# Writing for the intranet

impress
clear communication

Contents

## The problem with intranets

- In a large organisation the job of writing content for internal web pages falls to multiple people, which leads to problems with the quality and consistency of the information presented.
- When the author of a particular web page moves away, ownership of the content becomes unclear, which makes the task of keeping the information up to date and relevant very difficult. The website tends to become a pinboard of new information pasted around old information, as new authors are reluctant to alter or remove old content.
- These problems are passed on to the user, who then has to spend considerable time and effort finding the information they need. Amplified across the organisation this can lead to markedly decreased working efficiency.

Poor-quality content:

1. reflects poorly on the department, and
2. can confuse or mislead the reader, which
3. leads to misunderstanding and errors, which
4. need to be fixed, usually with the help of the person who wrote the content in the first place.

Writing effective copy for an intranet page is a skill that must be learned, ideally through practice.

## The website as a 'department store'

Imagine standing at the entrance to a big department store. You're in a hurry, and you just want to grab what you need and get out of there. Looking up you can see, hanging from the ceiling, big friendly signs that say

**Men's Clothes | Kids' Clothes | Electronics | Sporting | Garden**

Immediately you know where to go, and you're confident that when you get there you'll be able to find what you're looking for (or quickly find that it's *not* there and so head to another shop without wasting too much time).

A good website is like a department store. You can immediately see what's on it, you know where to click to get what you want, and you can quickly determine if what you're looking for *isn't* there and go search elsewhere.

Good organisation is actually *more* important for a website than for a store, because a website user has no concept of *just how big* the site is. They have no sense of scale or direction (whereas in a shop you can at least see the walls).

A well-organised website saves the user a great deal of time and effort.

## The purpose of an intranet

The purpose of an organisational website or intranet is to *inform* the *user* about a particular subject. It is likely to contain information and instructions, and also house the various resources that the user might need – templates, forms, reports, fact sheets, and so on. In effect, an intranet enables the inner workings of the organisation to run smoothly.

From the point of view of the user, an intranet is merely a tool that should help him or her to do their job. Often they need to visit only to find a small piece of information, or to download a form, or to find a phone number. And they hope to find what they need as quickly as possible.

## The benefits of a good intranet

Like any tool, if the intranet works efficiently then so will its user. Conversely, if it becomes difficult to navigate or cluttered with unnecessary or out-of-date information the user wastes time. To bring back the department store analogy, what do we do when we can't find what we're looking for? We have to find someone to ask, or we simply give up and leave the store.

New starters in particular benefit greatly from good intranet content. Being able to quickly glean the various workflows and policies in their new environment gets them up and running faster and reduces their dependence on colleagues.

If we consider that there may be dozens or even hundreds of staff in a department, the return on investment of time and thought into developing an effective intranet is very high. Any effort the author makes in providing good content is amplified many times throughout the organisation in terms of saved time and improved workflow.

Finally, a unified approach to online content development across the department will improve the consistency of information available to department employees.

## Assessing existing intranet content

It is easy to look at existing content and decide that it is adequate for the purpose at hand. But often the assessor is looking at the material from a point of view of a subject-matter exert (someone who knows the topic inside-out) and not from the point of view of the target user. When you know a topic intimately and are familiar with the associated processes and formalities, the content in question might seem crystal clear and obvious, but to someone who is not familiar with the subject matter this might not be the case.

Additionally, as an expert with a passion for the topic the subject-matter expert is often eager to provide detail that might be considered overkill by someone else.

This is why that when you assess intranet content for accuracy and currency you must do so *from the point of view of the user*.

## Know your audience and what they need

- Who is your primary audience?
  You shouldn't try to write for everybody. Doing so would mean that your web pages will have lots of information that only a few people need.

- What do they need to **know**?
  Don't tell them everything that *you* know, only what they *need* to know.
  What are they likely to know already? Can you check your assumptions?

- What do they need to **do**, and when?
  Is this for the reader's information only, or do they need to do something as well? Make tasks clear and provide good instructions.

