# Editing Complexity for the Web

BY MERRY BRUNS

Have you seen one of those diagrams of a car engine, where the various parts are exploded out on the page? That's how I think of highly technical or academic material on a Web site. Just as the exploded drawing helps to explain the complicated workings of a car engine, a Web page enables you to present complex information accessibly to readers.

Complex material is ideally suited for presentation on the Web, which offers editors infinite room for an "exploded-out" structure and readers infinite possibilities for collateral exploration. Yet—despite its famed informality—the Web contains thousands of dense, lengthy documents (difficult enough to absorb in printed format) that haven't been adapted at all for Web publication. Mistake.

Knowing how to deconstruct a complex document and then reconstruct it for a new medium isn't instinctive. You don't need to know HTML coding to make that happen, but you do need to follow a four-step process.

The process involves both writing and editing. "Web editing" may mean everything from rearranging material for greater clarity, to rewriting parts in a more suitable style, to deciding on the best technical presentation. In the print world, these roles are often very separate—not so if you're a Web editor.

**1. Get it in focus.** Before an editor can effectively restructure an existing document for a Web page, a focal point must be determined for the intended audience. Though you can't always know who all your readers will be, avoid making casual assumptions about "who this information is meant for" based on demographics such as average age, highest level of education, and job titles. That's just a start. Take the time to write down your answers to a few reader-driven questions:

- Why should people want to spend time reading about the subject of this document?
- What are the most relevant, significant, or interesting parts of this document for readers?
- How is the information important or influential for the work or personal life of readers?

When you've articulated the document's value for readers, write a very short (one- or two-sentence) statement of what the content is about. Place this précis at the top of the document, where readers will be sure to see it first. They can use it as a preview of focus and scope to decide whether to continue reading. And yes, you should allow uninterested people to turn away instead of trying to trick them into reading, when they'll only be disappointed. That's a tenet of respectable Web publishing.

**2. Break it apart.** The goal of restructuring content for the Web is to make the most important information more immediately accessible. That process begins with breaking the print document into smaller, more editorially manageable chunks—phrases, sentences, paragraphs. You'll use these broken pieces of information to help "Webify" your print document (transition it to the Web) in step 4, and you'll edit and rewrite them as necessary—obviously, many will be in need of transitions, contextual references, and narrative development.

For now, though, without any regard for the existing structure, pull out *all* the points (statements, examples, evidence, phrases) that seem to directly support that summary statement you just wrote. Web editors use their own shorthand way of isolating key blocks of text for reordering. Some work in the electronic file to copy and paste key statements into a new document. Others use a print version of the document to make notes on or highlight statements and paragraphs containing ideas that deserve prominence.

Once you've extracted the informational chunks, the task is to reorder them for further editing—but you're also making another cut at weeding out all but directly supporting information. Follow inverted pyramid style, as journalists do, placing the main point first, followed by the rest in descending order of importance. Web readers appreciate a structure that allows them to grasp the main point immediately and decide how much detail to pursue.

As you reorder in this hierarchical fashion, you're choosing not only to add and rank information but to leave some of it out. Remember that the criterion is whether a piece of information directly supports what you have determined to be *the most important point*. You can get bogged down in your evaluation of many pieces of complex content if you forget that. (We'll deal with leftover material later—don't destroy it.)

**3. Rewrite it.** You've been creating a hierarchy of ideas and facts and evidence, ranked in order of potential significance for readers. You may have been working with a numbered cross-reference system, your personal shorthand, or abbreviated chunks of text. Now you're almost ready to begin editing and rewriting the reorganized material, and it's time to go back to the print document.

Use the original text as much as possible. Otherwise, you're not rewriting, you're writing a new piece, using the original essentially as source material—another kettle of fish. Hopefully you won't have to heavily edit the original text, but it might be necessary. If you believe it's necessary for conciseness, do it now; if the text is already written in a pithy style, proceed to the "Webify" step, step 4. The degree of revision you're allowed or expected to do and the level of rewriting the piece requires involve a host of variables: Be sure you know the ground rules.

Closely examine the way each piece of information was originally presented by the author. You've been looking for points to emphasize, but now you may realize that the writing style is too academic, overly detailed, verbose, or too deeply cross-referenced to work well on the Web. The aims of editing for the Web are the same as those for printed documents: clarity and simplicity. Not all printed text needs editing for the Web—you'll have to make the decision for each document you're working with.

But there's an extra urgency to editing information on the Web—you're trying to make it as easy as possible for readers of all kinds to grasp your information quickly when they scan your document on a monitor. Your editing of the original material for concision will make it much easier for them to grasp each point. When you find jargon, lengthy sentences, stacked modifiers, passive constructions, and other obstructions, ask yourself, "Is there a simpler way to say this?" Simplifying complex material doesn't mean dumbing it down for the Web. And it's not always possible to keep complex subject matter easy to read. But tight editing can make a huge difference.

What's a good way to explain a difficult concept for quick understanding? Try using analogy when the subject matter is conceptually hard to grasp. The Computer and Technology section on the AARP Web site is written by Sandy Berger, a technology writer who's a whiz at using metaphors. For example, she says a hard drive is like a closet: In both cases, you want the biggest one you can afford, because you'll always run out of room. Take a look at how she makes technical explanations sound easy at www.aarp.org/computers-howto/Articles/a2002-07-16-diskclean.

**4. Add complexity back.** Once you have a reworked (perhaps extensively rewritten) article with a clear opening and crisp supporting points in descending order of importance, written in language your readers don't need a decoder ring to follow, it's almost time to put it on the Web. But it may be missing the rich detail and additional examples that add depth to a tightly focused article.

What about all that leftover material that you had to set aside in step 2, even though it seemed interesting? You don't have to toss it out after all. Web techniques allow you to add much of it back in—but revised and reformatted, and not really "back in" so much as nearby. You can also add nice-to-know content in ways that won't distract readers or delay their access to the main points.

Especially if the original document was in good shape to begin with, this isn't a nicety. You owe it to both the first authors and the readers to convey the essence of a message in its full glory—implications, projections, deadly statistics, and all. Here are some options for adding complexity back in:

- Create a diagram or an illustration to replace a lengthy written description of a process or transaction.
- Place comments, references, definitions, and lengthy quotes outside the main copy grid, run down the side of a Web page, set off in a box, or programmed as a pop-up window or as rollover text.
- Put extensive additional material on one particular subtopic on another Web page, and link to the relevant place in the edited main article or in an annotated "Additional Information" sidebar.
- Turn text that is heavily statistical or contains a lot of comparative numbers into a graph or chart, with its own in-depth caption, and box it on the side of the Web page. Remember to cross-reference it in the main article if the statistics are integral.
- Link to additional resources on other sites for readers who may want even more information than your complex article offers.

Knowing where to add extra information means second-guessing where in a document your readers may have questions. To do that you have to know what they can be expected to know about the topic—and we've come full circle. This is just more of what you've been doing all along: figuring out how to present content in ways that readers will appreciate online, while preserving the depth and complexity of coverage the material deserves. ◆

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