# Web writing—Part 1

In the beginning

# But first…

- Your exits are…

- House rules

- Warm-up

# About you...

- Book/movie/game/TV show you love (or hate) and why

- Something you're looking forward to

- What annoys you?

# An update

- Things you may already know

  ✦ Plain English

  ✦ Web-specific techniques

# What is 'web content'?

- Websites

- Emails

- Newsletters

- Apps

- Anything that gets read on a screen

# Some questions

- What types of content does your organisation produce?

- What are the characteristics of good content?

- What is the purpose of your organisation's web content?

- How would your organisation benefit from better web content?

# Who are these people?

(Your customers).'
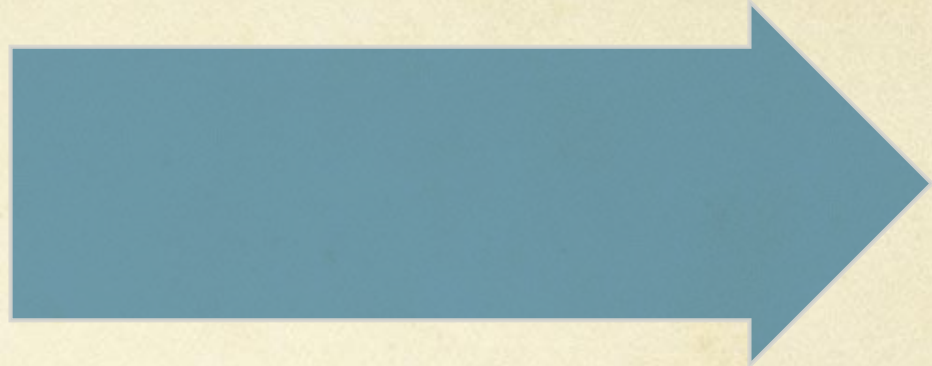
# Why use the web?

Reduce customer effort…

- If it's easier to find information or complete a transaction online, customers will use this channel—rather than calling or going to a counter.

Obviously, content must meet their needs.

# 2 types of content

**Push**

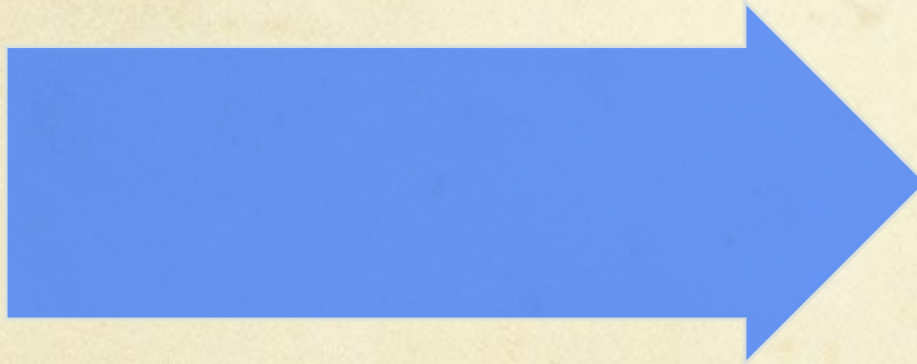**Pull**

# How does this affect how we write?

- What we include and what we don't…

  ✦ Does your customer need or care about the information?

    ▪ If you're buying a new car, do you care about the company's 'vision' statement?

- How we structure content

  ✦ Put what the customer wants first, not what the organisation wants first

    ▪ Put the application form links at the top of the page!

# It's not all about you...

- You can't make someone read your content

- If they do, you can't guarantee they get the message or take the action you want...