- What templates, tools or resources are available?
  Place the tools and e.g. templates that are vital to the task in easy-to-find places. Some people (but surprisingly few, actually) will want more information on a topic, so if it is necessary to place detail about e.g. governmental policy, Acts and other bureaucratic information, house it away from the core content so it doesn't cloud the messages.

It's always a good idea to form a group to discuss these questions so that everyone is on the same page; it's not unusual for members of a team to have very different perspectives on these questions and it is better to iron them out sooner rather than later.

Discussing these questions will enable you to look at the existing content from the user's point of view. One of three conclusions will present itself:

- It's perfect
- It's mostly fine but needs a minor renovation or update
- It needs rebuilding from scratch

Do not rush into thinking that a renovation is the easy way out. In many cases it is simpler, faster and far more effective to simply begin again. Of course, lots of the existing information might be reusable, but only if it fits cleanly into the desired new framework.

## Scoping

The answers to the questions we've posed will inform the scope of the new content, and help to identify what information is out of scope. Seeking agreement from your team at this stage can save a lot of time later.

An idea of where the limits are will not only help you to set the boundaries for the content but also enable you to estimate how long the project will (or should) take to complete.

## The 80/20 rule

Those of us used to government contracts will be aware of the need to cover all the bases. A typical contract is very long and detailed, and by definition is intended to address every possible outcome in a particular scenario. An intranet site does not (usually) have to do that. It is far better to write a short description of the subject that will satisfy the majority of users, and deal with the exceptions in another way, for instance by phone or email.

If there is a detailed piece of legislation concerning the activity described there is no need to regurgitate it on your intranet page. If there is a full policy or Act somewhere, place it outside of the key content or simply provide a link to it.

## Has the information been written before?

Don't reinvent the wheel. Another department or organisation might have already come up with great content about your subject. Research carefully.

# Developing new content offline

Unless you simply need to update a phone number or fix a typo on an intranet page it is better to redevelop your content offline, for example using a simple Word document.

## A note on using Word

Take a little time to set up a document so it's easier to translate into a web format later on. It's simply a case of using Word's inbuilt styles (and modifying them if you like). For example, in this document

# Heading 1 looks like this.

(If you've printed this in black-and-white know that it's a different colour to the rest of the text.) A Heading 1 tells the publisher that this is the title of an individual page (which will appear at the top of the page and also in the site menu).

## And Heading 2 looks like this.

You might use this for a sub-page heading (one that's be nested underneath a primary page). Whatever you decide, it signifies the beginning of another chunk of information and its relative importance.

**Heading 3 might represent an in-page heading.**

It doesn't take long to get the hang of using Headings in Word, and it's well worth the effort – for your own benefit as well as the publisher's.
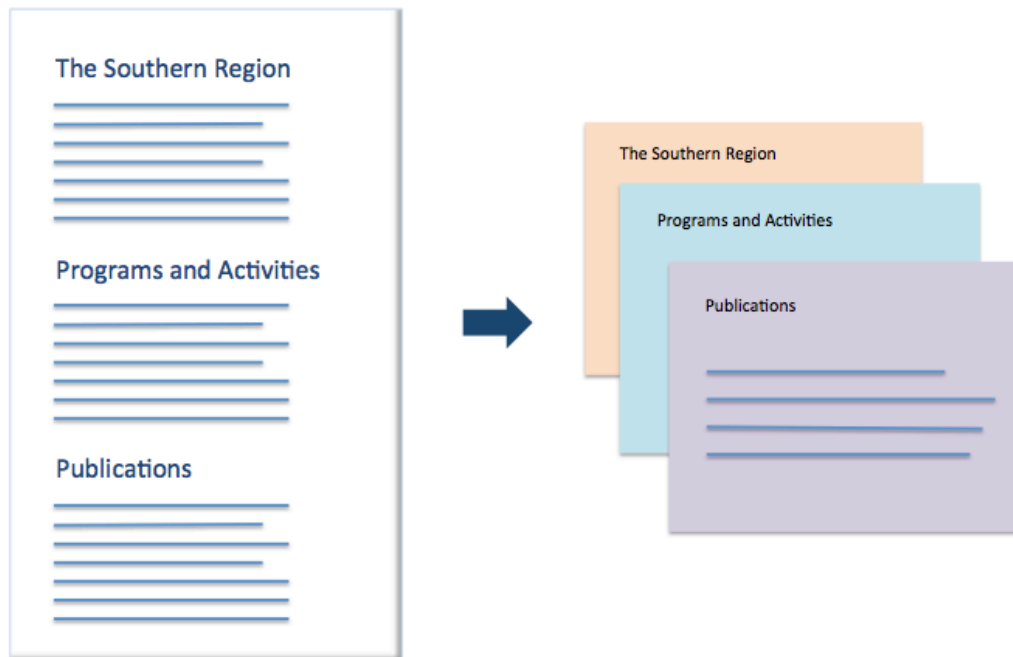
Using Headings also enables you to build a table of contents with a couple of clicks, which in itself is valuable in building a good site framework.

