at Web writing is to put in the time composing Web content. The art of creating compelling Web content is similar to any other art. You can't learn to dance by watching ballerinas. You can't learn to play the piano by listening to lectures or reading sheet music. Although it's



Every chapter is peppered with "Try this" suggestions. Don't ignore these suggestions. You'll get the most out of this book if you pause, put down the book, and try the ideas offered. You'll learn the most if you decide right now to try everything with a playful spirit and an open mind.

helpful to listen with a keen ear to the music you enjoy, that won't place the magic in your fingertips. A pianist practices scales. A pianist plays finger exercises. A talented pianist spends hours and hours at the keyboard. A talented Web writer practices writing.

Consider all the suggestions, writing prompts, and assignments in this book as part of your finger exercises and part of your practice, moving you toward passionate, exciting Web stories.

More Information

You can find additional resources for *Writing for the Web* at www.write4web.com, including:

- **Additional challenges.** More freewriting and suggested exercises for your writing practice.
- **Evaluation criteria.** Suggestions for critiquing different types of Web writing.
- **Resources.** Web sites that are good examples or provide helpful information, reading lists, book reviews, and additional technical instructions.
- **Student work.** Examples of student blogs and podcasts.
- **Teacher notes.** A downloadable booklet with suggestions for teachers.

Chapter

4

Adding Motion

There's no question about it: Moving images dazzle and mesmerize. Cinema has been around for over 100 years, and audiences are still willing to sit in dark rooms among strangers to watch the big screen. Video, even on the teeny screen of a mobile device, can hypnotize viewers. There is magic in telling stories with visuals in motion. If you get it right, there's no better way to draw in your readers and keep their attention.

This chapter examines the various media you might choose to show graphics in motion, such as video, animation, photo slide shows, and simulations. It also provides an overview and explains the ways to get started with adding moving images to your Web content. The topics in this chapter include:

- Deciding to use graphics in motion
- Brainstorming
- Developing a storyboard
- Writing scripts
- Using guidelines to produce video and animation

If you find your passions ignited about animation, video, educational technology, and so on, and you want to deepen your knowledge, see www.write4web.com for a list of schools, Web sites, and books.

Getting Started with Motion

The good news about designing content for the Web is that you're not limited to one media or another. You can incorporate video, animation, photo slide shows, illustrations, text, music, audio narration, and so on. You just have to make sure your story meets your readers' expectations and needs. Think of your reader as Goldilocks. The story should be *just right* in terms of timing, pacing, style, length, and complexity. Plus it needs to have clarity, spark, and meaning.

Deciding to Use Moving Graphics

The first question you need to ask yourself is whether or not it's a good idea to add moving graphics or animated text to your Web story. You don't want to annoy the reader with gratuitous noise or motion, but there are definite cases in which moving pictures can get readers excited, show a message, or instruct much better than text, still images, or sound.

Your decision to incorporate moving graphics into your story might be easier when you know the types of moving graphics available to you and how to use them successfully.

Types of Moving Graphics

Technology, design, and computer terminology are in a constant state of flux, which blurs the lines between the different types of media. Nonetheless, the following list attempts to briefly describe some types of moving graphics and how you might best use each:

- **Video** shows real-life, moving images, instantly immersing readers in place and time. Video is perfect for promoting products and messages, capturing personal histories, presenting interviews, and providing instructions.
- **Animation** takes individual pictures of characters or objects and shows them in continuous movement. The kid in all of us loves cartoons. Animations work well for short ads, product demos, Web introductions, and games. For instructions on complicated activities, such as tying knots, dance steps, or juggling, animation works best.
- **Motion graphics** are created by designers who work with software applications to make three-dimensional logos spin across the screen, film titles dance and weave, and images fly across the screen and then evaporate.
- **Software simulation** models the experience of using a software program by showing the software screens and mouse movements for typical tasks. Simulation is ideal for promoting software packages and for instruction on tools within the software application. For example, simulation works well if you need to show readers how to use the Bezier Pen tool in a design application.

Also, the simulation needs to be paced just right. If it's too slow, readers will get distracted. If it's too fast, readers will get frustrated.

- **Games** provide entertainment and can be educational. Make sure your audience thinks the game is as fun as you do. As with all Web content, your audience is key. Games for the corporate environment are nothing like games you play at home.
- **Photo slide shows** show people best. Still pictures can provide a more emotional experience than video, especially when combined with Burns effects (panning across the image and zooming in or out).
- **Digital storytelling** works well for personal stories and educational purposes. You can find wonderful examples and more information at www.storycenter.org.

