Nicely Said

WRITING FOR THE WEB WITH STYLE AND PURPOSE

Nicole Fenton and Kate Kiefer Lee

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CONTENTS

Foreword, v
Style Matters, vii

Chapter One
What Writers Do, 1

Chapter Two
Get Your Bearings, 11

Chapter Three
Make a Plan, 27

Chapter Four
Writing Basics, 43

Chapter Five
Find Your Voice, 61

Chapter Six
Watch Your Tone, 71

Chapter Seven
Build a Community, 83

Chapter Eight
Sell It without Selling Out, 99

Chapter Nine
Touchy Subjects, 117

Chapter Ten
Make It Flow, 133

Chapter Eleven
The Revision Process, 147

Chapter Twelve
Style Guides, 157

Afterword, 169
Acknowledgments, 171
Further Reading, 175
Index, 179

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FOREWORD

If you're not a professional writer, The Fear usually strikes early: either at the very idea of needing to write, or at the moment when it's time to begin typing and the terror of the blank page leaps up and freezes your hands on the keyboard. Many (most?) professional writers feel the same thing, along with bonus terrors near the midpoint of a project ("Why did I ever agree to this?!") and at the very end ("This is probably completely incomprehensible and I can't even tell anymore").

Much of that fear arises because our task is so unclear. Writing is something we're rarely taught, beyond mechanics and a little instruction about the five-paragraph essay. But writing—especially in a business context—is a craft with principles and methods that have little to do with grammar and mechanics and everything to do with identifying and meeting readerly needs. Even if they don't realize it, experienced writers understand and rely on those principles and methods, but it's very difficult to find introductions or explanations that deal with them head-on.

That's the first reason this book is such a joy. Whether you write full-time for a big agency or juggle a dozen hats at a tiny nonprofit or startup, this book will give you starting points, help with common web writing questions, and most importantly, a c*oherent and repeatable approach to writing*. In the chapters that follow, you'll find step-by-step guidance through the stages of research, writing, and revision, as well as detailed advice on developing a lively, appropriate voice and tone. You'll also find in-depth discussions of dozens of weird little problems that trip up even the most experienced writers: things like handling the corporate "we"/"us" without sounding creepy, using humor without alienating readers, and navigating the strangely worded waters of legal copy. (And the chapter on clear, ethical, humane marketing is worth the price of the book all by itself.) In short, Kate and Nicole actually explain the things most of us had to absorb from context or learn by getting it wrong.

The second wonderful thing about the book is its unapologetic, matter-of-fact belief that humanness matters as much as formal expertise, and that compassion trumps cleverness. The result is a writing guide that grounds its wealth of practical advice in empathy for readers and their needs—and really digs into what that means, and how to go about understanding the culture, vocabulary, and sensibilities of the communities you write for.

Between them, Kate and Nicole have written for many of the web's most valuable and respected companies. Their commitment to clarity and kindness is the result of their experience, and it makes them extraordinary teachers. The sum of their efforts is an orderly, comprehensive method for accomplishing each writing project you undertake: not paint-by-numbers, but a flexible process within which you can focus all your attention on your goals, your readers, and their needs.

Good writing is always hard, but good guidance makes it a thousand times easier. I can't imagine better guides.

— Erin Kissane
Author of *The Elements of Content Strategy*
Director of Content, Knight-Mozilla OpenNews

STYLE MATTERS

You can't see your readers. You don't know how they're feeling or what they're going through. You can't watch their expressions or make eye contact with them. So writing for them is a little bit of a puzzle.

Most companies fail at this. They don't know how to talk to people like real human beings, and their content is confusing or unhelpful. Sometimes it's even offensive. And that's a genuine problem, because there's no shortage of other things people can do or read online. You need readers to trust you.

With this book, our goal is to unravel the mysteries of the writing process and help you create useful and meaningful web content. Part of that is about asking the right questions. Part of it is about practicing and reading your work aloud. And part of it is about balancing your goals with what your readers need each step of the way.

Whether you're a writer, editor, blogger, content strategist, designer, developer, or small business owner, this book is for you. If you're new to the field, we'll introduce you to the types of content that go into making a website. If you're an experienced writer looking to brush up your skills, we'll help you take your voice further and thread your communications together.

In the chapters that follow, we'll show you how to write for the web with a consistent style and clear sense of purpose. You'll learn how to plan a writing project, define realistic goals, and work toward your mission. You'll know how to adapt your tone to fit the situation and match your readers' feelings. You'll have a set of principles to guide your writing. You'll be ready to teach these concepts to your team with a simple style guide. And you'll know when to break the rules.

This is not a handbook, a playbook, or a workbook. What follows is our best advice from years of writing for the web professionally. As you read, feel free to skip around to the parts that apply to what you're doing right now. After all, writing isn't a linear process. There's no real beginning, middle, or end.

We put a heavy emphasis on the fundamentals, ongoing practice, and value of writing. We won't go into detail about related disciplines like content strategy, information architecture, search engine optimization, or interaction design. But we included a list of our favorite resources in the Further Reading section.

Language is powerful. Your words can make people feel happy, sad, frustrated, proud, and everything in between. So whether or not "writer" is in your title, your writing is important. At the end of the day, you're a person communicating with other people. You want to be nice about it, and despite the screens between you and your readers, you *can* do that. That's why style matters. So let's get to it.

