chapter 3

# What Will the Web Do to My Text?

# Your Words Are Virtually There

*They call TV a medium because it is so rarely well done.*

**—Goodman Ace, TV writer**

*When I ask for a kiss, I do not want a piece of paper with "A kiss" written on it.*

**—Alan Watts,**
***The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are***

As a medium, the Web is a storm of electrons generating light and sound, moving through circuits, networks, and servers, guided by machine code, operating systems, and applications, and displaying our text along with images, animation, video, and audio on a brilliant screen. Electrons are mobile, uncertain, erratic, and fast—quite different from ink on paper. But many of our ideas of text still derive from our experience with paper documents. (In fact, our names for many documents assume that they will appear in that medium, i.e., term papers, newspapers, or corporate white papers.) And even though many of us grew up with all media blaring—the radio on, the TV going, the CD playing in our headset, and the video games live in the next room—many of our ideas of text come out of the older culture and the tradition of print.

Think of some of the assumptions our culture makes about text, even in the Internet Age:

- "I publish, you read. I am the authority; you are the note-taker." Only an authority can produce a book.
- "It must be true. It's right here in the paper." Text in print must be accurate.
- "It's as clear as black and white." Text is so crisp it is simple to read.
- "Text preserves information." Text stays put on the page, and the page lasts for hundreds of years in a library.
- "I have it in my hand." You can touch the thing that carries text, hold it, lift it up, close it, and move it around. Text is physical stuff.
- "I know how long the book is." On the page, text stretches from top to bottom in two dimensions—height and width. Considered as an object, a book also has a third dimension—depth. But all those dimensions are fixed. All pages are the same length, and once printed, no book gets any

*Gentle reader: start anywhere. Linearity optional. Some repetition may occur.*

**—Mick Doherty,** *"@TITLE THIS_CHAPTER AS... [WAS: ON THE WEB, NOBODY KNOWS YOU'RE AN EDITOR]"*

longer than it is today. We know in advance how much information there is, and that volume never changes.

- "It's a text." Because text appears in a discrete object such as a book, we know where it ends. We conceive of text as having a beginning and an end, a front and a back, and a fixed amount of stuff in between. We think in terms of "a text."

Time to throw those assumptions away! For instance...

- Anyone can produce text on the Web, and most do. Individuals without corporate sponsorship often have more juju than the official spokesperson. Putting text up on the Web does not make you an authority—your work, honesty, attitude, and character do that.
- Text is not crisp on-screen; it is hard to read.
- Text is no longer stable. It comes and goes. You leave a page, and you may never see that text again.
- Text has no physicality. You can no longer touch it, hold it, or weigh it.
- As a result, when we enter a text area, we do not know how long it will be, how much information is buried there, or where it will stop.
- Text flows from here to there, on and on. Text no longer shows up in a neat package called a book or a report. It just goes on and on, from link to link.

The Web, as a medium, makes reading hard, limits context, challenges even the most eager skimmer, destabilizes the text we devote to content, stabilizes and solidifies the text that acts as part of the interface. Because navigation is so often confusing, visitors are forced to rely on these menus, buttons, and other fragments of text for clues about their location in the larger structure. Before you write, consider the situation.

## Your words look fuzzy

Reading text on-screen is harder than reading print, in part because of the lack of resolution. Where a printout from a laser printer has 600 dots per inch, and a *National Geographic* page may have 2400 dots per inch, the screen has 72 or 96 dots per inch. Those are big fat dots, and they do not make individual letters very sharp.

Moving closer, which can clarify words on paper, only works up to a certain distance from the computer screen, after which we begin to be aware of pixels, not meaningful language.

Using software controls to zoom in can make the individual words easier to read—but then the proportions of the screen and the small size of the window interfere, limiting us to portions of paragraphs. We have to resort to kludges like resetting the margins, just to avoid horizontal scrolling.

Because the text is more difficult to read on-screen, people often read slower, comprehend less, recall less, and do less in response. Reasonably enough, whenever you ask people to read on-screen, they resist. In fact, they duck and weave and bob, just to avoid actual reading. They may use text artifacts such as headings to navigate, but only to make sure that they really, really have to start reading, a job they put off as long as they can.

Result: you have to work harder to shoot your ideas through the glass.

Also, due to the lousy resolution on-screen, skimming a page is harder. Looking at a screen, the eye has trouble picking up the particular word that our mind is looking for, whereas on paper, the word jumps off the page.