**Paste Special**

Tip: When you are collecting information from other sources and pasting it into your new document, use Paste Special instead of Ctrl-V (From the Edit menu select Paste Special, then choose Unformatted Text). This prevents messy formatting from clogging up your nice clean Word doc.

If you're doing lots of this kind of work it's pretty easy to add a Paste Special button to your menu bar in Word.

## Step 1 – Identify the audience

- "This page is for any staff member who needs to apply for parental leave."
- "This is for people new to a supervisory role."
- "This is for all staff."

Who am I writing for? What do they really need to know or do? What do they know already?

Identifying the audience will help to inform the content and keep it relevant. (There's no need to write about the departmental business plan on a page that explains how to apply for leave.)

> **Booking a departmental vehicle**
>
> Audience:
> This is for any employee who needs to book a departmental vehicle. They already have undergone the general departmental induction and are familiar with WHS responsibilities, code of conduct etc.

## Step 2 – Get your message straight

Take a step back from the sentences and paragraphs that make up the existing pages and start a list of the important points that need to be on the page (or page**s**, the number of which you can work out once you have the list finalised).

(This example is made up.)

> **Booking a departmental vehicle**
>
> Audience:
> This is for any employee who needs to book a departmental vehicle. They already have undergone the general departmental induction and are familiar with WHS responsibilities, code of conduct etc.
>
> Message:
>
> - There is a pool of vehicles available for use by approved staff
> - In order to be 'approved' the staff member must have a current drivers licence and complete the approval process
> - To book a vehicle, go to the DriveMe database and follow the prompts
> - Before driving, become familiar with our safe driving policy
> - On the day of the booking collect the keys from the Facilities Manager
> - Return the vehicle with at least 50% fuel in the tank, fill out the vehicle log book and drop off the keys to the FM
> - Complete the DriveMe booking
> - Report any road-related incidents or damage to the vehicle to HR
> - Contact for more info
>
> Resources: what supporting tools are there?
>
> - Vehicle drivers approval form (Word doc)
> - DriveMe online booking system
> - Safe driving policy
> - Field Hygiene Manual (PDF, also available in hard copy)

This is a simple example, but nonetheless it demonstrates the method. While short on detail the list covers everything that a hopeful car-booker needs to know about the process. It doesn't matter how complex the issue you need to document might be, begin with a list like this to make sure you've covered all the bases.

***This is a good time to seek feedback***. Check with others on your team that what you have in mind covers the important points. Being only a page or so, the outline won't take long to review – and it's far easier to add, remove or rearrange information at this level than it is once the text is written out in full.

## Step 3 – Expand the content

Your Word document can now be gradually expanded with the next level of detail in line with the list of messages you've identified. There's no need to adhere rigidly to the first draft of the points to be covered – the content may evolve slightly – just make sure you don't wander too far away from the key messages.

### Booking a departmental vehicle

Staff members who need to travel for work purposes may book one of the department's vehicles, provided they have been approved to do so and carry a current drivers licence. The pool comprises small five-seater cars, four-wheel-drive utilities and wagons, and a small number of light trucks.

>> Vehicle drivers approval form (Word doc)

It is wise to book at least a week ahead to ensure availability. Bookings can be made through DriveMe, the department's online booking system.