Happy writing!

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Chapter Four

WRITING BASICS

YOU'VE DONE YOUR RESEARCH. You have a plan. You can't escape it any longer. It's time to sit down and write (eek!). Yes, this is the hard part. Hang in there, though. We're in this together. In this chapter, we'll cover:

- Basic guidelines
- Common mistakes
- Tips for getting unstuck
- Exercises for improving your writing

Let's start with a few guidelines for good writing to help you produce it.

Basic guidelines

Good writing is clear, useful, and friendly. Some sentences may be a little plain or *just the facts, ma'am*, but that's okay. A straightforward tone rarely hurts the reading experience, as long as the information is accurate.

The hardest part, of course, is making sense to someone outside your own head. To write clearly, you need to understand your subject, organize your thoughts, and present each point in a logical way. That takes a combination of research, patience, and clearheaded thinking. Style is another important layer that we'll touch on here and explore in upcoming chapters. Your style is there to help you convey your message, which means it's secondary to the message itself.

So let's get to good first and bring in style later. Good means solid, not glamorous, cute, or catchy. Practice these guidelines regularly:

- Be clear.
- Be concise.
- Be honest.
- Be considerate.
- Write how you speak.

Let's work through each of them individually. Rules and guidelines can be a little dry, but we'll try to make this enjoyable.

Be clear

Writing is almost always about clarity. Of course you want to be clear! But if you're under a deadline, it can be hard to spot what's confusing to readers. Here are a few practical tips.

Remember that you're the expert

Don't assume that readers will understand what you're writing about. You know your business and your website better than they do. Invite them in as if you're striking up a conversation or telling a story. You don't have to dumb things down, but you do need to help readers skim and follow along. Think about what you'd tell a friend or a neighbor if they were learning about the topic you're covering.

Keep it simple

If there's a shorter word to say what you mean, use it (**Table 5.1**).

TABLE 5.1 Use short, simple words

Longer	Better
compose, author	write
discover	find
incentivize	encourage, reward
objective	goal
obtain	get
optimize	improve
purchase, acquire	buy
retain	keep
utilize, leverage	use

If you have to use a technical term that people may not recognize, briefly define it or explain it in plain language.

Keep your writing as close to speech as possible. One way to do that is to read your work aloud and see if it sounds like you. For example, do you ever hear people say "inimitable" or "natch" in person? Yikes. If it feels forced, rephrase it. Another way to write like you talk is to use contractions, which crop up naturally in conversation.

Be specific

If you're writing instructions for a series of steps, go through the steps yourself and write down the names of links or buttons exactly as you see them. Be explicit in what you're asking the reader to do.

Avoid vague instructions:

> Update your settings to receive fewer communications from us.

Instead, include specific labels:

> To receive fewer emails, go to Settings > Email Notifications.

Names and labels improve clarity like signs on a highway. Show people how to get around by adding these details. This is especially important for links to articles, headings, and help content. Consider these questions as you write:

- What is the reader trying to do?
- What does the reader need to know?
- What's missing?
- What happens next?
- Is this topic covered somewhere else?

Tell readers what to expect and guide them through the process. Don't stop at a basic confirmation:

> Your order was successful.

Instead, add details about the order:

> Thanks for your order. You'll receive an email confirmation within a few minutes. [View Order] [Print Receipt]

If something goes wrong, politely explain what to do next, whether it's reading an article, resetting a password, or asking for help. Including buttons and links can help you with that.

Be consistent

Use names and labels consistently. If you refer to *notifications* in one place, call them *notifications* everywhere else—not push notifications, instant notifications, real-time alerts, or messages. Being consistent and being repetitive aren't the same thing. Consistent names reduce the number of things your readers have to remember. Being consistent helps people understand the different parts of your website and shows them where to find what they're looking for. As an added bonus, consistent terms improve usability and reduce translation costs.

You should also be consistent with how you capitalize headings and subheadings—whether you decide to use title casing or sentence casing.

Be careful with pronouns, too. Some websites are confusing in this way. They refer to the reader as *you* in one place and *me* in another. Here are a few common examples from headings and links:

About us
My account
Enter your comment
Your orders

Who's *us* here? Generally, *us* and *we* should refer to your company, with *our* referring to things belonging to your company. This is where *my* is especially weird. Who's *me* here? The reader or the company? One way to avoid this awkwardness is to avoid pronouns in the first place:

About
Account
Enter a comment
Order history

Otherwise, we recommend calling the reader *you* to keep your writing conversational. This is definitely a style choice, but you should be consistent one way or another to avoid confusion.

Break the rules thoughtfully

Most of the time, your writing should fit in with your house style or the style of the publication you're contributing to. But every now and then, you'll need to break the rules. It's common for web writers to break traditional style conventions, because some rules don't read well online. For example, most style guides say to spell out numbers up to ten, but digits usually work better on the web since readers are scanning. Another example is how you refer to people after introducing them. Traditionally, you'd use the person's last name, but people don't talk like that in person, so it's a good rule to break.

As you write, keep the appropriate rules and style conventions in mind. Be careful not to confuse or distract the reader. When in doubt, talk about the issue with an editor, rephrase the sentence, or break the rule thoughtfully. If you find yourself breaking the same rule regularly, it may be worth updating your style guide. (We'll talk about style guides and other exceptions in Chapter 12: Style Guides.)