# SONY

4-676-072-11 (1)

**1** Setting up your CLIÉ™ handheld

**2** Basic operations of your CLIÉ™ handheld

**3** Connecting to the Internet

**4** Have a try
Taking pictures / Recording movies
Recording a voice memo
Listening to music
Managing schedule events / addresses
Viewing computer documents
Using the Bluetooth® function

CLIÉ™ handheld components

# Read This First

**Operating Instructions**

**Personal Entertainment Organizer**
**PEG-UX50**
**PEG-UX40**

# CLIÉ™

**Bluetooth®**

**MEMORY STICK**

© 2003 Sony Corporation

# Communication is tricky

**What you mean to say**

**What your audience hears**
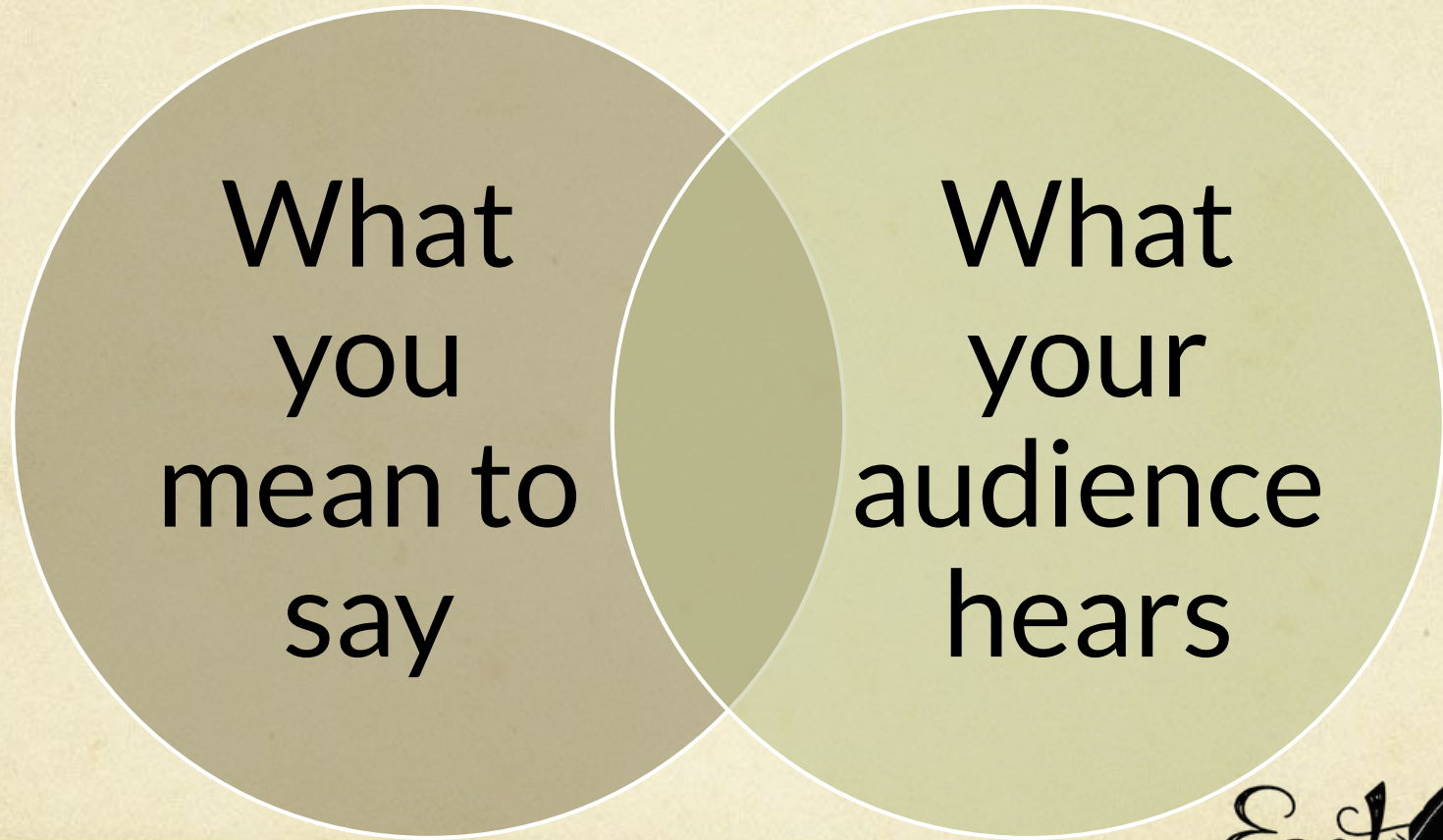
But, there are things you can do to maximise your chances…

# Job of the content writer

1.  Understand who your customers are, and what they need from the content.

2.  Research—find existing content sources; liaise with subject matter experts (SMEs).

3.  Create a content brief that, among other things, defines the job of the content— what should customers be able to do on reading it?

