Appendix C Web writing guide extracted from HEFCE intranet

What are you trying to communicate?

The first stage in the creation of all web content is to **be as clear as possible about your aims**. It is easy to publish token content without thinking about its purpose, but if the purpose isn't clear in your own mind, it won't be to the user.

As a starting point, one of the things you could do is **list the top 5 things you want users to be able to do** on your page or part of the site. Though it is important to recognise what your users want to do when you are drawing up this list.

The HEFCE site

The main overall purpose of the HEFCE site is to **publish information**. This information takes different forms each with slightly different purposes and aimed at our different audience segments. The table below summarises some of our aims and how our current publication types meet these aims.

The table also shows the small number of cases where we seek to engage with our audiences.

Please note that before you produce content it is always worth discussing your aims and requirements with the relevant contact in Corporate Communications. These contacts are listed next to the types of content.

Type of content	Aim	Audience segment
Publication	- Formal communication with the higher education sector - Provide detailed information about funding and policy decisions/announcements - Publish in a timely fashion	- The strategist - The news seeker - The number cruncher
News item or e-mail alert or promotion on main web pages	- Promote a publication or a key issue immediately and in the short term - Publish in a timely fashion	- The strategist - The news seeker - The number cruncher
'What we do' pages	- Publish overview and latest policy and funding decisions, regulatory and good practice information - Summarise notable reports - Link to other resources - Profile case studies and funded projects - Invite applications for funds	All segments, but in particular the news seeker and the newbie
Event	Promote and encourage registration for an event	- The strategist - The news seeker - The number cruncher
Consultation	Encourage engagement with a consultation	- The strategist - The news seeker - The number cruncher
Contact information	Facilitate contact with the Council	All segments

Appendix C Web writing guide extracted from HEFCE intranet

More about the types of web content

Publications

The publications section is the most important and popular part of the site. It contains detailed communications about funding and policy decisions and announcements with the sector.

New items/press releases

This is the second most important and popular part of the site. We use news items to maximise the publicity of key information we are publishing. All news items are produced in discussion with the press office.

'What we do' pages

This is the third most important and popular part of the site. These pages are flexible enough to accommodate many different types of information. But as a rule they provide an overview of our key areas of work by theme. The kind of information covers our core activities of policy development, funding, regulation and good practice. The pages can and often do contain technical information relating to the administration of HEFCE funds, but all these pages should be accessible for a non-expert audience.

With the help of an external consultant we have analysed the different segments of our audience according to their behaviour as site users. Based on this analysis, we have put together four 'personas' or fictional characters that represent these audience segments.

These personas are designed to help us when creating content for the site. Once you have established your publishing requirements, you should consider to which of the four personas your requirements relate.

Look at their characteristics and their goals and try to ensure the content you produce can meet their typical needs and behaviour. As with your requirements you may want to do this by listing the **top 5 things users want to do in your section**

Using the personas

For example, if you are writing a web page that relates to 'The Strategist' you might want to clearly signpost detailed strategic documents, provide contact details and ensure the page is flagged up as new content elsewhere on the site.

How do users find information?

Users find web pages in lots of different ways. Here are just a few examples:

- typing a web address into the address bar of a browser
- through browser favourites or bookmarks
- links on other web pages (Including 'jump' links)
- links on other web-sites or in documents
- external search engines
- through e-newsletters or e-mails
- through RSS feeds
- through widgets, apps, SMS
- through social networking/bookmarking sites
- by navigating from page to page on a site using menus, crumb trails etc
- using a web-site's search box.

Don't assume knowledge

2

Appendix C Web writing guide extracted from HEFCE intranet

A key trend in the use of the web shows that as search engines have become more advanced, fewer and fewer people are looking at the homepage of web-sites. In 2009 homepages in general had a 75 per cent bypass rate.

With all the other ways of accessing web content, this means that web pages **must be meaningful independently of other web pages**.

So:

- The title of the page should be clear and meaningful
- Text should not refer to or assume knowledge of information available elsewhere
- The page should provide contextual and/or related links

Since it is also possible to link to any point on a page, the headings and titles of documents on the page should also be meaningful in context.

Headings and titles of documents

For example, a bad title of a document would be:

'Sector impact assessment'

It would be better to call it:

'Sector impact assessment of the Revolving Green Fund'

Good orientation and related links

Given that a user can 'land' on any one of a web-site's pages, it is important that they can quickly discover where they are in relation to everything else.