Avoid abbreviations and acronyms

It can be tempting to shorten words to save space, but clarity should always come first. As an example, *security code* is a little longer than *CVV*, but it's easier to understand at first glance when you're talking about credit cards. If you have to use an acronym, briefly define it in plain language on the first mention.

If you're working within character or word limits, you may need to shorten words occasionally. Here are a few commonly accepted examples:

Dates: Sat Nov 22
Times: 3h5m, 3hr 5min, am, pm
Places: USA, UK, EU, JP, CA
Numbers: $20M, 45 ft, 60 m, 60 mi
Technical terms: 3G, LTE, EDGE, Wi-Fi
Formats: CD, DVD, JPG, GIF

If you decide to use abbreviations, look out for confusing ones, especially those that can refer to both states and countries. For example, CA could be either California or Canada. Use abbreviations sparingly, and add approved ones to your style guide.

Be concise

Most of the time, shorter is better. The easiest way to condense your writing is to give it a clear structure. Sketching is one way to do that. Here are a few other tips for organizing your thoughts.

Start with the main idea

Think about what people need to know right away. Move that information up to the top. Don't get to the point; start with it.

Find a direct and polite way to express your idea. Talking it out with a friend or coworker can help. Record yourself if you can so you can hear how you phrase things. Ask yourself: What am I trying to say? The answer to that question is often shorter than whatever you wrote down.

Make it scannable

Pull related ideas together. Arrange similar topics into modules and sections. Then, you can easily move anything that's out of order or fill in the gaps. As your paragraphs get longer, add clear headings to them. If you want to call out any important points, use bulleted lists to summarize them. Make it easy for readers to skim, find what they need, and know what's coming next.

Use simple sentences

Break down big ideas into manageable bites. Keep your sentences as short as possible.

Avoid trailing on:

> If you haven't already done so, you can sign up for our newsletter to receive deals and special offers delivered directly to your inbox.

Instead, try paring it down:

> Sign up for our newsletter to get special offers.

Don't make people read more than they need to. Once you figure out what your point is, whittle the writing down to the essentials. Here's another wordy example:

> For assistance with questions not listed above, please click here to see our contact information.

Instead, cut the extra words:

> Other questions? Contact us.

Cover one idea at a time. If you need to include secondary information, try linking to it instead of summarizing or repeating yourself.

Talk to your readers

Use the imperative when it's appropriate. Talk *to* your readers, not *at* them. Tell them what to do in a kind and straightforward way. This little change in perspective can help you be concise.

For example, avoid talking about yourself:

> For the holidays, our customers can find the perfect children's books on our website.
>
> We're excited to announce that we are introducing over 30 new products to our shop for the holidays.

Instead, be direct:

> Find the perfect holiday gift. Shop now.
>
> There are over 30 new items in the shop today! See what's on sale.

Be careful with the passive voice, where the subject of the sentence comes after the object:

> You have received a gift card from Maria.

Instead, use the active voice:

> Maria sent you a gift card.

Balance being direct with being nice. Huddle your nouns and verbs close together to shorten your sentences. Active verbs help you write concisely and invigorate your prose so that it feels more like a conversation.

Be positive

Be careful with negative language, which is usually longer and less friendly than positive language. Avoid telling readers what they can't do:

> You cannot continue without signing in.

Instead, be positive or neutral:

> Sign in to continue.

And while it's generally best to avoid the passive voice, in certain situations it helps you sound softer without adding too many words. It's especially useful for time-sensitive messages like payment confirmations and error messages. Directness can sometimes sound terse or robotic:

> We couldn't authorize your credit card. We cancelled your order.

In those cases, soften the language:

> We were unable to authorize your credit card. Your order has been cancelled.

Conciseness is a trickier concept, because it isn't always appropriate. You may need to vary the lengths of your sentences to keep them friendly. If you use several short sentences in a row, you can end up sounding sharp or stiff. It's also possible to cut too much, to oversimplify a complicated issue, or to reduce your message to something generic. Find the simplest way to say what you mean without losing important details.

Be honest

For web writers, honesty means two things: presenting the facts and being true to your company. It's a combination of accuracy and sincerity. Tell the truth and be nice. Don't brag about how great you are. Focus on your strengths and present them carefully. People will know when you're lying to them. Don't say an offer is "Just for you" if you're sending it to hundreds of readers.

Be careful

Along with checking for errors, you should also make sure your work is trustworthy and reliable. Back up your claims with facts and concrete examples. Don't exaggerate or overpromise. For example, if it takes an hour to purchase something over the phone, don't say it's a quick call. Or, if you're specifying how many readers you have, don't lie about the number.

Check your facts and sources. When reading through a draft, pick out any details you consider to be facts and verify them. If you're citing another writer's work or referencing a study, link to it. When you've done your research, it will come through in your writing.

Tell the truth

Make sure your writing speaks the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Even if you have the best intentions, little white lies can sometimes sneak in. Be especially aware of this when you're writing marketing copy. If you're trying to persuade people to do something, it's tempting to say things that sound nice but aren't exactly true. As Anne Lamott says, take out the lies and the boring parts.[1]

---

[1] https://twitter.com/ANNELAMOTT/status/440540092629655552

Check in with your own feelings regularly. As you're working on each sentence, make sure the writing is sincere. It should represent your real feelings or attitude on the topic. If you feel like you're pretending or forcing specific words into a phrase, you may need to pull the language back toward reality.