Context shrinks, too. We cannot see the facing page. We cannot see what lies above or below the passage we are reading. We are wearing blinders so we lack the sense of our surroundings, an awareness that—on paper—enables faster movement within the page, and from page to page. There's no such thing as riffling through the pages looking for a particular idea.

For all the miracles of hypertext, a book is still a faster interface for some lookups. The slowness of the Web, even on a fast connection, the likelihood of going to the wrong location, the excess of search results—all of these factors make the computer a clumsy research tool. As a result, people spend more time navigating and verifying their position online, to make sure they have gotten to the right information, because they are so often led to the wrong location, and they don't want to read anything that's not relevant.

Again, the emphasis has shifted, as we move from paper. In a book, we use headers, headings, captions, and boldface lead-ins to

orient us. But we quickly move from those to the running text, in order to "read." The amount of time we spend online reverses that ratio because we have to spend so much more time "using" text to find out where we are, compared to the time we actually spend "reading" when we arrive at the target.

## Your words appear and disappear in a moment

The text's lack of stability (now it's here, now it's gone) means that users cannot easily revisit, re-examine, and compare what you said just a moment ago.

On the Web, words do not stay put, as they do on a paper page. As a visitor moves from one link to another, the pages disappear, and, even with a Back button, people find it difficult to flip back to one page, then forward to another to compare. The book page stays put, more accessible than the electronic page, and more open to study. Little wonder users print out important pages to read the old-fashioned way. As an electronic writer, you are entering a world of dissolving text. You are writing on clouds.

## On-screen, the most stable words serve as labels, signs, buttons, and directives

Words dominate the controls people have to use to move through the electronic world:

- Words on menus
- Words in dialog boxes
- Words in warnings
- Words that appear when we hover over a tool.

For all the icons, the graphic user interface is still an extremely verbal medium; but people perceive this very reliance on words as annoying, restrictive, confusing, ambiguous, slow. Users constantly complain about running text on the screen, referring to the words there as "verbiage."

As elements of the interface, words become labels, more like street signs than an article. Even when you are communicating complex ideas, difficult operations, or interesting perspectives, and people are actually slowing down to read, they do so within an environment in which words are embedded in buttons.

*The fixed printed surface becomes volatile and interactive.*

**—Richard Lanham,**
***The Electronic Word***

*The blue underlined word became one of the Web's first contextual clues to functionality.*

**—Jeffrey Veen,**
***The Art and Science of Web Design***

Most of the time, using the computer, your audience is not made up of readers. They are users.

Words annotate what goes on the Web, and they influence our opinion of the images, links, and environment. But words are only part of the event, and for many people, they are the least attractive aspect of the experience.

Users who are impatient to "get through" the "verbiage" tend to regard an e-mail as a hint, rather than a thoughtful expression of ideas to be weighed seriously. Naturally, people miss subtleties, qualifications, extended riffs, and irony.

Our culture emphasizes speed, and many users just want to "get it" and "get out." Entering an environment in which words are for clicking, users expect even running text to act, to jump, and to communicate in one quick bite. No full course meals: people want a snack they can heat up by pressing buttons on the microwave.

## People turn to your language for quick indications of structure

In a book, readers have many cues to their location within the overall structure—the front cover, the back cover, the headers and footers, the headings, the chapter openers, the chapter endings, even summaries. But on a Web site, users cannot tell how much info it contains, where it begins, or where it ends. To find out where they are in the hierarchy of a site, users need to look at words as button labels ("Products," "FAQ," "About Us"), and words as menu items, because these words offer an idea of the structure of the site. Layout and graphics reinforce the words, but as with icons, a user must first figure out what the graphic representation means before being able to rely on it as an indication of the department, section, or topic.

Within a page, people rely very heavily on your title, headings, boldfacing for indications of your structure, and their location within it. Oddly, because they cannot flip through the pages quickly like a book reader, Web users are more dependent on verbal cues about their position in the hierarchy than book users are. Moral: you have to be more aware of structure when you write online than you were when you wrote for paper. The shape and

*As far back as you look in the history of the Web, plain old text has been the lingua franca.*

**—Jeffrey Veen,**
***The Art and Science of Web Design***

scope of your online writing is difficult for users to perceive. So you have to work harder to communicate your main point, your organizing patterns, and your starting and stopping points.

## Web text is three-dimensional

*I think Web writing needs to be conversational and direct.*

**—Marisa Bowe, producer of *Word***

Visitors to your site are following an erratic path that goes forward and back, up and down, in and out. Short-term memory is quickly exhausted trying to recall the trail, so the users must devote considerable energy to deciding where to go next and figuring out where they are now. They ask that question of your text long before they choose to "read" it for meaning. Like visitors to a new city, they are wondering:

- Have I come to the right place?
- Is this the topic I am interested in?
- Does this person have anything interesting to say?
- Are the paths through this material recognizable?
- Are its districts clearly defined?
- Are there landmarks I can use to navigate with?