So:

- The navigation (menus and crumb trail) should clearly show this
- The page must obviously belong to the visible hierarchy of pages around it
- The page should provide relevant contextual links to other pages and other sites

Example of good orientation

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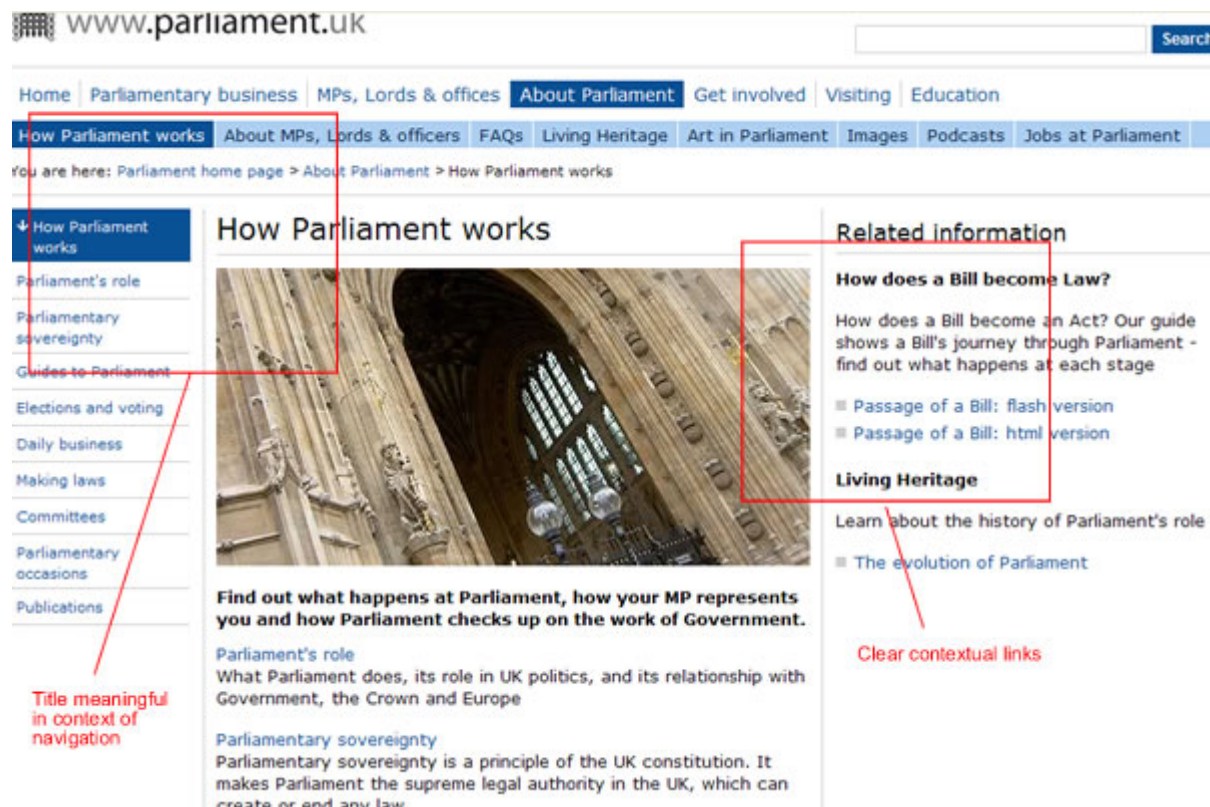
How do users read web pages?

'With very little patience' is the answer. In general users come to a site with some idea of what they are looking for. This is particularly the case for the HEFCE site where most users are carrying out 'known-item' searches.

This means that users want to find the item they are looking for as quickly as possible and are prepared to cut as many corners as possible to do it.

So **users generally scan**. They do **not** read line by line.

The 'F' pattern

An extensive eye-tracking study carried out by the Nielsen Norman Group (specialists in web usability) showed that:

- Users tend to go to the top left-hand corner of the page content, and begin by reading horizontally.
- They will then jump down the left-hand side of the page a little and, if something catches their attention, they will start reading horizontally again.
- Finally they will resort to scanning down what remains of the left-hand side of the page, with dwindling interest.