>> DriveMe vehicle booking system

### Vehicle collection and use

Once booked, the vehicle can be collected from the depot between 7am and 6pm on the day of the booking (weekdays only); the vehicle may be collected on the day before or on a weekend with prior arrangement.

The driver is responsible for the safe use of the vehicle. Please become familiar with departmental policy on safe vehicle use.

The Facilities Manager holds vehicle keys. Sign the register and note any issues with the vehicle.

Before returning to the depot ensure that the fuel tank is at least 50% full (use the fuel card in the glove box). If the vehicle is used for field work follow the necessary field hygiene practices.

>> Safe driving policy
>> Field Hygiene Manual (PDF)

### Vehicle return

1. Deliver the vehicle to the depot, complete the log book, deposit the key and sign off on the register. Wash the vehicle at the depot if necessary.
2. Complete the DriveMe booking, remembering to enter the final odometer reading.
3. Report any incidents or damage to the vehicle to HR.

### Incident reporting

Any accidents, near misses or other road safety incidents must be reported immediately.

>> Incident report form (Word doc)

If you have any queries contact the Facilities Manager on ext 331 or email …

> Note that the example above relies quite heavily on forms and links to other pages. It's crucial that these resources are clear and effective as well – a good form should not need pages of instructions.

This is a brief, simple set of instructions set out in chronological order, with the relevant links placed where they are likely to be needed.

The author might choose to contain all the information to a single web page. But if the content needs more detail, or there are many more steps involved, then each of the 'chunks' of information might need its own page.

## Step 3 – Reiterate the content

By now your document has grown from a few dot points to perhaps several pages of text. Chances are it will keep evolving for as long as you choose to spend on it. This poses a risk to your project. Not only is it difficult to draw a line under your work and call it finished, if others are involved there is often the temptation to keep adding material until everyone feels they've had their say.

When you are reiterating content it is important to do so as evenly as you can. That is, try to keep the quality and level of detail in the text consistent all the way through. This will help you to avoid scope creep, and will also prevent hotspots of too much detail from developing.

**Reiterating content**

Good

Content is developed evenly

Bad

Content hotspots develop
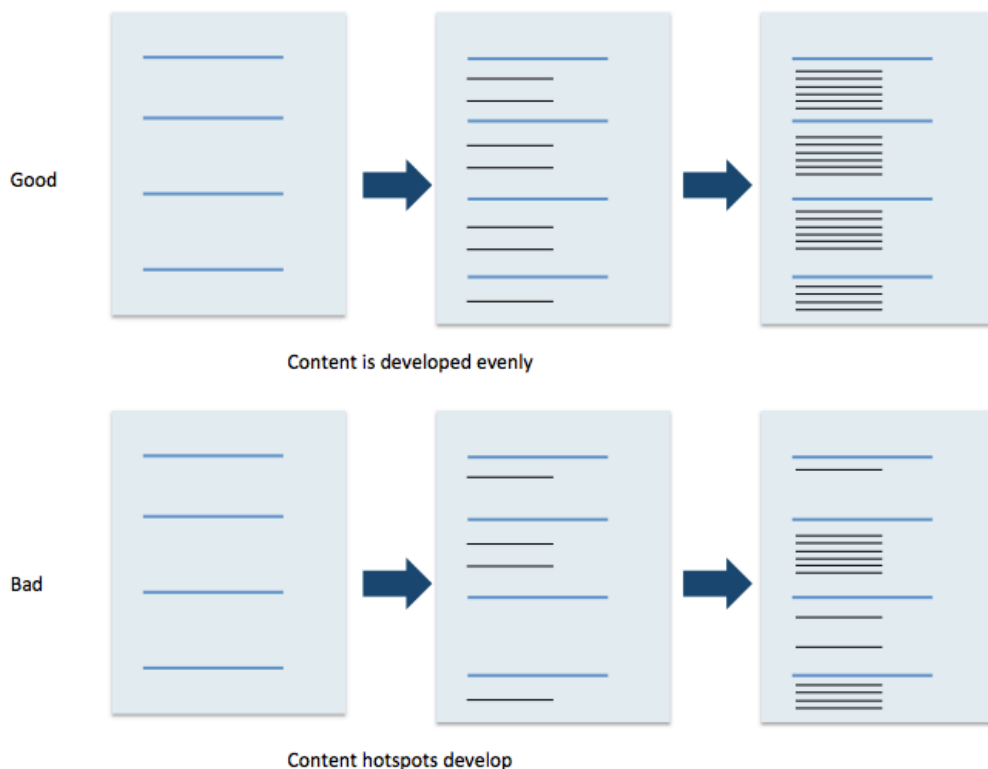
> It's easy to write lots of content but very difficult to keep it brief.
> (If it's short it's more likely to be used.)