Be careful with adjectives and modifiers. It's easy to overuse descriptive words and leave readers feeling unsatisfied. Replace fluffy modifiers with concrete ideas. Here are a few examples to avoid:

- amazing
- artisanal
- beautiful
- dynamic
- industry-leading
- innovative
- intuitive
- memorable
- natural
- powerful
- revolutionary
- unique
- everyone's favorite
- it's never been easier

Show readers how your product is different or why it's great; don't *tell* them how to feel. Avoid being melodramatic:

> With our intuitive design tools creating the site you've always wanted is easier than you ever imagined. (www.godaddy.com)

Instead, add honest, useful details:

> Choose from simple templates or customize your site over FTP.

Point out specific things you can do for the reader, instead of assuming you know what they want.

Be considerate

Help people on their own terms. Use words they understand, and treat them with the same level of respect you'd give them in person.

Be polite

Most of the time, the easiest way to show your empathy is to write how you speak. How would you talk about this in person? Make it sound more like a conversation. Show your thoughtfulness. Make the reader smile. You can even give them a little encouragement. Put yourself in the reader's shoes and check your tone to make sure you're being polite. If you need the reader to wait for a moment or fill in extra form fields, a simple "please" or "thank you" goes a long way.

Be inclusive

The words you choose affect how people relate to you and define your relationships. Keep the language open when you can. Watch out for words that turn people off or only make sense to a particular audience. Don't assume that your readers are all from the same place, age group, or industry circle.

Be careful with idioms and slang

Jokes, metaphors, regional expressions, and cultural references don't always translate well. Your readers may live in different countries, or English may not be their first language. The next time you're explaining something with a metaphor or a reference, ask yourself if there's a more universal way to make your point.

Avoid jargon and catchphrases

Don't complicate your ideas with business or industry jargon. Not everyone will understand your lingo, even if you and your boss talk that way around the office. Whenever you're reading over your work, remember to cut the bullshit (**Table 5.2**).

You probably have your own set of professional terms too. Make a list of overused words and phrases from your industry and add them to your style guide so that your team knows to avoid them.

TABLE 5.2 Jargon

Blogs and magazines	Startups
bespoke	adaptive
curate	crushing it or killing it
gifted, gifting	disruptive
sustainable	ecosystem
tweeps	engagement
X is the new Y	game changer
the future of X	impact
viral	seamless

Be respectful of personal names and genders

Use a person's chosen name and preferred gender pronoun. If you're unsure of what to call someone, use their name or consider using the singular *they*. Neutral pronouns like *them* and *they* are inclusive of all gender presentations, and considerate of the fact that not everyone identifies as male or female. Here's an example:

> Your gift card recipient can choose exactly what they want.

We use the singular *they* throughout this book for that reason and because it sounds less awkward than the alternatives. And while it may be a controversial topic for grammarians, the singular *they* has been in use since the 1300s.

Okay, those are all the rules for now. Still here? Great! To sum it up, good content presents the facts in a kind, honest, appropriate way.

Getting unstuck

So far, we've covered the basics of good writing and looked at some examples. But if you're feeling stuck on the writing itself, you may need a little push in the right direction. Here are a few things to try:

Be patient. The hardest part of writing is waiting for the right words to come to mind. Keep at it. Stay in your chair, and be kind to yourself as you work through drafts. Don't try to write and edit at the same time. The first draft is usually the most painful, but don't be discouraged by that. Writing is a process, and like anything worth doing, it takes time.

Switch it up. Depending on what you're writing, it may be easier to start on one piece than another. If you're stuck, try switching over to a different page or section. You can also try talking it out with a friend. You don't have to go in order. In fact, we usually save the introduction for last.

Clear your head. If your brain isn't cooperating, take a walk or try writing in a different environment. Give yourself time to think it through before you force words onto the page. Sometimes all you need is a change of scenery.

Read edited text. Reading is the best way to get better at writing. Study other people's work. Books and magazines can expand your vocabulary and help you develop an ear for strong sentences. As you read, you'll start to notice different styles, which can help you develop your own voice.

There's a world of wonderful writing advice out there. We've included a list of our favorite books in the Further Reading section.

Go further

After you finish a first or second draft, take a break and let your work rest overnight. Look at it tomorrow with fresh eyes. Ask a few friends or fellow writers for an outside opinion. Find ways to push your writing a little further.

Try different options

One thing you can do to improve your copy is to come up with a few variations. This can help you explore a specific idea in the copy or find the best way to express it. Try words and phrases with slightly different meanings. Think of different directions you could take the feeling or essence of the word. As an example, here are some variations on a button label:

Post
Publish
Comment
Send
Share
Save

Which one works best? How are they different? Along with different words and phrases, try variations in length. Here are some examples for a nonprofit:

Donate
Donate now
Give back
Fund a project
Make a donation
Save a life today
Help us save lives
Join the fight. Make a contribution.

Longer labels may work better as links or headlines. Write alternate versions to find the best words for your audience. A visual thesaurus or online tool like Wordnik (www.wordnik.com) is a great resource for this.