The following heat-map (red areas show the most looked-at part of the page) gives an impression of this 'F' pattern.

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What does this mean for web content?

This means that content needs to be written specifically for the web (or re-purposed for the web).

Don't steal from publications!

It is not appropriate to copy paragraphs from publications into a web page. Government web-sites, in particular, are often singled out as bad examples of this practice.

Users don't read text closely
So don't rely on them doing so. The following are all bad:

- long paragraphs (particularly copied from publications)
- long sentences
- chunks of text without any visual element, such as headings, sub-headings, bullet points, links.

The F pattern also clearly shows that key messages should be upfront, and not lost in the middle of paragraphs or towards the end of a page.

Visual structure
Conversely give the content a visual structure that maps to the F pattern or which is easy for the eye to latch onto. So:

- Break up the page with meaningful headings
- Make links meaningful for the user, and, if possible, without having to read the full sentence in which they occur
- Break lists down into bullet points
- Keep paragraphs short (2-3 sentences at most).

The rule of twos

Put key words and content in the first two:

5

Appendix C Web writing guide extracted from HEFCE intranet

- words of a headline, page title, list item, link
- lines of a paragraph or a page
- paragraphs of a page.

Messages and summaries

Users are looking for any content that can help them break down what is available on the page. So it is helpful to provide signposts, either through links to key content or a summary at the top of the page which puts the rest of the content in context.

Readability

Most users of the HEFCE site will be well-educated, high-literacy users who can cope with complex texts. But usability studies show that high-literacy users prefer (because it is easier and quicker) to read web content that has been written deliberately for lower literacy audiences.

Where we are dealing with material that is, by its nature, complex it is not always easy to produce content for lower grades of readability. But a few readability tools can help us move in this direction.

Creating a section

By a section of the site, we mean a set of web pages that forms a **hierarchy of related content**. Typically the section will have a homepage which briefly sets out the focus of the section and provides links through to more detailed sub-pages.

Mapping the section

Before you begin to write content for a section it is important to know the structure of its page hierarchy. A common practice in web design is to do this through a visual aid, either a diagram or map, or even an illustrative wireframe.

This map should identify the section homepage, the pages that fall immediately underneath the homepage, those pages that fall underneath the pages underneath the homepage, and so on.

Example map

The following map was created in Excel. Click the image to see how it translates into web pages.

Appendix C Web writing guide extracted from HEFCE intranet

Revised business and community structure

B&C homepage			
	Higher Education Innovation Fund		
		HEIF 1-3	
	Measuring business and community engagement		
		Higher education-busines and community interaction	
			Survey stakeholders group
		Micro studies	
			Sounding Board
		Pilot public benefits reporting	
		International comparisons	
	Contributing to society		
		Beacons for public engagement	
		Social Entrepreneurship Awards	
	Strategy and development		
		Research into knowledge exchange	

The purpose of these maps is not to identify every single page within the section but simply to show how the content as whole is broadly organised.

'Flow'

The structure of a section should try to **anticipate what a user wants to do**. This means the hierarchy of information should be built around the analysis of your aims and user behaviour.

If a site does this well, users will have an easy experience of the stages that they pass through to access content. Web designers refer to these stages as the 'flow' of information.

This means that you should try to refer back to your aims and audience when you are mapping out the content and **place content in the hierarchy according to the priority of tasks you have identified**.

Note that it is not always the case that fewer clicks improves the flow. **Perceived progress** is the key. Users need to feel like they are finding the information they are looking for.

The way you name pages, headings, links, and the way in which you structure pages all has an impact on the successful flow of information.

Poor flow often occurs in an unnecessarily complex structure, with redundant stages in the hierarchy of information. Use of too much jargon and a structure that reflects the mechanics of an organisation rather than what users want from it, also undermines the flow.

Appendix C Web writing guide extracted from HEFCE intranet

Headings

It is a good idea to break up text that you include on a web page with headings. This makes the page **easier to scan** and take in quickly.

It also **gives more context** to the material you are publishing. Some readers will, for example, scan down the page looking at all the headings to get a sense of what the page is about, and then start hunting for more detailed information.

So the headings should be **meaningful** and **spell out the overall structure of a page**. The page heading and the sub-headings should cover the overall topic of the page and the key areas into which it breaks down.

