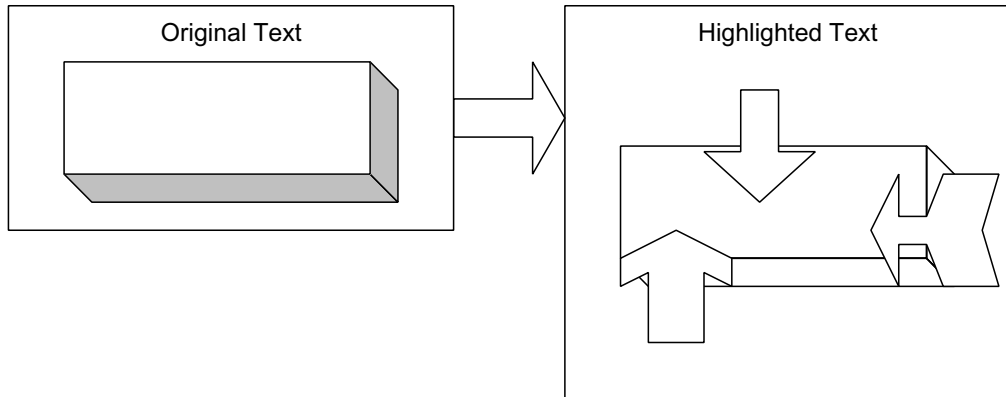


Highlight Key Words, Phrases, and Links



BACKGROUND |

Boldface what is important

Boldfacing a word or phrase makes it **leap out**, so someone skimming sees it, but not the rest of the text, which is a gray blur. Just what skimmers want! They can catch the key point—if you have emphasized it—without doing any of that annoying activity called reading.

Emphasize small, **important** words. (Horton, 1990)

On-screen, *italics* get shaky, and underlining destroys the descenders (the parts of letters like *g* and *q* hanging down below the line). On paper or on-screen, ALL CAPITAL LETTERS are difficult to read. (Perhaps lawyers put software licenses in all caps on purpose, so nobody will read them). Net: use **boldfacing** as your main way to emphasize.

If you want to use color for emphasis, use only one color, because people will probably not understand your personal method of color coding, and a page with text in three or four colors looks very exciting, but unreadable.

Make links emphatic

In English sentences, we tend to put important new information at the end. So if you care enough to include a link in a sentence, put it at the very end.

Because the link text is colored and underlined, it stands out from the rest of the paragraph, and attracts the eye. (America Online, 2001)

When you place the link at the end of the sentence—where we normally expect a big bang—the link also acts as a point of emphasis. In this way, you make important words catch the user’s attention.

Don’t overdo the emphasis

Too much bolding in a paragraph creates a push-me-pull-you effect, because the eye sees the bold text jumping out, making the rest of the text mere background; but then the eye takes the white space in, and tries to bring the regular text to the front—and on and on. Like a camera that struggles to set automatic focus on a cloud, grinding in and out, uncertain because it cannot spot a straight line or sharp edge to focus on, the human eye remains in doubt when your highlighting risks overwhelming its surrounding text.

One or two phrases per paragraph—that’s enough to emphasize by bolding or turning them into links. If you find you are highlighting half a dozen items, reconsider. Perhaps these could be turned into a bulleted list.

Don’t overdo bold words.

— Dan Bricklin, 1998

EXAMPLES

Before

What is a cookie?

A tiny text file holding information about you, such as your address and preferences. We send it along

After

What is a cookie?

A tiny text file holding information about you, such as your address and preferences. We send it along

with our Web pages, to live on your hard disk, along with the Web pages themselves (click [here](#) for more information about storage on your hard disk). When you sign in, we ask your browser to send us your cookie, so we know who you are. That way, we can recognize you, fill out forms for you, and make the site look the way you like. No other site can read your cookie, so your information stays private, if that is a concern.

Before

Databases spawn Web pages in three ways. The old-fashioned way is that the database spits out a report in ASCII, and the user reformats that report in HTML and posts it on the site.

More recently, databases have begun to be able to turn out reports in HTML itself. But the information in such a page is only as good as your last report. It is static.

Better are pages built on the fly. In this third scenario, the Web page sends a request to the database, and the database pours the latest data into the correct template, then the browser displays that brand-new page. In this scenario, you do less work, once you get the delicate communication set up between your Web pages and the database. That's where our new database comes in handy.

Before

Why do I have to fill in a profile?

We are able to provide free e-mail because we are supported by advertisers. (Click [here](#) if you would like to see a list of advertisers). They want to put their ads on e-mail you send—but

with our Web pages to live on your hard disk. When you sign in we ask your browser to send us your cookie. That way, we can recognize you, fill out forms for you, and make the site look the way you like. No other site can read your **cookie** so your information stays private.

After

Databases spawn Web pages in three ways. **The old-fashioned way** is that the database spits out a report in ASCII, and the user reformats that report in HTML, and posts it on the site.

More recently, databases have begun to be able to turn out reports in HTML. But the information in such a page is only as good as your last report. It is static.

Better are pages **built on the fly**. In this third scenario, the Web page sends a request to the database, and the database pours the latest data into the correct template; then the browser displays that brand-new page. In this scenario, you do less work, once you get the delicate communication set up between your Web pages and the database. That's where you'll find a use for our new database.

After

Why do I have to fill in a profile?

We are able to provide free **e-mail** because we are supported by advertisers. They want to put their ads on e-mail you send—but only if you fit their profile of a potential **customer**.

only if you fit their profile of a potential customer. To know which ads to drop into your e-mail, we need to know more about who you are. That's why we need you to fill in the profile. Please click [here](#) to return to the profile, to get started on your free e-mail.

To know which ads to drop into your e-mail, we need to know more about who you are. That's why we urge you to fill in the [profile](#).

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

Bold is beautiful, loud, exciting, as long as you don't litter the page with highlights.

TO LEARN

Look at a textbook. Key terms are bolded, so clever students know they will be on the exam. (Dull students skip all the other cues, too).

TO ACT

A link is a dramatic cue to act. Make sure the reader can see it, putting it at the end of the sentence or paragraph.

TO BE AWARE

Signaling the mind what you consider important helps get your point across, even before someone reads. Using these tools means you are sensitive to the user's state.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

Yes, like emoticons, boldfacing and links raise your voice and give a little bounce to your prose.

See: America Online (2001), Horton (1990), Lynch (2001), Morke & Nielsen (1997, 1998), Nielsen (1997a, 1997b), Williams (1990).

For your review only.

Excerpt from *Hot Text: Web Writing that Works*.
(New Riders).

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