For longer sections of text, switch the order of your main points. Here's a basic example using the same button label:

Get the best deals on zippers.
Join Zipzip by creating an account.

[Create account]

Create an account.
Get the best deals on zippers.

[Create account]

Presenting a few options can be especially helpful if you're part of a team. Most people aren't content experts, and it may be hard to know what they're expecting from you. Show your team some copy variations to get them involved and speed up the decision-making process. This is also a great starting point for running simple tests on your content.

Read on

People will read your work in different places, on different devices, and in different formats. They could be reading on a phone, or tablet, or computer. They could be on a train commuting to work, eating dinner, or relaxing on the couch. Read your writing in different contexts, so you can experience it the same way. And if you wrote the text in a word processor, be sure to read it online after you publish it.

Check your work

Read your writing on paper too. This is useful for improving drafts, spotting typos, and checking your tone. Tape your current draft to a whiteboard, or find a quiet corner to sit down and read. If you're feeling adventurous, grab a pen (any color will do) and go to town. For longer pieces, you can check the structure by cutting pages and paragraphs into strips and reordering the sections. As you read, listen to how the words sound and consider each point you're making. Keep an eye out for redundant ideas. Check for the basics: Are there typos? Are there clunky sentences? Does it all make sense? Would links or references help the reader? Take some time to reread and reconsider your work.

Ask for feedback

We all get too close to our writing. Ask a friend or coworker you respect to read over your draft. We call these people *early readers*. It might feel embarrassing to share unfinished work, especially earlier in the process, but it can dramatically improve your writing.

Tell your early reader what kind of feedback you're expecting. Does it make sense? Does it flow? Is it interesting? Are there any gaps? Does it sound like you? Or, you may have more specific questions about themes or details in the piece. Be clear about what you need from your early reader and respectful of their time. You may need to move things around or make other changes afterwards, but it's better to learn that early in the process. Talking about your writing is a great way to make it clear, concise, and polished. (For more editing tips, see Chapter 11: The Revision Process.)

Edit it live

Try editing an existing piece of text in its real habitat. We love this little trick! It's helpful in meetings where you're debating headlines or labels with your team. It's also helpful for copyediting on your own. And it's easier than you might think. Let's look at two ways to edit your text in context.

Inspect element

Open the page in your browser. Right-click the text you want to edit. Choose Inspect Element in the pop-up menu. The text should be highlighted in the source code. Replace it with something new. Press the Return key to see what the page would look like with the new text. If you want to show a few variations before making the changes, take a screenshot of each one.

Use Keynote or PowerPoint

Open the page in your browser. Take a screenshot of it at the appropriate size (small for mobile, larger for tablet, and so on). Drop the screenshot into a blank presentation slide in Keynote or PowerPoint. Add a text box over the current text. Give it a background color that matches the background of your site. For example, if the background is white and the text is blue, make the background of the new text box white. Then, write over the image in blue text with the copy you're trying out.

Make a reverse outline

You probably remember making outlines in school. To outline something, you typically write a list of things you want to say, put them in order, and then expand on each of the list items. To review longer pieces of text, try making an outline after you have a draft (we call this *reverse outlining*). Pull the main ideas from what you wrote into bullets or headers. This can give you a sense of what you've covered and what's missing. It can also help you see larger themes in your writing and show you where you might need to move things around. This is also a great time to review the labels and headings you chose to guide readers through your piece.

Keep practicing

As you work through drafts, keep pushing toward being clear, concise, considerate, and honest. In the next two chapters, we'll show you how to write like you speak and bring your voice to the page.

INDEX

A
- abbreviations, 48–49
- acronyms, 48–49
- adjectives, 53
- apologies, 126–128
- Associated Press, 160
- *Atlantic, The,* 127
- audience. *See also* community building; customers
  - considering style guide's, 161
  - defining, 19–20
  - describing in project brief, 32
  - improving flow for, 143–144
  - learning about your, 13, 18
  - respecting, 96
  - selecting newsletter, 91–92
  - using people you know as, 20–21
  - writing for your, 5, 50–51, 54
- Auger, Jenifer, 76

B
- bios, 106–108
- Blair, Gabrielle, 96
- Blend Interactive, 30
- blogs, 86–91
  - Design Mom, 96
  - developing topics for, 2, 86–87
  - editorial calendar for, 89–90
  - FTC guidelines for, 90
  - honesty in, 96
  - links in, 89
  - multiple contributors for, 87, 96
  - reading comments to, 89
  - republishing articles in, 90
  - short paragraphs in, 89
  - titles for, 88–89
  - types of posts, 88
- Bloomstein, Margot, 68
- Bonney, Grace, 93
- Brain Traffic, 103
- brand voice. *See also* voice
  - aligning to mission statement, 69
  - card sorting exercise for, 68
  - creating This But Not That list for, 66–67
  - defined, 62–63
  - developing, 15, 64–65
  - interviewing others to find, 65–66
- branded terms, 109–110
- breaking style rules, 48
- Brown, Mandy, 131
- Brown, Tiffani Jones, 15
- business writing, 2–3

