



Copywriting for Search Engine Placement



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An Erickson Barnett White Paper





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Abstract

Writing for the web is different than writing for print. It is critical that you plan and structure content carefully so search engines will find and list the pages in your web site appropriately and as highly as possible.

The added benefit of optimizing web copy for search engine optimization is that your visitors will quickly find the information they want. What's more, the copy you've written will be focused and easily scannable, making it ideal for the web and likely to achieve the results you want.

The least you need to know:

Write your copy around keywords – each page should have a unique set.

Make your keywords first and most important – in your first headline and/or first sentence.

Use the inverted pyramid style – the earlier the keywords appear on the page, the higher the page will rank.

Use headings and subheadings liberally – they rank higher than plain copy.

Use meaningful text for your links – search engines don't want to "click here."

Write for your readers – if it's what your visitors want, they'll find it.

Creating Your Keyword List

Keywords are the holy grail of web copywriting. Pick the right keywords for every page of your site, write your copy around them, and you're nearly guaranteed great search engine placement. But how do you identify those perfect keywords?

Pick apart your presentations – What words does your CEO use when talking about your company? What words do your salespeople use most when talking about your products and services?

Get into customer support – What words do your customers use when they need help? What terms are used to search your current support site?

Step into your customers' shoes – How do your customers refer to the needs you satisfy? What words do they use to describe their business?

Get it wrong – Don't forget to include common misspellings of important keywords. Include common misspellings of your company name and products, along with acronyms or abbreviations for technologies and other technical terms when you're completing your list.



Get help – Use a tool like *Overture* or *Wordtracker* to fine-tune your list. These tools will help you brainstorm related words you may not have included and give you an idea of how many other pages are using the words you’ve chosen.

Organizing Your List

Now that you have a (possibly quite long) list of keywords for your web site, what next? Divide the list into logical groups.

Some keywords may apply to every page of your site (your company name and primary business area, for example), but the majority should apply to only a few pages at most. Those are the words you’ll focus on when you write your copy.

In a perfect world, no two pages should have exactly the same list of keywords.

It’s likely that you already have an idea of how (you think) your site will be organized – often in the form of a flow chart or site map – your keyword list might organize neatly into those groupings.

If you find groups of keywords that don’t fit into your existing vision of the site, it’s a good sign that you need to rethink your site’s organization. Perhaps you need to add a page or two to your site – do it now, rather than later!

If you’ve organized all of your keywords into groups and you’re left with parts of your site that don’t seem to have any keywords that fit, you may want to reconsider those pages. Are they a reflection of internal politics rather than customer need?

Using Meta Tags

You’ve probably heard of using meta tags for search engine placement. Although quite a few search engines no longer use meta tags in determining placement, creating and using them properly is still useful in some search engines, and they can help you focus your message.

There are two types of meta tags – the keywords tag and the description tag. We suggest creating both.

- The keywords meta tag is a comma-separated list of the keywords you decide belong with each page.
- The description meta tag is the short, targeted statement – the “so what” sentence – that sums up the message of the page using the keywords you selected.



Writing Your Copy

Once you've put time and effort into creating a great set of keywords and descriptions for your web pages, you can easily write targeted and keyword-driven copy – in other words, copy that will rate highly with both automated and human-driven search engines as well as with your web site visitors.

Your keywords for each page will typically fall into two groups: high-level keywords (such as your company name or industry) and specific concept keywords. It's the specific concept keywords – no more than a handful – you'll build on when writing copy.

Good, searchable web copy repeats and expands on the specific concept keywords that relate the message of the page. You should include these keywords in:

- the page title,
- the headline of the page,
- the first sentence of the page,
- links to and from the page, and
- 2-3 times more within the remainder of the copy.

Start at the top

Good web content follows the inverted pyramid format common to newspapers. Search engines give higher ranking to text that appears earlier in your copy and lower ranking to text further down your page. That means the most important sentence of your page – the one that will get you ranked the highest – is the first sentence.

In many search engines, the first sentence or so of the page's content is displayed along with the page title when a page is listed in a set of search results. This sentence is your chance to convince searchers they've found the information they want.

What's more, many of your web site's visitors won't scroll – if they can't see it right at the top of the page, they'll never see it at all.

Get into the headlines

Headlines and subheadings are another key factor in optimizing your web copy for search engines. Headline and subheading text is given significantly more weight in search engine ranking than plain copy – main headings are ranked first in their order of appearance, subheadings are ranked next in their order of appearance, and body copy is considered after that.



Combine this with the fact that headlines and subheadings make your page much easier for a visitor to scan, and you can see that strong headlines and subheadings go a long way toward page copy that gets the job done.