Example headings

For example, if you were creating a page about our international work, you might like to include information on specific aspects of this work. So the headings might be:

HEFCE's international work [Heading level 1]

[Intro text]

Bologna process [Heading level 2]

[Information about Bologna]

The Europe Unit and the International Unit [Heading level 2]

[Info about the two units]

In excess, headings can work against their purpose by making the page look too visually cluttered, particularly if there are lots of sub-headings and sub- sub-headings. So it is important to strike a balance between visual structure and visual overcrowding.

Paragraphs

Keep them short at around **2-3 sentences**. Long paragraphs create the impression of an impenetrable wall of text.

Use a paragraph to express just **one idea**. Any more than one idea per paragraph will be skipped over by the user.

Ensure that the **key information is in the first sentence** and, if possible, the keywords are in the first sentence towards the beginning. Try to use keywords under which you think the content you are producing may be found.

Appendix C Web writing guide extracted from HEFCE intranet

Example paragraph

The following paragraph occurs half way down a page on the Directgov web-site about the benefits of higher education:

And on average, graduates tend to earn substantially more than people with A levels who did not go to university. Projected over a working lifetime, the difference is something like £100,000 before tax at today's valuation.

The paragraph is two relatively short sentences both about the economic benefits of HE. ' ...graduates ... earn substantially more ...' is the key fact and occurs in the first sentence.

Sentences

Sentences in web text should be:

- short and concise
- in the **active voice**
- constructed around **keywords** preferably at the beginning of the sentence
- easy to understand for a lay audience.

Sentences in web text should avoid:

- the passive voice
- lots of clauses and qualifications
- redundant words and phrases
- jargon and acronyms with no explanation.

Bad sentence	Better sentence(s)	Why?
This 3 year project, led by Harper Adams University College, represents a new and substantial collaboration with the Royal Agricultural College which builds on both institutions' specialist strengths and track records in employer -based CPD and training within the land based professions and industries.	This three-year project aims to support the development of skills in land-based professions. It brings together Harper Adams University College and the Royal Agricultural College to build on their shared strengths in this area.	The bad sentence is too long (it's really a paragraph or even two paragraphs). It also places the initial emphasis on the institutions rather than what the project is about. The ideas need breaking up and re-ordering.
This approach was endorsed by the Bergen summit in 2005, at which ministers also suggested that there should be a register of quality assurance agencies which would provide, in effect, a form of European recognition of quality assurance agencies.	The Bergen summit endorsed this approach in 2005. Ministers at the summit also suggested the need to recognise European quality assurance agencies through a register.	The bad sentence is a) in the passive voice b) too long c) contains redundant/repetitive information d) expresses two ideas through a single sentence.
In this context, higher education covers a broad range of educational and training provision at undergraduate and postgraduate level, including all modes and levels of higher education delivery in HEIs and further education colleges, research activities, industrial linkages, and economic and business development activities.	Here 'higher education' refers to a broad range of postgraduate and undergraduate programmes. This includes: - all programmes at universities and colleges	Too long, contains jargon and redundant language, and a list that can be broken down into a bulleted list.

Appendix C Web writing guide extracted from HEFCE intranet

Bad sentence	Better sentence(s)	Why?
	- research activities - industrial linkages - economic and business-development activities.	
An evaluation of the programme was conducted by Evidence Ltd to enable us to understand the impact of our policy interventions in this area, and inform future policy development and government spending review.	We commissioned an independent evaluation of the programme. This helped us to understand the impact of our work in this area, and will feed into further policy and spending decisions.	The bad sentence is in the passive voice, and uses slightly inward-looking language (policy 'interventions' and how many users will know who Evidence Ltd are?). As above it is also too long.
HEFCE are also under a duty to ensure value for money in the expenditure of public funds delivered through us.	We are also required to ensure the public funds we administer bring value for money.	The first is ponderous and uses the passive voice.

Words

As a general rule it is best to use words that are **simple** and **meaningful**. This generally means that words should be **concrete and familiar** rather than **abstract and technical**.

Bad use of words

HEFCE's approach to **online provision** embraces **OER**.

Good use of words

HEFCE's approach to **online learning** embraces **materials that are freely available to use**.

Keywords

Some users will scan through a page looking for words that carry key information. So when constructing pages, paragraphs and sentences, it is worth thinking about the words you use carefully.

