What is Good Writing for the World Wide Web?

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Review of:


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Editor, Interface


Is good writing simply good writing, regardless of the medium? Obviously writing for different audiences will require a different “voice” and often a different vocabulary as well. But what of writing for the World Wide Web? Has the Web had an impact even on written English? Should it? The works reviewed here have different responses to these questions, and consequently illuminate a wider issue: What constitutes good writing for the World Wide Web?

At the Berglund Center, the volume we purchase for our student editors, keep on our shelves, and most often consult for issues related to writing for the Web is Walker and Taylor’s The Columbia Guide to Online Style. It is essentially an encyclopedia for citation styles and concentrates on related issues.

The first chapter, “The Logic of Citation” alone is worth the paperback purchase price. However,
the work assumes that good writing is good writing, regardless of the medium. This view is perhaps appropriate to a publication from one of the university presses, which prefer, of course, to view their own works as canonical.

We were amused to find that although the book lists a related web site at Columbia for updates <www.columbia.edu/cu/cup/cgos>, in fact there have been no updates in the more than six years the work has been available. Given the facts that the work does have a slim section on “works cited” and that there has been a very rapid increase in publications related to writing for the web, we might have expected some recent work to have merited mention on the web site. It might be time to update this guide!

The other works addressed here take a far wider view, and as a result have much to offer not found in the *The Columbia Guide*. However, if the issue facing you is primarily how to cite sources, electronic or otherwise, then you should have *The Columbia Guide* for its clear voice and its ease of use.

Of the books discussed here, the one that is probably closest to the Columbia Guide, save for the fact that it is written solely for digital media, is *Wired Style*. Edited by Constant Hale, this is a relatively old guide, published in 1996 and apparently last updated in 1999. This work takes rather the opposite approach of *The Columbia Guide*. It unashamedly proclaims that the World Wide Web has changed everything, including “good” writing. The authors use terms like “clear-but-oh-so-conventional” and “puréed” to describe mainstream or standard written English. Rather they celebrate “voice” and think that written English should reflect “the way people talk”, particularly if those people are “Wired.” Much of the work, however, is really a lexicon of computer-speak. There were a total of eleven pages dealing with style in our copy of the 1996 printing. This book will be of greatest interest to future historians who are trying to decipher the breathless prose of the old “new economy”.

The indefatigable Dianna Booher (She has written thirty-seven books!) has written a much more hands-on guide, *E-Writing*. This books, although produced for a business audience, could well be of value to almost anyone who writes in an electronic environment. Like several such guides, she also includes several useful chapters on grammar, spelling, punctuation, and other troublesome issues. The most valuable part of the book is her very intelligent advice for the proper use of e-mail. The members of any large organization which communicates extensively via e-mail should read this work, it would save a great deal of time, and as Dianna constantly points out, money as well.

Unhappily the section on writing for the Web is less than five pages long and seems almost an afterthought. Dianna, like many authors of related works, basically feels that it is less the medium than the audience that should influence writing. Her book, then, appropriately concentrates upon writing for a business audience and has little to say about particular uses of the Web as a means of transmitting written information to a general audience.
With Andrew Bonime and Ken C. Pohlmann’s work, *Writing for New Media*, we encounter a book that seems fully aware that the World Wide Web is rapidly changing even written communication. This is especially surprising because this work is, in Web terms, ancient; it was published in 1998. Bonime is a producer for interactive media projects as well as a highly published writer. Pohlmann is a Professor of Music Engineering and also highly published in the field of digital technology. Their rich variety of experience and training has resulted in a very useful book.

Their main argument is a very simple one: Web projects are organized very differently than are most written works. The author must assume that the reader may enter at a number of points and may well take an unpredictable path through the materials, unlike reading in conventional works which are overwhelmingly linear. Their analysis of the important differences between “traditional” or linear writing and writing for interactive projects has much to offer to all writers, regardless of the medium in which their words appear.

The work will be very useful for anyone actually contemplating or engaging in a multi-media project, including preparing Web pages. But perhaps their most thought-provoking and potentially useful contribution is the connection that they make between film and interactive media. The notion of a “grammar” for film—an underlying logic and structure—is well established and very useful to even the beginning student or writer working with film. Bonime and Pohlmann suggest that we are in the early days of developing an equivalent “grammar” for interactive media such as the World Wide Web. The notion has immediate resonance and is certainly a fruitful metaphor for understanding the challenges of writing for these media.

Bonime and Pohlmann are, unlike the authors of the works mentioned earlier, quite clear that “good” writing on the Web is quite different from “good” writing for the printed page. However, those interested solely in the issue of what is “good” writing for the Web will probably find the book overly discursive. The book will be most useful to those interested in a wide-ranging and sometimes quite analytical work that moves smoothly between different types of interactive media and generally speaking, presumes that one is actively involved in working with such media.

Another shortcoming is that while the work does deal extensively with the Web, it is, as appropriate to a work published in 1998, much more concerned with CD-Rom projects. One hopes that it will soon be updated and deal much more centrally with writing for the Web. But of the books reviewed here, if you want to understand what “good” writing for the Web may be, this is the place to start.

In preparing this review, we did several searches on Amazon.com and Powell’s City of Books, a process which we find a quick and useful guide when assembling bibliographies, particularly of recent publications of the sort likely to be of use at the Berglund Center for Internet studies. Interestingly, there was no more than 50% overlap between the two lists, suggesting that there may be other books not listed by either source!
We turned up the publications listed below (See Resources) which seemed to be guides to writing for the Web. Several were by the same author or authors and may be updates of earlier works under slightly different titles. Others are probably for a narrower audience, those writing technical materials, for example, than that envisioned here. But clearly there is no shortage of advice for those who wish to know more about writing on the web.

We picked those we chose to review here because we were familiar with them or for their availability at our local Powell’s City of Books. Our sample is thus in no way representative of the available books, and some of those not reviewed may be more useful than those we did review. This is true for all book reviews, however, and we invite you to send us your own thumbnail sketches of the particular books that you find useful. We will either publish your reviews or review your choices here.

Resources

Web Sites:

- http://www.amazon.com/

Publications:


Eric Carbone and Nick Crump, *Writing Online*.


Jane Dorner, *Creative Web Writing*.


Timothy Paul Garrand, *Writing for Multimedia and the Web*. 


Irene Hammerich, *Developing Online Content: The Principles of Writing and Editing for the Web*.

Andrew Harnack and Eugene Kleppinger (Contributor,) *Online!: The Internet Guide for Students and Writers*.

Charles Hampton Harrison, *How to Write for Magazines: Consumers, Trade and Web*.

Crawford Kilian, *Writing for the Web (Writers’ Edition)*.


M. Neil Keeley, Stuart M. Browne *Prentice Hall Guide To English on the Internet*.


Marcia Peoples Halio, *Writing on Internet*.

Dawn Rodriques, *Writing on Line*.

Martha C Sammons, *The Internet Writer’s Handbook*.


Mary Mcguire, *The Internet Handbook for Writers, Researchers, and Journalists*.


Todd W. Taylor. *Literacy in the Age of the Internet*.

Jason Whittaker, *Web Production for Writers and Journalists*.

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on February 4, 2014 at 10:38 AM said:

good work, i adore reading your post. Maintain the great work.