700 BILLION YOUTUBE VIDEOS

It's only recent advances in technologies that have given you the capability to easily add animation and video to your Web content. And readers are wild about it! YouTube.com was registered in 2005. Just five years later, YouTube (youtube-global.blogspot.com) announced, "During 2010, you all watched more than 700 billion YouTube videos and uploaded more than 13 million hours of video."

But before you can narrow down the type of media you'll use, you'll need to come up with an idea to set in motion. Brainstorming is an excellent way to unearth ideas, and writing down your ideas can help you flesh them out.

Capturing an Idea for Video or Animation

Where do you get your ideas? That's a question all authors are asked and asked often. It can be a difficult question to answer, because ideas can come from anywhere and anything. The more you think and talk about an idea, the more it morphs into something else. You're driving in your car, listening to a favorite radio station and boom! A fantastic idea hits you. Or you're talking with a friend and suddenly you stop listening, because something wonderful is percolating in your head. You don't want to be rude, so you share that idea with your friend. The friend catches on and takes the idea a step in another direction. In a heartbeat, you're collaborating. It's a fascinating process when you're just letting the thoughts gallop around in your head. However, trying to tie down ideas for a creative project can be exasperating.

*Ever tried. Ever failed.
No matter. Try Again. Fail
again. Fail better.*

—Samuel Beckett

try this

Just for fun, try capturing your ideas for a story on napkins, the backs of envelopes, the palm of your hand if you don't mind a temporary tattoo, paper bags, the backs of receipts, the blank side of a greeting card, or any scrap of paper you have handy. It's good to be flexible.

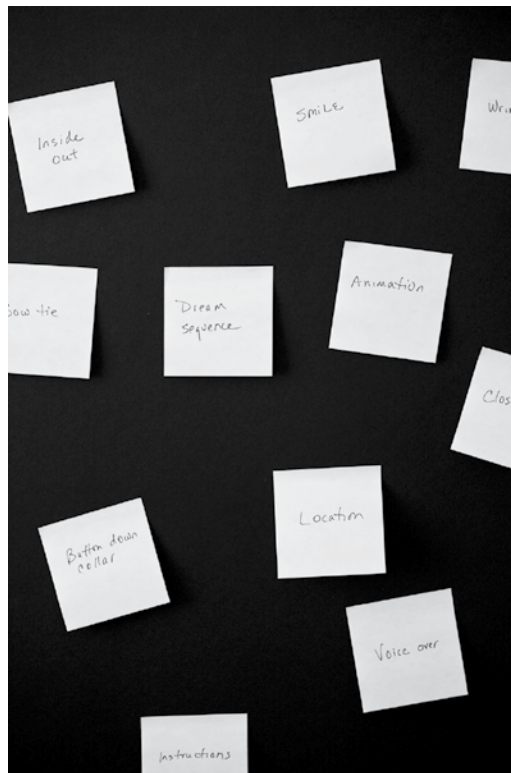
You are the only one who knows what works best to capture an idea and begin the design process. But here are some ideas for brainstorming that have worked well for others:

- **Sticky notes.** Jot down anything and everything that comes to mind on sticky notes (**FIGURE 4.1**). Place the notes on a large surface, such as a wall or tabletop. Move the notes around as you continue to add notes.
- **3 x 5 cards.** Index cards work the same as sticky notes but give you the added flexibility of designing on the go. Keep them in your back pocket while you're out taking a walk.
- **Lists.** Make lists of whatever you think of that relates to one or more ideas.
- **An outline.** If you like working with outlines, this is probably the best way for you to begin.
- **Napkins.** Seriously, napkins work as well as sticky notes and can be fun for collaborations.

When you finally have an idea that's nearly hatched, you can begin developing it along a timeline. That's where a storyboard helps.

FIGURE 4.1

Use sticky notes to collect and sort ideas.



Developing the Story

Whether your work is fiction or nonfiction, it has to tell a good story. For video and animation, it's especially important to plan the story. You need to understand the concept, the structure, the setting, the action, any spoken narration, and so forth. You need to determine how all the multimedia elements will work together. The time spent planning is time well spent. If you've ever worked on a complex project that used seat-of-the-pants planning, you understand the trouble and frustration you can encounter that can easily be prevented by thinking through the design, developing a storyboard, and discussing with any team members or stakeholders what the final production will look like.