This also helps search engines since they scan through pages looking for relevant terms and trying to get a sense of the page's meaning based on what they find.

Try to choose a handful of words that are meaningful in their own right, give context to the page and are terms which users might search for.

If you can identify two or three keywords:

- use them several times on the page
- place them in headings, links and towards the beginning of sentences.

Example of keywords

10

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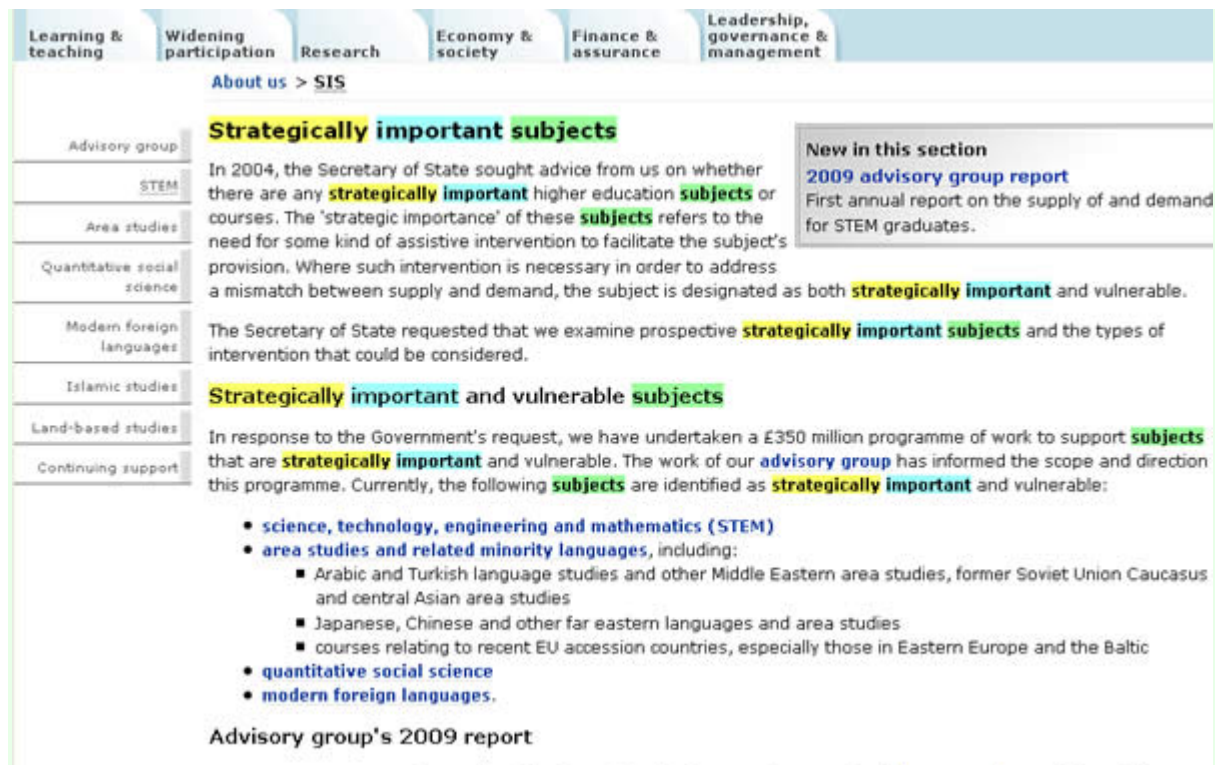
The screen shot above shows the Google cache for our page on strategically important subjects based on the search 'strategically important subjects' (the cache highlights the words of the search term).

In this case a user looking for information about strategically important subjects may scan the page in much the same way as the search engine.

Things to avoid

Wherever possible try to avoid the following:

- jargon
- long words
- redundancy

Style

Style of writing on the web should generally be **spare**, **simple**, **more informal and conversational than printed publications**. It should also follow an **inverted pyramid** structure.

'Stepping back'

Most of our web pages aim to be accessible for laypeople (even though they may contain technical details of funding policy and administration). This means that the style and tone should try to 'step back' a little from the administrative detail.

Since most users are also scanning for information it serves no real purpose to write in a detailed, or overly elaborate way.