# Wait... Content brief?

- Document control

- Approvals

- Metadata, copyright etc.

- Actual content

- Relationships with other content

- Content audience and purpose!

# Job of the content writer (cont.)

4. Write the content in plain English, following web writing principles.

5. Get the SME to approve the content's technical accuracy—help them to understand why it's written the way it is; push back on attempts to insert content that the customer doesn't want or need. (covered later)

# Your role is critical

- Information architecture is important.

- Interface design is important.

- Content is king.

# A refresher…

Nouns

Verbs

Adjectives

Adverbs

Prepositions

Conjunctions

Determiners

# Stop! Tangent time!

# Old English (c. 1000 CE)

Fæder ure þuþe eart on heofonum si þin nama gehalgod tobecume þin rice gewurþe þin willa on eorðan swa swa on heofonum urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us to dæg and forgyf us ure gyltas swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum and ne gelæd þu us on costnunge ac alys us of yfele soþlice.

# Middle English (1384)

Oure fadir þat art in heuenes halwid be þi name; þi reume or kyngdom come to be.

Be þi wille don in herþe as it is dounin heuene. yeue to us today oure eche dayes bred.

And foryeue to us oure dettis þat is oure synnys as we foryeuen to oure dettouris þat is to men þat han synned in us.

And lede us not into temptacion but delyuere us from euyl.

# Early modern English (1611)

Our father which art in heauen, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in heauen.

Giue us this day our daily bread.

And forgiue us our debts as we forgiue our debters.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliuer us from euill. Amen.

# 50 most common words

the, of, and, a, in, to, it, is, to, was, I, for, that, you, he, be, with, on, by, at, have, are, not, this, but, had, they, his, from, she, that, which, or, we, 's (verb), an, -n't, were, as, do, been, their, has, would, there, what, will, all, if, can

# Bureaucratic words

- ## Legal roles

  - ✦ advocate, attorney, bailiff, coroner, defendant, judge, jury, plaintiff

- ## Legal processes and institutions

  - ✦ bail, bill, decree, evidence, fine, forfeit, jail, inquest, penalty, petition, plea, proof, punishment, ransom, sentence, suit, summons, verdict

- ## Names of crimes

  - ✦ arson, assault, embezzlement, felony, fraud, larceny, libel, perjury, slander, treason, trespass

# What is plain English?

- [Video](Video)

# How we do it

Together, these things add up:

- words—which ones

- sentences—syntax

- paragraphs—structure

- pages—structure

# Words

- Use common words ('use', not 'utilise')

- Use personal pronouns ('we' instead of 'this department')

- Get rid of anything unessential to meaning

  - ✦ redundant synonyms (fair and equitable?), modifiers (prior experience) or categories (period in time)
  - ✦ adjectives and adverbs (many can be deleted)
  - ✦ transition words and phrases (currently, initially, at present).

- Avoid jargon, acronyms, verbosity, colloquialisms and idioms

- Avoid nominalisations (what's a nominalisation?)

# Nominalisations (nouns created from verbs)

- He will give a presentation.

  ✦ He will present.

- Submit an application by 1 September.

  ✦ Apply by 1 September.

- We have reached an agreement to …

  ✦ We have agreed to …

# Spotting one in the wild

| Suffix | Examples | Root verbs |
| --- | --- | --- |
| -ion | compensation, contribution, interrogation, negotiation, nominalisation, prevention | compensate, contribute, interrogate, negotiate, nominalise, prevent, |
| -ment | confinement, enhancement, management, payment | confine, enhance, manage, pay |
| -ing | catering, viewing [nouns] | cater, view |
| -ness | completeness, willingness | be complete, be willing |
| -ure | legislature, annexure, exposure | legislate, annex, expose |
| -ance | assurance, compliance, performance (Not 'agreeance'!) | assure, comply, perform |

# More examples

| Suffix | Examples | Root verbs |
| --- | --- | --- |
| -al | appraisal, dismissal, referral | appraise, dismiss, refer |
| -age | appendage, breakage, usage | append, break, use |
| -ive | derivative, directive [nouns] | derive, direct |
| -ee | grantee, licensee, trustee | grant, license, entrust |
| -er | carrier, doer, seer | carry, do, see |
| -or | grantor, inventor, investor | grant, invent, invest |

# Nominalisations (cont.)

- Have more letters than verbs

- Require extra words

  - ✦ We are **progressing the** finalisation **of** the project.
  - ✦ We are finalising the project. (The nominalised example requires the addition of a verb [handling], an article [the] and a preposition [of].