Not sure whether your headlines will do the job? Ask yourself whether scanning just the headlines and subheadings will tell a story – if they don't, your headlines aren't targeted enough.

Think about the links

When users are scanning your page, they probably won't read only your headlines – they'll also see the hyperlinks. Search engines put a great deal of emphasis on the words used for hyperlinks.

Shoot for links that can stand alone as a meaningful imperative for your visitors. "Click here" doesn't tell the user anything about what they'll find when they follow your link; "Read our white paper" can stand alone with its link and tells users everything they need to know.

Too much of a good thing

Don't get carried away writing copy for the web – ideally, a web page will have 250-350 words at the most. Some search engines will begin penalizing you in their ranking if your pages are long and excessively wordy. Since users won't read all those words anyway, why waste your time writing them?

- 79% of visitors only scan; only 16% will read word-by-word.
- Reading from computer screens is 25% slower than reading from paper.
- Web content should be 50% the length of its paper equivalent.

Remember, the web is more informal than print. It's better to use short phrases and more informal language than you would in print.

Writing your initial web site copy isn't the end of the road if you want your site to be well-ranked and successful. There are two more important factors to consider:

Update your content frequently. The more often you make substantive updates to your site, the higher most search engines will rank you. Adding articles and press releases, updating your company information and posting white papers and other content-rich pages lets automated search engines know your site is content-rich and worthy of a high ranking.

Get good incoming links. Links to pages in your site from other highly-ranked sites are among the most valuable tools you can have. We're not talking about "link-for-all" sites, but meaty, content-heavy sites that rank well in their own right. Links from your business partners, suppliers, and best clients will do more to improve your search engine ranking than just about anything else you do.



A Few More Tips

There's no place like home

Resist the urge to put all of your keywords on your home page. Perfect use of keywords should ensure that visitors arrive at your site directly at the information they were looking for – and it's very likely that's somewhere other than the home page.

So which keywords should you use on your home page? Only the most important—the keywords of your keywords. Think of your home page as the web equivalent of an elevator speech—only even shorter. Your home page gives you three to five seconds to hook a visitor and convince them there's something worth exploring further.

Don't neglect your visitors

Copywriting for the web is a balancing act between optimizing for search engines and optimizing for your visitors. It's important to remember that when your web site visitors find your site useful and informative, they'll link to your site from theirs—and that's one of the best ways to increase your search engine ranking.

What's more, your visitors have already put some effort into getting to your site – if you make them feel neglected once they've arrived, the chances are slim they'll be back.

Web users scan, they don't read – you have just a few seconds to grab and hold their attention. Design your page for ultimate scanability. Specifically:

Highlight keywords

- To draw attention to key points, make use of highlighting, but only for words and short (two-three word) phrases.
- Use bold, not italics, or underlines. Bold draws the eye, italics are difficult to read online, and underlines should only be used to indicate links.
- Use about twice as much highlighting on the web as you would for print.

Bullet text where possible

- Bullets are a great way of helping visitors scan a page. Break paragraphs into bulleted lists whenever possible.
- Keep lists to no more than 5-7 brief items – no more than a sentence each.
- You can include more bulleted lists on a web page than on paper.



Concise writing

- Each paragraph should contain one main idea. Use the inverted pyramid style used in newspapers for paragraphs and the page itself.
- When you have detailed or technical information that can only be presented in long text format, consider creating a separate, downloadable document. Present the highlights on the web, and let visitors download the details.
- Use simple sentence structures; shorter is better. Remember that the web is a global medium and not all of your visitors are native English speakers.
- One- or two-sentence paragraphs are perfectly acceptable on the web.
- Use meaningful headings and subheadings. This will draw attention and help visitors scan for information. Create a story with your headlines.

The bottom line

Writing great web copy might seem overwhelming, but if you remember a few key points, you'll be well on your way to success.

- **Focus on your keywords** – unique, targeted keywords for each page.
- **Put the good stuff at the top** – make your most important point first to draw people in.
- **Tell your story in headlines** – they make the page easier to find and easier to scan.
- **Make your links stand alone** – use keyword-focused links rather than “click here”.
- **Keep the reader first** – your visitors are most important, so give them what they want.

About Erickson Barnett

Erickson Barnett is an established creative and marketing agency with a strong heritage and reputation in the interactive world. We've helped our clients create award-winning corporate web sites, support sites, extranets, and micro sites to help them achieve their marketing communications and sales objectives.

At Erickson Barnett we believe that following a proven and repeatable process ensures we meet our client's goals on time and on budget. TechnIQ, our proprietary design and development process, has been at the heart of our success for more than a decade.

For more information about writing effectively for the web, or for an assessment of your needs, please contact Erickson Barnett at:

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