On the Web, people use the text for movement up, down, and in—long before they actually read for ideas.

## Caution: Date-stamp your idea of the medium

Media are of the moment. Our understanding of a medium reflects the culture of the hour, the technology, and the mental models of the day. Our idea of a medium like print grows, morphs, gets redefined, every ten years. A medium like the computer seems to grow so fast that established ideas about interface design change every few years. And the Internet draws in so many new people every day that our very idea of the medium (computer-like devices hooked to the network or networks) gets changed every few months.

**See**: Apple (1999), Black and Elder (1997), Bolter (1991), Bork (1983), Bricklin (1996, 1998), Broadbent (1978), Cooper (1995, 1999), Dillon (1994), Doherty (2001), Haas (1989a, 1996), Heim (1987), IBM (1997, 1999), Johnson-Eilola (1994), Keeker (1997), Keep (1999), Kilian (1999, 2001), Krug (2000), Lanham (1993), Levine (1997), Lynch and Horton (1999), McLuhan (1962, 1964a, 1964b), Microsoft (2000), Morkes and Nielsen (1998), NCSA (1996), Nielsen (1997b, 1997d, 1999f), Ong (1982), Price and Price (1997), Siegel (1996), Spool, et al (1997), Spyridakis (2000), Uncle Netword (1999c), Veen (2001).

# Web Text = Content + Interface

On the Web, a chunk of text acts as both content and interface. A menu item, considered as content, tells a user what the page is about; the same menu item, considered as an interface element, is just a hot spot. Text can swing both ways:

- Content is what people are looking for—information, activity, perspective.
- Interface is what people use to find the content, move through it, act on it.

## Text as content

As content, text responds to questions the users ask about topics they care about. A product description is content. An article is content. Even a phrase that sums up an idea elaborated in the article is content.

As content, text also encourages and guides activity. For instance, when people shop online and have to fill in their billing and shipping addresses, they are providing their own content within a form that contains a (somewhat) meaningful message. In this sense, the labels identifying the fields are content.

As content, text also communicates context. The company name, the mission statement, the text in the main menu all signal who owns the site, what it is about, and how the people there think about the site's value.

## Text as interface element

The same chunk of text that acts as content may also act as an interface element.

A heading that tells the user something about the topic to be discussed in a particular section also appears as a menu item on another page. As a participant in the menu, that text acts as content in a new way, forming part of a group of related topics, indicating

*Content is the information that resides in a computer or other information-processing device and that has meaning and utility for you.*

**—Jef Raskin,**
***The Humane Interface***

how the writers think about the whole array of topics. But the heading is now hot, and acts as what user interface folks call an *affordance*—a way for the user to move to the section. The text has become an active part of the interface.

When the user clicks the menu item and goes to the page, the heading appears again at the head of the section. The format—14-point, let's say, bright red Arial, centered, with plenty of space before and after—indicates to the user that this text is more important than the running text that follows. The graphic treatment acts as a passive, or inert, part of the interface because although the formatting does not offer any software action, it helps direct the eye, offering help to the mind looking for a particular piece of content. So, even though the heading is a significant part of the content, stating an idea briefly and advertising the content to come, it is also an element of the interface.

## Working together

Content itself is reflected in the interface elements, including the graphic layout and the menu system, but considered as interface, these verbo-visual expressions are not content. They point to meaningful content, support it, and reflect it. But as buttons, formats, or links, they serve a different function, helping people use their eyes and fingers to navigate through the content pile to particular tidbits.

*If the computer behaves unexpectedly while you are using an interface, you become less likely to see hints, help messages, or other user aids as you become increasingly agitated about the problem.*

**—Jef Raskin,**
***The Humane Interface***

When the interface designer and graphic designer have worked well in collaboration with the content providers, the organization, purpose, and tone of the content shines through the form. The inventor of the IBM logo, Paul Rand, once said,

> Design is the fusion of form and content, the realization and unique expression of an idea.
> (*Design Form and Chaos* 1993)

Of course, Rand thought of design as a purely graphic effort, expressing relationships between the parts and the whole, through visual affordances such as contrast, balance, proportion, pattern, repetition, scale, and rhythm. But on the Web, many people are

builders of structures, organizing and manipulating content, giving it form through which the user will move. Today, we are all information architects.