- Are harder to read, particularly for people with varying literacy levels, learning difficulties, or who speak English as a second language

# Practice

Not all reporting forms and systems were updated at the commencement of the new legislation. Clients should continue to use the reporting forms and templates on the department's website, even where these refer to the Quarantine Act, until advised to the contrary.

Reporting processes, forms and templates will be updated to reflect the new law and will be progressed in line with broader service delivery reforms implemented later in 2016 through the initiation of a maritime reporting system.

# Nominalisation

Not all reporting forms and systems were updated at the commencement of the new legislation. Clients should continue to use the reporting forms and templates on the department's website, even where these refer to the Quarantine Act, until advised to the contrary.

Reporting processes, forms and templates will be updated to reflect the new law and will be progressed in line with broader service delivery reforms implemented later in 2016 through the initiation of a maritime reporting system.

# Plain words

Not all reporting forms and systems were updated at the **commencement** of the new legislation. Clients should continue to use the reporting forms and templates on the department's website, even where these refer to the Quarantine Act, until **advised to the contrary**.

Reporting processes, forms and templates will be updated to reflect the new law and will be progressed in line with broader service delivery reforms **implemented** later in 2016 through the **initiation** of a maritime reporting system.

# Personal pronouns

Not all reporting forms and systems were updated at the **commencement** of the new **legislation**. **Clients** should continue to use the reporting forms and templates on **the department's** website, even where these refer to the Quarantine Act, until **advised to the contrary**.

Reporting processes, forms and templates will be updated to reflect the new law and will be progressed in line with broader service delivery reforms **implemented** later in 2016 through the **initiation** of a maritime reporting system.

# Redundancies

Not all reporting forms and systems were updated at the **commencement** of the new **legislation**. **Clients** should continue to use the reporting forms and templates on the department's website, even where these refer to the Quarantine Act, until **advised to the contrary**.

Reporting processes, forms and templates will be updated to reflect the new law and will be progressed in line with broader service delivery reforms **implemented** later in 2016 through the **initiation** of a maritime reporting system.

# Jargon

Not all reporting forms and systems were updated at the *commencement of the new legislation*. Clients should continue to use the reporting forms and templates on the department's website, even where these refer to the Quarantine Act, until **advised to the contrary**.

Reporting processes, forms and templates will be updated to reflect the new law and will be progressed in line with *broader service delivery reforms* **implemented** later in 2016 through the initiation of a maritime reporting system.

# Literal rewrite

Not all our forms and systems were updated when the new law began.

Please use the forms on our website, even if they refer to the old Quarantine Act, until we tell you otherwise.

Later in 2016, we will introduce a new maritime reporting system and update our forms and processes at the same time.

# Rewrite

Please continue to use the forms on our website, even if they refer to the old Quarantine Act.

Updated forms and a new maritime reporting system will be introduced later in 2016.

# Exercise #1

Addressing legacy mining issues in the Northern Territory

Find nominalisations, jargon, redundancy, opportunities for personal pronouns…

# Oh, and nominalisations…

… often require a passive sentence structure, which generally engages your reader less.

# Active vs. passive voice

**Active voice**

The baby threw the banana.
(Subject [agent] + active verb + object)

**Passive voice**

The banana was thrown by the baby.
(Subject + verb + past participle + preposition + object [agent])

The agent is the thing doing the 'doing'—the above baby is doing the throwing.

Passive sentences often leave out the agent because it is implied. (e.g. Her gazebo has just been built [by builders].)

# Passive to active

- The ship will be sailed to New Zealand by pirates.

- Pirates will sail the ship to New Zealand.

- Your questions will be answered.

- We will answer your questions.