If we are to change our world view, images have to change.

—Vaclav Havel

The first important step in your planning is to develop a storyboard.

Designing a Storyboard

Storyboards are design tools that show the main action on the screen over time. A storyboard also lists all the media for each scene, such as sound effects, voice-over, music, and text, and describes how they all work together. Not only does the storyboard gather all the ideas on paper with a timeline, but it is also conducive for generating and building additional ideas. Designing a storyboard provides a few more benefits as well, because it:

- **Records the plan.** It documents the creative process by placing a stake in the ground for the initial starting point. From there you can use it to track changes.
- **Persuades stakeholders.** If you need to persuade someone else to pay for the production, a storyboard helps whoever holds the purse strings to make a good decision. It helps you convince someone that the production will be worth the cost.
- **Informs team members.** If you're working with a team of artists, writers, and programmers, the storyboard keeps everyone in line. You can use the storyboard as a reference for developing schedules and assigning responsibilities.
- **Establishes a blueprint.** A storyboard keeps you from making costly mistakes during production, because it provides you with a clear plan. The tailor's maxim is to measure twice, cut once. Completing a storyboard is like measuring twice.
- **Creates a working agreement.** If you're working with a client or a boss, the storyboard educates that person, documents agreements, and keeps the process moving. It's completely frustrating to be halfway through a project and hear the client say, for the first time, "Oh, we need to..." With a storyboard in place, you can gently remind the boss or client that you are following the original direction and any changes at this stage will cost more and take more time.

The format for the storyboard depends on the people you are working with and their expectations. Every storyboard needs a brief introduction to describe the work's main idea or message. In addition, every storyboard needs to state the targeted audience and the objectives or goals for the work.

For the corporate environment, it's likely that you'll need to set the expectations. If you're working on a training demonstration for instance, you might use a simple, three-column format (FIGURE 4.2).

FIGURE 4.2
A three-column storyboard format.

Storyboard		
Title		
Producer (Your Name)		
Artists (Photos)		
Composers (Music)		
Speakers		
Visuals	Audio	Production Notes
Add video, animation, still images, and text here.	Add narration, music, and sound effects here.	Add production notes here.

If you're collaborating with a team in the corporate environment, PowerPoint works fine as a storyboard tool. Place the visuals in the slide view, and then add all the information about other media in the speaker's notes.

For animation, storyboards are typically a series of framed, hand-drawn scenes. If you're not a fine artist or you don't like to draw, don't be alarmed. Stick figures work fine. If you feel self-conscious about your stick figures, draw balloons around their legs and arms to fill them out. Make sure, in the storyboard, that you change the perspective for scenes, showing them as wide or long shots (from a distance), mid-range, and close up (FIGURE 4.3).

FIGURE 4.3
A storyboard for animation.



Rapid Prototyping

Another way to design a digital production is to use a method called *rapid prototyping*. With rapid prototyping, you need to work with design tools to rapidly create a prototype of the final production. This works especially well with productions that can take weeks to develop, such as computer-based training.

Using rapid prototyping, you need to set expectations and let those who will be reviewing the prototype know that it is only the beginning of development and design. You can call the prototype a “quick-and-dirty” version of the final production. You want it to have imperfections at this point for a number of reasons:

- **Preliminary design feedback.** You want the prototype to be a design tool rather than the finished product. If it's too perfect, the reviewer or client might have a look and say, “Great! Let me have it. Send me the bill.” Although pleasing the reviewer is satisfying, at this stage you're better off getting reviewers to offer suggestions and describe likes and dislikes.
- **Big picture critique.** You don't want to focus on minute details, such as the choice of fonts or color at this stage. Set expectations and tell reviewers and collaborators that the prototype is in its infancy, and it's not the time to spend hours crossing Ts and dotting Is. You definitely don't want to spend days searching for just the right shade of mango that your boss has in mind.
- **Team/client participation.** You want others to feel that they have taken an active part in the production, not just accepted your final product. Consider all suggestions carefully. But also remember that *you* are the author, and the final production will represent *your* work. Don't simply roll over and say yes to all suggestions that come your way.

For more information about storytelling methods, read Chapter 9, “Telling a Good Story.”

Whichever storytelling approach you use, a good and simple way to structure your Web story is with three major parts.

Adding an Introduction, Body, and Close

According to Aristotle, a story needs a beginning, middle, and end, and your story with moving images is no exception.