C
- calls to action, 112–113
- campaign taglines, 109
- card sorting exercise, 68
- Casalena, Anthony, 121
- changelog, 168
- charity: water, 22
- chat responses, 124–125
- *Chicago Manual of Style, The* (University of Chicago Press), 160
- Chimero, Frank, 134
- Chronicle Books, 22
- clarity
  - abbreviations and acronyms vs., 48–49
  - auditing words', 141
  - in blog titles, 88–89
  - describing products and events with, 111
  - establishing clear project goals, 7
  - importance of, 4
  - in marketing copy, 102
  - required in calls to action, 113
  - style guides and, 158
  - tips for writing, 44–49
  - when using legal terms, 130–131
- co-searching, 85
- collaborative writing, 14, 16, 168
- comments, 89
- community building, 83–98
  - blogs for, 86–91
  - defining your community, 83–84
  - email newsletters for, 91–93
  - finding your audience, 84–85
  - getting community's feedback, 97–98
  - how they find your site, 85
  - planning messages for community, 86
  - using social media, 95
  - writing emails for, 94
- companies
  - defining your community, 83–84
  - tone for, 80–81
  - using multiple blog contributors, 87, 96
  - voice of, 62
  - writing for, 3–4
- conciseness
  - headlines using, 110
  - tips for, 49–52
  - using in sensitive situations, 119
  - writing calls to action with, 112–113
- consistency
  - importance of, 47, 158
  - maintaining for voice, 167
  - writing with, 143
- contact pages, 124
- content. *See also* sensitive subjects
  - defined, 1
  - defining type used on site, 140–141
  - friendly tone in, 4–5, 14

    further resources on, 177
    including in project brief, 32
    listing types in style guide, 163–164
    mapping emotions to, 73–74
    marketing, 103
    picking for project, 35–37
    principles of good, 4–5
    reverse outlines of, 59–60
    studying materials for, 12
    style guide sections on, 161–164
    types of, 2, 32, 36, 163–164
    writing and refining, 7
Content Strategy at Work (Bloomstein), 68
Content Strategy for the Web (Halvorson), 103
copyrighted materials, 90
customers
    basing copy on needs of, 103
    finding your, 103–104
    interviewing, 65–66
    listening to, 66, 84
    stories about, 88, 114
    writing for, 5

D

deadlines, 149–150
Design Mom, 96
design resources, 177–178
Design*Sponge, 93
Dougherty-Wold, Alicia, 167
drafts. *See also* revision process
    checking your own, 58
    editing others', 152–153
    fact checking, 52
    introducing to reviewers, 148
    preparing to write, 37–40
    providing in friendly format, 148
    re-rereading, 151–152
    refining, 56–60, 114–115, 155
    writing, 40–41

E

early readers, 58–59
Economist Style Guide, The, 160
editing. *See also* revision process
    interface writing, 145
    others' drafts, 152–153
    recordings of work read aloud, 76
    and refining content, 7
    resources on, 176
    your rough drafts, 58
editorial calendar, 89–90
Editorially, 131
Elbow, Peter, 75–76
Elements of Style, The (Strunk and White), 159
email
    asking for feedback, 98
    canned responses for, 124–125
    contacting reviewers by, 150
    etiquette for, 91–92
    personalizing, 92
    sending newsletters via, 91–93
    Social Print Studio's, 94
    subject lines for, 92
emergencies, 121–122
emotions
    content mapping exercise for, 73–74
    matching tone to reader's, 72–75
    Plutchik's wheel of, 73
    using in marketing messages, 105–106
empathy
    communicating with tone, 72–75
    unsubscribe confirmations lacking, 126
    writing with, 118–120
error messages, 46, 120
etiquette for writers, 91–92, 152–153
Etsy, 142
experts, 16, 44

F

Facebook, 167
FAQ pages, 79, 122–124
feedback
    asking for, 58–59, 97–98
    editing others' drafts, 152–153
    listening to, 5
    receiving and using, 14, 150–152
    requesting kind of, 149
    teaching voice and tone in, 154
flow, 133–145
    about, 133
    alternative paths for, 144–145
    auditing word choice for, 141, 143
    defined, 134
    editing other sites', 145
    finding big picture for, 135–136
    inventory of site, 136–137
    listing content used in, 140–141
    making connections for readers, 143–144
    organizing screenshots and notes for, 138–139
    structuring, 139–140
forms, 134, 142
freelancing, 3, 108
Friedman, Ann, 93
FTC guidelines for blogs, 90
further reading, 175–178

G

Gaiman, Neil, 86
gender-neutral pronouns, 55
getting started, 11–25
    conducting interviews, 13–18
    doing research, 12–13
    finding balance for project, 25
    knowing your audience, 19–21

Index

  - when you're stuck, 56–60
  - writing mission statement, 21–25
- ghostwriting, 87
- goals
  - clarifying project, 28–30
  - defining writing, 13
  - developing project, 11
  - listing in project brief, 32
- Google, 23, 79–80
- GOV.UK, 77
- grammar guidelines, 164

H

- Halvorson, Kristina, 103
- Harvest, 123–124
- headlines, 110
- help documents, 122–123
- honesty
  - about sensitive situations, 119
  - adding human touch with, 97, 112
  - apologies and, 126–127
  - establishing voice with, 63, 69
  - when writing marketing copy, 102–103
  - in writing, 52–53, 96
- human check, 76
- humor, 78–79, 119
- Hunt, Randy J., 142