## Step 4 – Finalise the content

Finishing a writing project can be easy, or it can drag on for a long time. The good thing about an intranet site is that people do not expect it to be polished in the same way that a glossy report might be. Small errors can be fixed at any time after publication (hopefully sooner rather than later).

**The art of seeking feedback**

If you send a document to a team of people and ask them to please provide feedback, typically what happens is that you'll (eventually) receive back versions of the document from each person that now look very different to what you started with. Sometimes the feedback is even conflicting. To some people, the notion of providing useful feedback is moving commas and apostrophes.

Be specific when you ask for feedback.

> "*Please take a look at the attachment, which is a draft intranet page describing the vehicle booking procedure. In particular I'd like your feedback on whether the key messages are correct, and that they cover what the audience needs to know. Remember, this is for an intranet page so I want it short and sharp. Don't worry too much about correcting typos – I plan to have the document edited later.*"

> Feedback is not the same as testing, by the way. In the world of websites, many organisations test their content on a selected group of typical users before they launch the site to the wider audience.
> This is clearly not possible in many cases but consider 'testing' your content on a colleague or two to see if they get the point you're trying to make.

## How to present information effectively

### Break text into chunks with useful headings

We've already discussed beginning to structure a document using dot points, then slowly migrating the key messages into chunks of information. 'Chunking' helps readability immensely.

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## Hopsum infinite

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## Klingon poop

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It is far easier to find information on a page divided into small sections, particularly if each section is given a clear and informative title or heading. The user can scan and quickly determine whether the information is what they're after.

**Headings**

Try to make the headings reflect what is in the content that follows.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Bad** | Information for patients |
| | Important – please read |
| **Good** | What to do on the morning of your operation |
| | In the event of a fire |

## Layout

Of course, there is not usually much scope to 'dress up' an intranet page, which typically is based on a template with a limited number of formatting options. But you *can* control how the headings and paragraphs appear on the page. It's also likely that you can use a table, for example, to present information in a better way.

**Responsibilities**
**Duty Holder -** accounta[...]
necessary resources to [...]
work that ensure this pr[...]
applied and observed
**Managers –** must ensu[...]
implemented within thei[...]
**Duty Officer -** Has the [...]
following this procedure[...]
working under their con[...]
procedure. They have [...]
safety of personnel follo[...]
and for maintaining app[...]
to their activities.
**Workers –** to ensure th[...]
does not adversely affe[...]
safety, or that of others.[...]
comply with the terms o[...]
must immediately repor[...]
person any matter that [...]
others' health and safet[...]

## Responsibilities

| | |
|---|---|
| Duty Holder | • Provide the necessary resources to ensure safe systems of work<br>• Ensure that the procedures are understood, applied and observed |
| Manager | • Ensure that the procedures within their area of responsibility are implemented |
| Duty Officer | • Follow these procedures<br>• Ensure those working under their control follow these procedures<br>• Maintain records relating to activities |
| Worker | • Follow these procedures<br>• Act in a manner that does not adversely affect their own health and safety, or that of others<br>• Report to the Duty Officer any matter that may affect their own or others' health and safety |

### Structure vs. content

Structure and content are interrelated. It's helpful to think of 'structure' as what you see at first glance – the title of the different sections and tabs and their arrangement on the screen – a bit like a table of contents in a report. But it's important to consider structure at the information level too. The order in which we present the information on a single page, paragraph by paragraph, is just as important as where the page sits on the site's framework.

# The hard bit: writing

Writing is hard, but not as hard as thinking. The good news is that we've already covered the thinking part of the process. If you know who your audience is, and you know what you need to tell them, then three-quarters of your work is already done.