- She was chased by sloths on the first day.

- Sloths chased her on the first day.

# Active voice in speeches (or not)

- We will fight them on the beaches! (Winston Churchill)

- They will be fought by us on the beaches! (passive)

- Mistakes were made. (Richard Nixon)

- [Passive voice ... Where's the agent? Who made the mistakes?]

# When to use passive voice

Passive voice can be useful:

- where the agent can't be identified or is redundant

  ✦ The pineapple farm was burned to the ground. (Someone burned the pineapple farm to the ground.)

- when avoiding designating blame

  ✦ Angry words may have been said. (I got cranky.)

- where the agent is not important

  ✦ The *Mona Lisa* was stolen!

- sometimes in headings, lists and links (covered later).
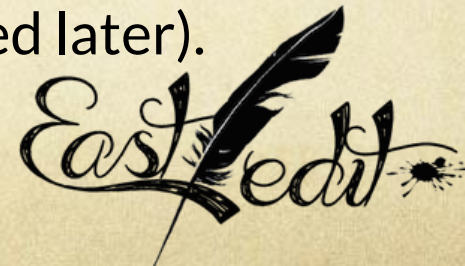
# Make these active

1. The prize was won by my brother's friend.

2. Late job applications will not be accepted.

3. The drinking habits of chimpanzees were recently studied by scientists.

# Active

1. My brother's friend won the prize.

2. We will not accept late job applications.

3. Scientists recently studied the drinking habits of chimpanzees. [?]

# Exercise

- Underline all the passive phrases in the legacy mines text.

# Other sentence points

- Keep sentences short. Break long sentences into several short ones.

- Keep the protagonist (or subject) in view.

- Avoid multiple embedded clauses. (What do I mean by embedded clauses?)

# Multiple embedded clauses

Where for the purposes of determining the full unencumbered value of any property (other than any stock, marketable security or right in respect of shares) it is necessary to determine the value of any trust property or an estate or interest in trust property or a partnership interest, the value of that trust property, estate or interest in trust property or partnership interest shall (except where its value is being determined for the purpose of determining the value of any stock, marketable security or right in respect of shares) be the full unencumbered value of that property, estate, interest or partnership interest calculated in accordance with this section.

# Rewrite

In this section, 'trust property' means 'trust property, estate or interest or partnership interest in trust property'. 'Stock property' means any 'stock, marketable security or right in respect of shares'.

When working out the unencumbered value of property that includes trust property (other than stock property), the value of trust property is the full unencumbered value.

# Before and after

**Readability Statistics** ☐ ? ☐ X

Counts
Words ............................................. 108
Characters ....................................... 564
Paragraphs ......................................... 1
Sentences .......................................... 1

Averages
Sentences per Paragraph ......................... 1.0
Words per Sentence ............................ 108.0
Characters per Word .............................. 5.1

Readability
Passive Sentences ................................. 0%
Flesch Reading Ease .............................. 0.0
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level ...................... 47.8

[ OK ]

**Readability Statistics** ☐ ? ☐ X

Counts
Words .............................................. 56
Characters ....................................... 321
Paragraphs ......................................... 2
Sentences .......................................... 3

Averages
Sentences per Paragraph ......................... 1.5
Words per Sentence ............................. 18.6
Characters per Word .............................. 5.5

Readability
Passive Sentences ................................. 0%
Flesch Reading Ease ............................. 35.3
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level ...................... 12.9

[ OK ]

# Why we need to write in plain English

Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (2008–2013):

- looked at people's ability to process information at work and home

- involved 33 countries—including Australia

Australia scored pretty high. But out of Australia's participants:

- 43.7% had trouble understanding long texts and ignoring irrelevant information (literacy)

- 53.5% had trouble applying numbers in unfamiliar contexts (numeracy)

- 69% couldn't find information on the internet if there were too many steps (problem solving in a technology-rich environment)

# How is web different?

- Accessibility and usability considerations (covered later)

- Screen resolutions change (and with them layout)

  ✦ What type of content do people read on different devices?