Compare styles

Compare

Appendix C Web writing guide extracted from HEFCE intranet

However, where QAA decides that an institution's collaborative provision cannot properly be addressed as part of the standard Institutional audit model, either a separate audit of the institution's management of its collaborative provision will be conducted at a time to be arranged between QAA and the institution, or a hybrid Institutional audit will take place.

with

A large part of the work of the House of Commons and the House of Lords takes place in committees, made up of MPs or Lords. These committees consider policy issues, scrutinise the work and expenditure of the government, and examine proposals for primary and secondary legislation. Select committees operate largely by an investigative process, while legislative committees operate mainly by debate.

Both these paragraphs are explaining the work of organisations but do so in different ways. Beyond the length of sentence, use of jargon, and the passive voice etc, they differ in their apparent aims and assumptions about their readers.

- The first is formal, procedural and almost scientifically indifferent, but the second steps back a little to explain in more friendly and personable terms
- The first seems to assume some sort of prior knowledge, but the second assumes no prior knowledge
- The first is bureaucratic, the second is lay friendly.

The inverted pyramid

The inverted pyramid style is a metaphor used by journalists. It essentially refers to placing the most important attention-grabbing material at the beginning and letting the content taper away in order of importance.

In light of the way users read web pages, it is important to place the most important information where the eye as it scans the page will find it. This is why it is a good idea to place important words in the first two:

- words of a headline, page title, list item, link
- lines of a paragraph or a page
- paragraphs of a page

Storytelling

Conversely **don't tell stories.** However fascinating and/or useful you may think the history behind a policy initiative may be, the chances are that readers won't share your enthusiasm.

If you choose to set out a Council decision by first explaining how it has arrived at the decision, this means the key bit of information (i.e. the decision) will get swallowed up by the story. It is better to either a) avoid telling the story and simply state the decision up front or b) state the decision first and give the context further down the page.

Example of storytelling

Following the letter in December 2004 from the Secretary of State for Education that defined LBS as a strategically important and vulnerable subject, we met with heads of most of the higher education institutions (HEIs) that offered LBS-based courses. The group informally offered advice on the scope of the planned review, including the broad definition of LBS. After that meeting an advisory group was set up, whose membership was representative of interested parties within the higher education (HE) sector and land-based industries. The advisory group met for the first time in October 2005 to agree the terms of reference of the review and finalise the invitation to tender to carry out the review.

It's not totally clear from the text, but the key information here is that an advisory group has been established to oversee the review of land-based studies. This is lost at the end of the paragraph.

Appendix C Web writing guide extracted from HEFCE intranet

Linking

Some users scan through the page looking at just the links (this is also the way in which some accessibility tools break down page content). So links are a powerful way of enhancing the meaning of a page. They are also an opportunity to be as useful as possible to the user.

The text of links

The text of links should:

- Make sense without having to read the whole sentence in which they occur
- Clearly relate to the content they refer to

This means that linking text should avoid phrases like 'Click here' or 'More about this'. We should also try to avoid long links.

Good link

In July, we sent a **letter launching the new framework** to institutions

Bad link

Click here to download the report.

What to link to

If you are linking to another web-site, try to **link to a web page** on the site (rather than a PDF or Word document). If a link goes direct to a download on another site, we are sending users to another site without their knowledge. It is better to make it clear to them that they have left the HEFCE site.

But it is best to find a page on an external site that **relates specifically to the text of your link**. It is not good practice, for example, to create a link to a report on another web-site and link to the other web-site's homepage (rather than the page on which the report can be found).

If you are linking to material on the HEFCE site, it is okay to link directly to downloadable material that 'lives' in other sections of the site, but it is still preferable to link to a web page.

When creating links **try to be helpful** but don't distract from the main purpose of your page. Look to create links that may relate to **why the user has come to the page**.

Helpful links - example

The skills agenda and our work with STEM subjects have some points of overlap. So reciprocal links between the employer engagement section and the STEM pages would probably make sense.

Menus and navigation

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Site navigation is one of the ways in which users browse between web pages. But it is also the main way in which users can orient themselves and understand how the pages are organised.

Navigation can be either structured or unstructured. It can involve drilling down through steps in a hierarchy of related pages or leaping about between sections or even across web-sites. Typically users will want to do both, and web-sites should allow them do this.

Structured navigation

Structured navigation follows the hierarchy of information on a site. This means that it is not only a tool for finding information but also a way of **sign-posting the relation of pages to each other**.