To think about these comments another way consider this:

> There are plenty of beautifully-written materials out there that are utterly useless.

Lots of 'good writers' will rely on their skill with words without first considering the strategy behind what they are trying to achieve. No-one – particularly those reading an intranet page – cares that your written style is not perfect, as long as your message is useful and clear.

But there are some principles you should consider when you write.

## Get the chronology right

Think about the order in which you present the information and match it with what happens in reality. The example on vehicle booking above describes the process in a logical order.

## Keep a single idea to its own paragraph

If you introduce a new concept begin a new paragraph. It helps readability immensely.

## Don't use too many words

| | |
|---|---|
| **Before** | The following questionnaire is designed to provide us with information that will help us improve the site and make it more relevant to your needs. Please select your answers from the drop-down menus and radio buttons below. The questionnaire should take you only 2–3 minutes to complete.<br><br>At the bottom of this form you can choose to leave your name, address and telephone number; you may be contacted in the future to participate in a survey to help us improve this site.<br><br>If you have comments or concerns that require a response please contact Customer Service. [**97 words**] |
| **After** | Please help us improve the site by answering these questions. It should only take you 2–3 minutes to complete the survey.<br><br>NOTE: If you have comments or concerns that require a response don't use this form. Instead, please contact Customer Service. [**42 words**] |

*Source: Don't make me think, Steve Krug*

## Is there any way this could be misunderstood?

Whenever you write something ask yourself that question. *You* know what was in your head when you wrote it, and it made perfect sense, but put yourself in the place of the user and ask if what you've written could be misinterpreted somehow.

Most of the time any lack of clarity will be picked up during the content review stage. At least make sure that someone else reviews your work before you have it published.

## Bad writing makes smart people look dumb

We've said that 'no-one cares' if your writing skills are not your strongest feature but there are limits to what you can get away with.  If writing is not your forte, accept that fact and when the time comes seek input from a colleague (or from a professional

editor). Even for an experienced writer a fresh pair of eyes on a complex topic is invaluable.

## Allow time for re-writing

It's extremely rare that someone's first draft covers everything perfectly. Expect several re-writes and accept that doing so takes time. Plan for it, and don't put yourself in a position that you are releasing sub-optimal content.

## Web conventions – hyperlinking

Don't overuse hyperlinks. A link to a report or a useful site does not need to be added every time that target is mentioned. A page with too many links on it detracts from the message, is confusing for the reader, and makes them think there is lots of extra information that they'll need to read, perhaps unnecessarily. Clicking on a hyperlink can 'kidnap' the user away from your page, which you want to avoid as far as possible.

There's nothing wrong with a few inline hyperlinks on a page, but if there are lots of links consider listing them beneath the paragraph or at the bottom of the page.

Furthermore, if a link points to a document rather than a web page make it clear.

>> Vehicle washdown procedure (PDF)

## Page anchors

If your page is a long one or has lots of sections, consider using an anchor list at the top, which is the web equivalent of a table of contents. It enables the user to jump to the relevant section without having to scroll through reams of text.

Using anchors provides another reason to make sure your headings are clear and describe what is contained in the text beneath.

**Programs and Activities**

This page describes the current and planned on-ground works occurring in the area throughout 2014–15.

> Rejuvenation white gum habitat
> Holistic grazing practices
> Community engagement
> Weed control and revegetation

Rejuvenating white gum habitat

The endangered forty-spotted pardalote relies on white gum habitat for survival. Population surveys between 2010 and 2014 have shown that numbers are decreasing and

I hope you've found this little guide useful. If you take away only one thing, it should be the department store analogy. Imagine yourself standing at the doorway of K-mart or Bunnings. You can quickly work out where to go, based on clear signage. When you get there the items are arranged so you can quickly find what you need.

Were it so with websites!

## Further reading

- www.sensible.com (Steve Krug's Don't Make Me Think website)
- Strunk & White's Elements of Style (a little book on grammar that you can read during your next boring phone meeting)
- The Australian Style Manual, 6th edition (the bible on writing for government)
- Cambridge Guide to English Usage, Pam Peters (for grammar and style enthusiasts)