- People's behaviour is different—time poor, goal oriented

  ✦ Scan read
  ✦ Only read about 20% of the words on a page—read in an F-shaped viewing pattern

# Stop! Tangent time!

- <u>Count the passes</u> made by players wearing white

# F-shaped viewing pattern

# Which tells us …

People mainly look at:

- the content area—not navigation or promotional elements
- headings (often only the first few words)
- the first sentence of a paragraph (or only the first few words)
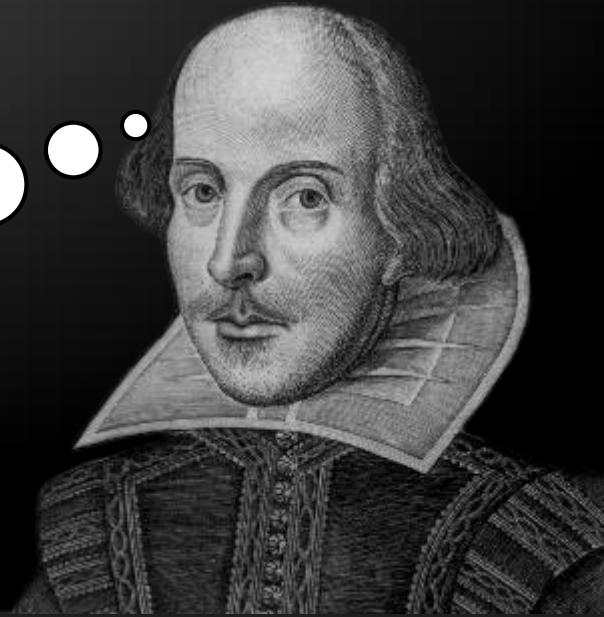- bullets
- [link text](#)
- tables
- images.

# Gaze plots



Image from usability.de

# Scannability

- Break up a page with headings.

- Align key words to the left (passive voice ok!)

- Align links to the left.

- Write meaningful link text (no 'click here').

- Put information in a scannable layout (tables, bulleted lists etc.)

- Write in 'inverted pyramid' style.

# Inverted pyramid

## Most important content

A teddy bear has flown around the world in a hot air balloon.

## Important

Little Ted—aged 40—flew from Tasmania to Greenland in a red balloon and came home last Monday.

## Less important

Little Ted says he is 'stuffed' after his trip.

# Other important web stuff …

- Left-align text (not justified or centred).
- Don't underline anything unless it's a link.
- Make heading hierarchies clear.
- Leave white space.
- Don't write in all capitals.
- Use italics sparingly.
- Consider content area line length. (50–70 characters).
- Don't create false bottoms.
- Don't start list items with the same words.

# Research

- Jacob Nielsen's Tourism Nebraska study (1997)

# Original

Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), Carhenge (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).

# Concise (58% better)

In 1996, six of the best-attended attractions in Nebraska were Fort Robinson State Park, Scotts Bluff National Monument, Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum, Carhenge, Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park.

# Scannable layout (47%)

Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were:

- Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors)

- Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166)

- Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000)

- Carhenge (86,598)

- Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002)

- Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).

# Objective (27%)

Nebraska has several attractions. In 1996, some of the most-visited places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), Carhenge (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).

# Combined (124%)

In 1996, six of the most-visited places in Nebraska were:

- Fort Robinson State Park

- Scotts Bluff National Monument

- Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum

- Carhenge

- Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer

- Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park

# Promotional language

(How to kill it dead!)

- Keep to objective, not subjective, statements. Use facts.

  ✦ 'Charming' is not a fact.

- Remove 'scene setting' statements

  ✦ 'at the end of a long day …'

- Remove overly emotive words

  ✦ Replace 'striving to' with 'working towards'.

- Remove undefined contexts

  ✦ X contributes 1.75 billion to the 'economy'.

# When does promotional language work?

I am indeed amazed when I consider how weak my mind is and how prone to error.

*Rene Descartes:* Meditations (1596–1650)

# Stop! Tangent time!

# A test

- Who's competitive?

- Call out the answer as soon as you can.

- Ready.

- Set...

# Test!

- A bat and ball together cost $1.10.

- The bat costs $1 more than the ball.

- How much is the ball?

