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Webster!

Writing for global online learners

With multinational corporations growing the world over, training has followed suit. Global organizations are beginning to rely on online learning programs because of the advantages they offer. Above all, they are seamless. They transcend international borders, taking learning to different parts of the globe. Therefore, online learning content and instructions should be comprehensible to learners from different countries and cultures.

For all the care taken to see that international trainers and training schedules adapt to the “when in Rome, do as the Romans do” mindframe, little is done to restructure content. The challenge of writing for a global audience aside, content writers also have to wade through the little known waters of online writing. Before going into the subtleties of writing for online global learners, let’s take a look at what Web visitors prefer.

What’s online?

“Really good writing - you don’t see much of that on the Web,” said one online learner. Sadly, this is the impression that most online users hold.

Such opinions highlight the flaws in online content writing. When online writing does not help users find the necessary information, the quality and relevance of content are questioned.

What do studies say?

Various Web usability studies reveal that Web users:

- Scan, not read
- Understand more while reading less
- Prefer texts to be short and relevant
- Read online texts slower than printed versions
- Detest hyped language

Web writing should enable users to scan content and flip back and forth between different sites. In addition, grammatically correct and well-written content gains the learner’s trust. Regular updating of content is also important.

Online content should thus ensure:

Simplicity. One online PowerPoint course had the following instruction; “The Don’t Show This Dialogue Box Again check box on the New Slide dialogue lets you set a default slide layout for each time you insert a new slide. The layout will be whichever slide type is selected when you mark the Don’t Show This Dialogue Box Again check box.” This is enough to baffle learners and drive them away! Online learners prefer clear, concise and non-bureaucratic language. A sentence that reads, “Failure to enter your

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password will result in an invalid entry message,” can simply be rewritten as, “Provide your password for our system to identify you.” Such simple, informal and useful tips keep the learner online.

Credibility. When the publisher of a particular site and the sources of information are unknown, the learner doubts its credibility. Well-known magazines such as *Reader’s Digest* and *National Geographic* carry a certain image. A website too can build an image of its own. For this, the information it carries should come from a reputable and believable source. It should be current and accurate. The learner should be able to rely on the featured facts and information.

Cautiously funny! One learner said, “I like websites when they’re not all that dry. I like to laugh.” While most learners prefer humor, global preferences for humor vary dramatically, and culturally altered humor seldom works. Therefore, humor in global learning content should be avoided as much as possible. The writer should have a fair idea of the audience before incorporating humor. Puns and metaphors are a definite no for sites with a large number of international learners.

The faster the better. Learners prefer highly organized sites where they can quickly access relevant information. It is important to give learners information fast since they are often hard-pressed for time. Lesser response time for links and fast-loading graphics enhance online learning experience. This also means better viewership.

Upside down! One online learner remarked, “I like the ability to read a summary and then go to the article if I’m interested.” Most web learners prefer content to be designed in the inverted pyramid style. Such content starts by stating the conclusion. Information is then built so that it leads to a summary that highlights important and interesting points. Next, the points are detailed. The article wraps up with some background supportive information. Because learners on the web are generally scanners, this bottom-up style of presenting content is highly appealing. Learners can:

- Get to the important points quickly
- Continue reading only if interested
- Save learning time

Exactly scannable. Writers are aware that online learners scan information. Therefore, content should be embellished with elements that support scanning, such as headings, bold and highlighted text, bullets, captions, graphics, tables of contents and topic sentences. Learners also desire concise texts that present relevant information quickly. They prefer short one-page texts.

Well-connected. A writer can use links to reduce overloading the content page with definitions and background information. Links should be placed on the sidebar. The reader can then concentrate on the text without interruptions and embedded links. In addition, the graphics and text should be related. Pictures without captions and flashy graphics that are of no value irk learners.



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Apt references and jargon. “I will touch base about your assignment later” - this baseball reference would confuse a non-American learner. References that are culture-specific should be avoided. Content should also be idiom-proof (hands-on, just-in-time and brush-up can give way to practical, as needed and refresher). Global learners are unfamiliar with everyday work jargon. Online course titles are often jargon-loaded. “End-User Business Development Skills” can be rewritten as “Developing Business Skills,” and “Anti-Hacking Boot Camp” as “How To Avoid Threats To Your Computer Network System.”

Well-tailored. Content writers should remember that measurement and time systems are not universal. Most of the world follows the metric system, so when giving US measurements, the metric equivalents should be mentioned. While the international date standard is year/month/date, some countries use the day/month/year format. Ideally, the date on global content should go in as, “The next workshop is scheduled for December 10, 2003.” Some prudent content writers mention the time zone as well. For instance, “The next seminar is on January 20, 2004 at 9 a.m. Eastern Standard Time.”

When web authors employ the three principles of web writing, namely scannability, conciseness and objectivity, there is virtually no reason for them to fail when faced with a global audience.