For video blogs (also called vlogs), the introduction can be the title page and the ending can be the credits. If you're planning a series of videos, you'll want to give all the introductions and endings a similar look and feel, so your readers will recognize the series.

The middle of the video should tell the story. If you're not sure how to construct the middle, try following this simple organization:

1. Show the overview. Show a long camera shot as the audio narration speaks the introduction (**FIGURE 4.4**).
2. Show a mid-range shot as audio narration gives more specifics about the story (**FIGURE 4.5**).
3. Show a close-up shot and describe details with the audio narration (**FIGURE 4.6**).



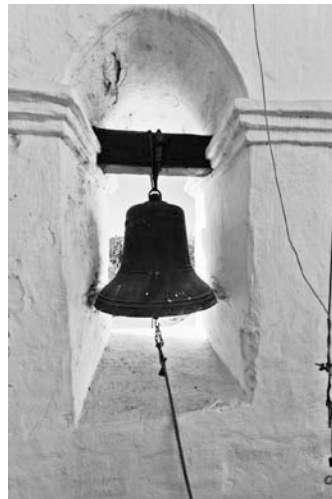
Imagine that you are showing a production to someone important, like the VP of marketing where you work. You've worked night and day on the production and feel certain it's going to wow the VP. Sadly, you don't get the response you're expecting. The VP does the equivalent of crumpling up a piece of paper, sneers, and says the entire thing is sophomoric and distasteful. Take a deep breath. How will you respond? Make a list of your thoughts.

**FIGURE 4.4**

Provide a long shot to start the story.

**FIGURE 4.5**

Provide a mid-range shot to continue the story.

**FIGURE 4.6**

A close-up of details to go deeper into the story.

The Animation or Video Setting

The setting is a combination of the location and the time. For example, the story might occur in the 1950s in Paris. Setting is important. For theater scripts, *AT RISE* appears at the beginning, and it tells what the audience sees when the curtain rises for the first scene. What does your audience see *AT RISE* for your first scene?

Make sure the setting meets the audience's expectations. For instance, if your story is about skydiving, the audience expects to see the sky, an airport, or the inside of an airplane. See Chapter 1 for more information on understanding your audience.

For video, remember that the camera can see more than you typically do. For example, if you're producing a video that shows how to make an exotic dish, make sure your kitchen is spotless and there aren't any crumbs on the counter.

Writing Scripts for Video and Animation

A written script provides a road map for your production and example dialogue for any spoken words in your story. It can also briefly explain the setting, action, lighting, and transitions. If you are the author, the director, the editor, and the producer, you don't need as many details. But if you are handing off the script to someone else to direct and produce, you'll want to add more detail.

You might think you can't write a script without screenwriting software. Shakespeare did not have a software application to help him write *The Tempest*, and it turned out pretty well. You don't need a screenwriting program to write a good script.

You might think you don't really need a script, but there are several good reasons to have one:

- When recording voice-overs or for any spoken narration that accompanies the visuals, a script helps you and other speakers remember what to say and when to say it.
- A script prevents some ahs, ers, and ums that would need to be edited out.
- A script stops some spontaneous, impromptu nonsense that would need to be eliminated.
- A script briefly describes settings for scenes.
- A script briefly describes action during a scene. Is the main character pulling out her hair when she says, “No, I don't want to,” or is she stamping her foot?
- A script provides a minimal amount of stage direction.

The format you use for writing a script should be clean and easy to read, but there are no strict rules unless you are writing a screenplay and are hoping to sell it. Scripts don't use quotation marks around dialogue, and characters are shown in ALL CAPS.

For more details about writing dialogue, read Chapter 5, “Adding Sound.”

FIGURE 4.7 shows a short sample script.

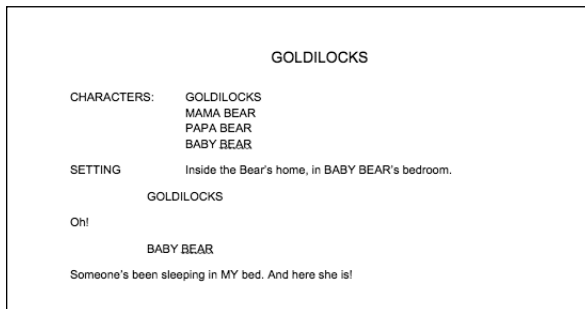


FIGURE 4.7

A sample script.