I

- idioms, 54
- Imprint, 18
- inclusive language, 54
- interface writing
  - defined, 134
  - editing other sites', 145
  - improving flow of, 133
  - inventory of site flow, 136–137
  - keeping big picture in mind for, 135–136
  - providing alternative paths, 144–145
  - reviewing, 145
  - types of content for, 36
- interviews
  - conducting, 13–18
  - finding brand voice with, 65–66
  - running, 16–17

J

- jargon, 54–55, 102

K

- kickoff meetings, 30
- King, Stephen, 92

L

- Lamott, Anne, 52
- legal writing
  - resources on, 178
  - types of content for, 36
  - writing legal policies, 128–132
- Leo, Jodi, 18
- limitations of style guides, 158–159
- links in blogs, 89
- listening
  - to customers, 84
  - during interviews about brand, 65–66
  - to feedback, 5
  - resolving disagreements by, 15
- long-form writing, 93
- Lotan, Benjamin, 94

M

- Mad Libs for mission statements, 24–25
- MailChimp, 67, 75
- marketing, 99–115. *See also* brand voice
  - about, 99–100
  - bios in, 106–108
  - calls to action in, 112–113
  - content type for, 36
  - describing in project brief, 33
  - developing useful, 103–104
  - emails for, 93
  - headlines for, 110
  - importance of web, 100–101
  - message types for, 104–106
  - principles of, 102–104
  - refining drafts, 114–115
  - resources, 178
  - selling yourself, 5–6
  - Social Print Studio, 94
  - stories in, 101–102, 114
  - taglines for, 108–109
  - using social media, 95
  - writing copy for products and events, 111–112
- messages
  - considering your, 86
  - error, 46, 120
  - progressive disclosure in, 132
  - types of marketing, 104–106
- metrics for goals, 29
- Microsoft, 79–80
- mission statements
  - aligning brand voice to, 69
  - examples of, 22–23
  - Mad Libs for, 24–25
  - questions for developing, 23
  - writing, 21–22
- *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers,* 160
- ModCloth, 80
- modifiers, 53, 102–103
- modular writing, 38–39

N

- *New York* magazine, 22
- *New York Times, The,* 168
- news blogs, 88
- newsletters, 91–93
- nomenclature audit, 141, 143

P

- Packard, David, 100
- paragraphs for blogs, 89
- personal names, 55
- Photojojo, 126

Pink, Daniel, 100–101
Pinterest, 15
Pipher, Mary, 17
planning, 27–41
  clarifying project goals, 28–30
  creating rough drafts, 40–41
  implementing, 41
  organizing your thoughts, 37–40
  overview, 27
  picking content types, 35–37
  site flow, 138–139
  writing project brief, 31–35
Plotnik, Arthur, 154
Plutchik's wheel of emotions, 73
politeness, 54, 92
presentations on style, 167
Product Design for the Web (Hunt), 142
products
  blogs about, 88
  finding readers' connection to, 18
  telling story about, 101–102
  writing marketing copy for, 111–112
progressive disclosure, 132
project brief, 31–35
projects
  clarifying goals for, 28–30
  collaborating with others on, 14, 16
  defining writing goals for, 13
  developing goals for, 11
  kickoff meetings for, 30
  linking to people you know, 20–21
  outlining workflow for, 33
  team editing for, 59
  writing process for, 6–7
pronouns, 47, 55
ProPublica, 90
Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 160

Q

questions
  developing mission statements with, 23
  form as series of, 134
  interview, 16
  writing feedback, 97
Quinn Popcorn, 101

R

readers. *See* audience
reading
  other's writing, 56
  own writing, 58
  work aloud, 75–76
release blogs, 88
republishing articles, 90
research
  purpose of, 12
  resources about, 177
  role in writing, 6–7
  talking to experts for, 16
reverse outlining, 59–60
reviews. *See also* feedback
  contacting reviewers by email, 150
  interface writing, 145
  introducing draft to reviewers, 148
  setting deadlines for, 149–150
revision process, 147–155
  communicating deadline changes, 150
  defining roles and deadlines in, 149–150
  editing others' drafts, 152–153
  enlisting early readers, 58–59
  introducing draft to reviewers, 148
  making mistakes in, 152
  providing draft in friendly format, 148
  re-rereading, 151–152
  receiving and using feedback, 150–152
  refinements during, 155
  requesting feedback needed, 149
  role in writing, 6, 7
Richards, Sarah, 77
rough drafts. *See* drafts

S

sarcasm, 78–79
scannable writing, 49
scheduling blog posts, 89–90
selling yourself, 5–6
sensitive subjects
  apologies, 126–128
  avoiding polarizing topics, 120
  canned responses for chat or email, 124–125
  emergencies, 121–122
  error messages, 46, 120
  help documents and FAQs, 122–124
  kinds of, 117–118
  legal policies, 128–132
  preparing templates for, 122
  unsubscribe confirmations, 125–126
  writing tips for, 119
sentence style, 49–50, 110
Shortstack Books
  about, 8–9
  adapting tone for, 74–75
  bio for, 107–108
  content type used by, 37
  inventory of site flow, 136–137
  project brief for, 34–35
  This But Not That list for, 67
simplicity, 45, 49–50
sketching ideas, 38–40
slang, 54
sneak peeks, 93
social media, 95
Social Print Studio, 94
specificity in writing, 46
Squarespace, 121
Starbucks, 22