Text is one of our most important building blocks. Almost anyone can make text. No one except a poet puts on a beret and announces, "I am extremely cool because I can create text." Only specialists create flashy animations, layout templates, and interface icons. But the rest of us create text. We have to be aware of the way each piece of text will cooperate in the construction. What we write must function as a unit, taking up its own space, and as a part of the whole, holding the arch together.

To be heard or read, text takes on a format, whether that is a font on-screen, or a voice-over. And to be used, the text also takes on affordances for action, such as link tags, scripts, or active fields. By its nature as a symbolic representation of ideas, text is content. Therefore, the general rule is:

Web Text = Content + Interface.

Whether your text is meaningful or confusing, helpful or annoying, depends on you. This book gives you a lot of advice on how to create text that guests will be able to understand, play with, act on, and enjoy. But you have to create the text itself, alert to its double life.

*Affordances provide strong clues to the operations of things... Knobs are for turning.*

**—Donald Norman,**
***The Psychology of Everyday Things***

**See**: Black and Elder (1997), Bolter (1991), Krug (2000), Morkes and Nielsen (1998), Nielsen (1997b, 1997d, 1999f), Siegel (1996), Spool et al (1997), Spyridakis (2000), Veen (2001).

# Warm, Warmer, Hot!

Computers are cool, and the Internet is warming them up.

Despite the pronouncements of media guru Marshall McLuhan, TV is hot because it shows dramatic conflict, evokes strong emotions, and arouses intense fantasies.

Lacking all that visual drama, radio is not as hot, but because we can hear real people saying what they think and making music, both of which stir us, radio is at least warm.

Compared to TV and radio, computers are cold.

## The chilling effect

When computers come into an office, schmoozing goes out. Instead of talking with our neighbors, we begin to carry on a dialog with the file system, trying to get along with the reasoning of geeks, struggling with the hostile interface of many programs, and watching not another person but the glass, silicon, metal, and plastic of the object itself.

And the annoying modes, the prissy error messages, the sheer stupidity of the computer make it more like a bossy intruder than a friend. Despite Microsoft's millions, it could not persuade people that the utility Bob was a friendly personal agent. By itself, the computer removes us from contact with other people, increases our workload, makes us look like fools, and forces us to turn out ever more text, more total output, and more crap.

## Enter the Internet

When you hook your computer up to the Internet, you get e-mail, and suddenly the computer can communicate with other people directly. You can see past the screen and make human contact.

If you have a fast connection to the Internet and indulge in video conferencing, you actually see and hear the other people. If you tap into Internet radio or use Internet phone connections, you actually

*Washington-Moscow Hot Line to Open in 60 Days.*
**—New York *Times*, June 21, 1963**

*Media Hot and Cold.*
**—Chapter Title, Marshall McLuhan,**
***Understanding Media***

hear individuals talking to you or to each other. With the Internet, people are trying to heat up the computer, making it more sociable, more personal, more human.

## Raising the temperature

The more we share ideas, opinions, outrage, and recipes with other people on the Internet, the warmer we feel toward the discussion list as a whole. Community binds us and makes us feel close, despite the keyboard, the screen, and the distances between the people chatting or posting. Wild personal rants on a webzine, flames on an e-mail list, pornographic prose—all these raise the temperature.

The electronic medium is cold, so if you want to break the ice between you and your guests, you have to be intensely human. Your prose should be warm to the touch.

## Getting warmer

The warmth comes from your attitude toward your audiences, not tricks of style. Warmth comes from paying attention to every inch of your audience.

Consider what they might need that they haven't asked for. Chat with them. Answer their e-mails. Go to their meetings. Talk to them on the phone.

The more you establish direct personal relationships with individuals, the more your prose will sound like a human being wrote it to another human being. No more bloodless writing!

## Finally

To get hot, reveal yourself.

Not every site allows self-expression. But if your site gives you this kind of freedom, let go of your shame.

Admit your craziest impulses, silliest actions, utter confusion. Stop acting smart.

But keep your attention on the individual people and your relationships with them, which they see expressed in your tone. From your language, they can tell what you think of them. In a few sentences, they sense your affection or your contempt. Honest passion

*The electric light escapes attention as a communication medium just because it has no "content."*
**—Marshall McLuhan,**
*Understanding Media*

sweeps them away. But fake feelings, sentimentality, preening, and posturing, simply repel most people.

If you don't feel up to writing with the blood from your opened veins, that's fine. Most sites just need a human touch.

**See**: McLuhan (1962, 1964a, 1964b), Ong (1982).

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