Guidelines for Video and Animation

Designers tend to make several common mistakes when they produce animation or video. Here are a few problems you can easily avoid when you make your own productions:

- **Talking heads.** Your video is an interview of one or two people, and the footage simply shows one face and then another. You can fix this by adding more interesting visuals while the speakers are talking. But do you even need visuals? If the audio story is arresting, think about simply producing an audio podcast of the interview and leaving out the video footage altogether.

- **Panning and zooming too quickly.** Use a tripod and don't let the camera person drink too much coffee. Tailor the speed of the panning to the audience, but keep in mind that members of the audience don't want to feel like they're on a rollercoaster ride.
- **Little or no sound.** Even the silent films, before talkies, had a pianist or organ player to accompany the movie. Without any sound at all, your images can feel empty. If the video shows someone making something, either have the person talk the viewer through the process or add voice-over. A podcast without visuals works fine, but most video or animation needs sound.
- **Timing is too slow or too fast.** For photo slide shows, three seconds per slide works well unless there is a lengthy pan or zoom. Seconds add up. If the scenes fly by too quickly, the audience feels cheated.
- **Not providing a way to print out detailed information.** If you're showing complicated mixes or technical instructions, you'll want to also give the reader an opportunity to print out the information. For example, if you've produced a video on how to make samosas, also provide the recipe, in text, for the reader.
- **No transitions.** Transitions help connect scenes, keep the audience on the same train of thought, and offer resting spots during the production. A simple, common transition is simply to cut to the next scene.
- **Too many scenes.** Modern audiences are quick to move from one scene to the next and don't need all the intermediary scenes that an audience in the 1970s needed. Compare any TV sitcom from the 1960s with a recent show, and you'll see the difference.
- **Impersonal instructions.** When a real person is demonstrating an action, such as folding a paper airplane, and only the hands are shown, viewers can feel as if they are watching a robot. Also, showing only mouse movements and screen captures when explaining how to use a software program can distance your viewers. Fix this by showing a person or a face at the beginning of the story and when you introduce the topic, and by making sure any audio narration sounds enthusiastic.

Here are a few suggestions to consider while producing the visual work:

- Keep it short.
- Keep it simple. Don't try to include more than one idea.
- Keep your audience in mind.
- Keep the lighting suitable for any camera work.
- Keep it fun.

For a good example of an engaging, interactive video online, watch *The Test Tube* with David Suzuki at <http://testtube.nfb.ca>. The first thing you'll see is a question for you to respond to: "If you could find an extra minute right now, what would you do?" After you type in your answer, the show begins. Your response connects with real-time Twitter updates from around the world on the same topic.

Challenges

The best way to get better at writing Web content is to write, write some more, and rewrite. The challenges in this chapter focus on working with moving images.

Freewriting

The freewriting challenge in this chapter asks you to practice writing a script with an image in mind.

Freewriting works best when it is timed. If you tend to write quickly, set the timer for ten minutes. If you tend to take a little more time, give yourself 15 minutes. Remember that with freewriting you don't need to worry about accuracy, grammar, spelling, and so forth.

AFTER 43 YEARS, BARBIE AND KEN SPLIT UP

Early in 2003, Mattel announced that it was indeed time for the plastic couple to spend some time apart (**FIGURE 4.8**).



FIGURE 4.8

Barbie and Ken's last date.

Imagine that Barbie and Ken are on a double date with Midge and G.I. Joe (Barbie's best friend and Ken's best friend). It's the day before they decide to call it quits. The setting is a bar with a dance floor. Choose another setting if you like.

- What are the four characters saying?
- What are they wearing?
- What is the action?
- Describe the setting.

Suggested Exercise

Exercises are longer projects that will take more time to complete. You can find more complete instructions, learning outcomes, and criteria for critiquing your work at www.write4web.com.

STORYBOARDING

Using stick figures, create the storyboard for instructions on how to tie a tie or a silk scarf. Make sure you include:

- An introduction
- A description of the target audience
- A description of the media you will use
- Wide shots, mid-range shots, and close-ups
- An ending

Decide whether you will use animation or video to produce the instructions.

When you are finished, search the Web to find many examples of instructions for both tying a tie and tying a scarf. For examples of both animated instructions and video, see www.tie-a-tie.net. How would your production be better?

Up Next

Now that you've learned about moving graphics and realized how they might enhance your Web content, you can continue on and read about adding sound. Chapter 5, "Adding Sound," explores the dimensions of sound and how human voice affects a story.

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