Index

stories
  interviewing others for, 18
  telling your, 101–102
  testimonials and customer, 88, 114
Storq, 112
structuring flow, 139–140
Strunk, William, Jr., 159
studying content materials, 12
style guides, 157–168
  announcing changes to, 168
  breaking house rules, 48
  components of, 161–165
  considering audience for, 161
  content principles for, 161–162
  developing, 4–5, 168
  examples of, 159–161
  grammar and usage sections in, 164
  including list of resources in, 165
  limitations of, 158–159
  listing content types for, 163–164
  listing web styles, 164–165
  mapping content to emotions for, 73–74
  mentioning in project brief, 33
  negotiating style principles, 154
  promoting standards in, 166, 168
  purpose of, 158
  tips for concise writing, 49–52
  tone guidelines, 4–5, 15, 162–163
  updating, 165–166
  using consistency, 47, 158
  voice guidelines, 162–163
style resources, 176
subject lines for email, 92

T

taglines, 108–109
teams
  choosing goals with, 29
  editing by, 59
  working with lawyers on, 129–130
TED, 23
terms of service, 130–131
thank yous, 97
Thomas, Clarence, 130
titles for blogs, 88–89
To Sell Is Human (Pink), 100–101
tone, 71–81
  adopting informal, 80–81
  checking by reading aloud, 75–76
  defining in style guide, 162–163
  developing guidelines for, 15
  GOV.UK's inclusive, 77
  humor, 78–80, 119
  illustrating in style guide, 158
  maintaining polite, 54
  shifting, 71
  showing empathy in, 72–75
  using friendly, 4–5, 14
  voice vs., 61
topics
  avoiding polarizing, 120
  developing interview, 16
  listing in project brief, 32–33
  structuring flow of web, 139–140
trademarks, 109–110
Twitter, 95

U

University of Chicago Press, 160
unsubscribe confirmations, 125–126
updating style guides, 165–166
user interface. *See* interface writing
users. *See* audience; customers

V

verbs, 110
Vernacular Eloquence (Elbow), 75–76
Vilhauer, Corey, 30
voice, 61–69
  aligning to mission statement, 69
  avoid squashing writer's, 154
  card sorting exercise for, 68
  defined, 61
  defining in style guide, 162–163
  developing for brand, 15, 62–65
  honesty and, 63, 69
  illustrating in style guide, 158
  interviewing others to find, 65–66
  maintaining consistent, 167
  qualities of company's, 62
  selecting words reflecting, 65
  This But Not That list for finding, 66–67
  tone vs., 61

W

web
  as customer service medium, 5
  importance of marketing for, 100–101
websites. *See also* interface writing
  calls to action for, 112–113
  making inventory of flow, 136–137
  messaging on Obama, 125–126
  reviewing interface writing of other, 145
  structuring flow of, 139–140
  usage guidelines for, 164–165
White, E.B., 159
Woot, 78–79

words
  abbreviations and acronyms, 48–49
  auditing clarity of, 141, 143
  creating brand voice with, 65–66
  idioms and slang, 54
  playing with variations in, 57–58
  pronouns, 47, 55
  providing guidelines for, 164
  selecting carefully, 53–55
  taglines and branded, 109–110
  tips for effective, 142
  using positive, 51–52
  whimsical, 80
writers
  conducting interviews, 13–18
  considering message to your community, 86
  content types for web, 36
  defining your community, 83–84
  developing voice, 15, 62–65
  doing research, 12–13
  editing others' drafts, 152–153
  empowering with style guide, 158
  finding readers' connection to products and services, 18
  getting unstuck, 56–60
  organizing your thoughts, 37–40
  promoting style guide standards, 166, 168
  reading comments to blogs, 89
  reading work aloud, 75–76
  remaining sincere, 53
  role of web, 137
  running interviews, 16–17
  standardizing styles and voice, 167
  teaching about voice and tone, 154
writing. *See also* interface writing; sensitive subjects; tone; voice
  adding human touch to, 97, 112
  basic guidelines for, 43–44
  basing on people you know, 20–21
  blogs, 86–91
  clarity in, 44–49
  collaborative process in, 14, 16
  community-building emails, 94
  consistency in, 47, 143, 158, 167
  creating concise, 49–52, 110, 112–113, 119
  defining goals for, 13
  email subject lines, 92
  finding audience for, 5, 50–51, 54
  goal statements, 28–29
  habits for, 5–6
  headlines, 110
  honesty in, 52–53, 96
  humor in, 78–80, 119
  kinds of, 2–4
  legal policies, 128–132
  marketing copy, 102–106
  mission statements, 21–25
  modularly, 38–39
  newsletters, 91–93
  organizing thoughts for, 37–40
  picking content type for, 35–37
  polishing drafts of, 56–60
  principles of good, 4–5
  project brief, 31–35
  reading aloud, 75–76
  resources for, 175
  rough draft, 40–41
  scannable, 49
  selecting words carefully, 53–55
  sentence style, 49–50, 110
  shifting tone in, 71
  showing empathy in, 72–75, 118–120
  simplicity in, 45
  specificity in, 46
  steps in, 6–7
  studying other's, 56
  taglines, 108–109
Writing to Change the World (Pipher), 17

Y

Yahoo! Style Guide (Barr and others), 159

Z

Zinsser, William, 4