# Two types of thinking

- ## System 1

  ✦ 'operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control'

- ## System 2

  ✦ 'allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it'—for complex problems that require concentration

Kahneman D (2011) *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Penguin Books, London

# Cognitive ease

Repeated experience

Clear display

Primed idea

Good mood

Ease

Feels familiar

Feels true

Feels good

Feels effortless

Kahneman D (2011), *Thinking Fast and Slow*

# Ease is...

When you are in a state of cognitive ease, you are probably in a good mood, [you] like what you see, believe what you hear, trust your intuitions and feel that the current situation is comfortably familiar.

Kahneman D (2011), *Thinking Fast and Slow*

# Strain is...

When you feel strained, you are more likely to be vigilant and suspicious: [you] invest more effort in what you are doing, feel less comfortable, and make fewer errors, but you also are less intuitive and less creative than usual.

Kahneman D (2011), *Thinking Fast and Slow*

# Scannable, meaningful headings

- People *do* look at headings ... but often only the first 2 words (around 11 characters).

- They will read more if they think it's relevant.

- Everything under a heading must relate to the heading ... don't tack things on.

# Writing good headings and links

- Be literal and descriptive—not clever.

- Use common words. (Words your customers search for).

- Align left. (Don't centre.)

- Keep succinct! (Aim for less than 35 characters.)

- Front load. (Nothing to do with washing machines.)

EastEdit

# Good headings

- Open access publishing: what to believe

  ✦ Not 'What to believe in the new world of …'

- Cassowary rehabilitation centre to close

  ✦ Not 'The government has decided to …'

# Your turn

Workbook: Headings

And then…

Let's learn about wheelie bins.

# … and lists

- Follow the same rules as headings and links.

  **and**

- Don't start each item with the same word.

- Use parallel structure.

# Parallel structure (not)

- Hosting personal materials in our systems is not permitted.

- No portable hard drives are to be connected.

- Do not change the screen resolution.

# Parallel structure

Please do not:

- host personal materials on our systems

- connect portable hard drives

- change the screen resolution.

# Workbook

Exercise #3: Parallel structure

# Information architecture (IA)

- Peppa Pig

- Darth Vader

- Pol Pot

- The White Witch

- Bindi Irwin

- Socrates

# Sorted?

- Male

  ✦ Pol Pot

  ✦ Darth Vader

  ✦ Socrates

- Female

  ✦ Peppa Pig

  ✦ The White Witch

  ✦ Bindi Irwin

# Sorted?

- Good
  - ✦ Socrates
  - ✦ Peppa Pig
  - ✦ Bindi Irwin

- Evil
  - ✦ Pol Pot
  - ✦ Darth Vader
  - ✦ The White Witch

# Sorted?

- Real
  - ✦ Bindi Irwin
  - ✦ Socrates
  - ✦ Pol Pot

- Fictional
  - ✦ Peppa Pig
  - ✦ The White Witch
  - ✦ Darth Vader

# Not just menus

- IA can be taken down to the sentence level ...

- High-level IA informed by research.

- Page level informed by heuristics.

# Page level IA options

- ## One short page

    - ✦ Self-contained scannable layout

- ## One long page

    - ✦ Page menu at top
    - ✦ Works well for content where customers only need to read the bit that's relevant to them
    - ✦ Or a 'brochure' page

- ## A guide

    - ✦ Pages linked in a logical sequence (where order is important)
    - ✦ Don't break a page up arbitrarily

- ## Mother and child pages

    - ✦ An overview page linking to detail; people dip in for what they want

# What's wrong with this page?

- Cradle Mountain

- Identify bad stuff

# Cradle Mountain questions

- Who are the target audience?

- What do they want to know?

# Planning

The content brief should tell you:

- the target audience

- their needs—what should they know, or be able to do when 'using' the content

- the location of existing content.

# Read and prioritise

- Look at the existing content.

- Remove anything irrelevant to the customer journey.

- Write key points. (bullets)

- Prioritise your bullet points in order of importance (to customer, not agency!)

- Turn these into headings and subheadings.

# Structure

- Your headings should demonstrate the structure for the 'article'.

- One page or several pages?

  ✦ If several pages, group headings accordingly.

- Paragraphs, bullets, or tables?

  ✦ Identify how the information can be best presented

- Flesh out the page content.

# Questions

Do you have any?