On the HEFCE site, the two main forms of structured navigation are **left-hand menus** and **crumb trails**. Both the left-hand menu and the crumb trail show the relative position of the user.

Example of structured navigation
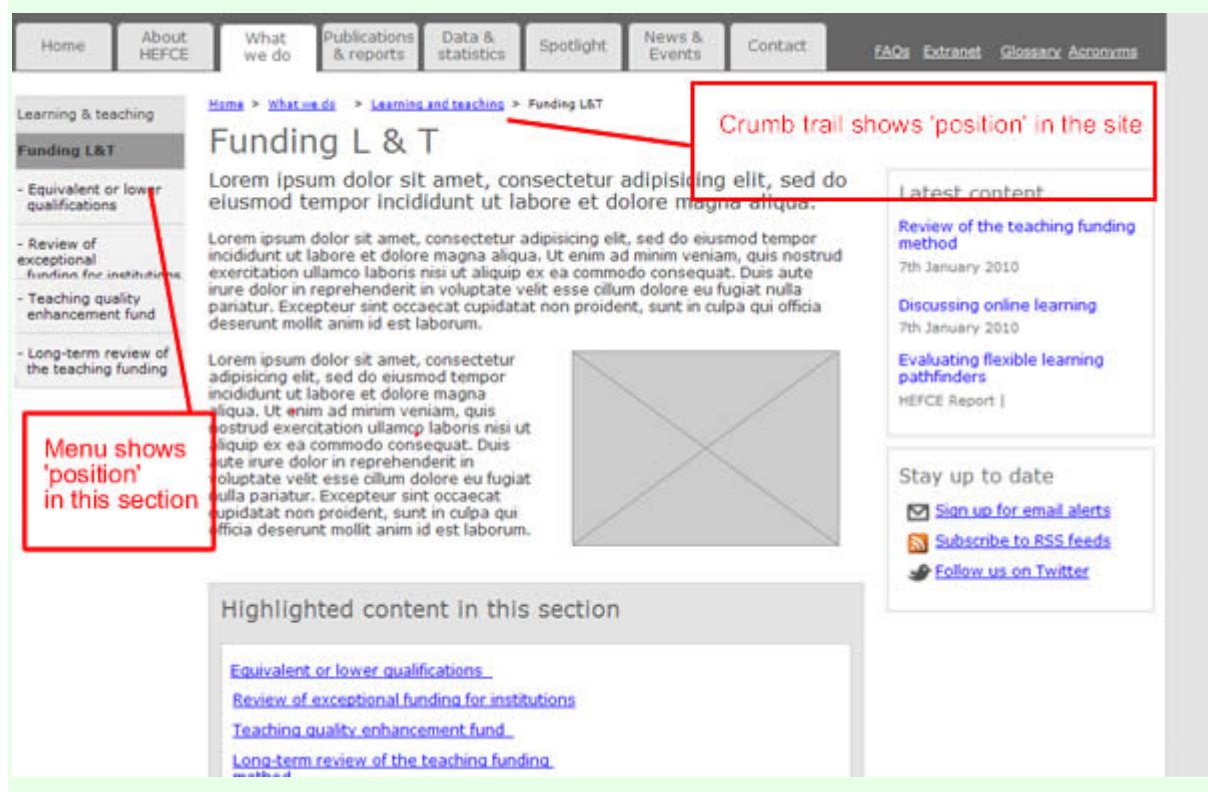
This means that the content of the structured navigation will follow naturally from the structure of your section. This clearly shows that it is important to produce a section hierarchy that is intuitive for the user.

Note that the space available in the crumb trail and the left-hand menu is small. This means that the **title of pages should not be too long**.

The **site map** is another form of structured navigation. Like the crumb trail and the left-hand menu it basically reflects the structure of the content, but for the whole site.

Unstructured navigation

Appendix C Web writing guide extracted from HEFCE intranet

Users will also navigate to pages or between pages without using the structure provided by the hierarchy of information.

This may involve using communications channels over which we don't have as much control. We don't, for example, have control over links that people put in e-mails, or on other web-sites. Search engines also allow users to completely bypass the hierarchy of content on our site.

But we can provide our own unstructured ways of navigating around our site. These will mainly be through:

- links in the text of web pages
- contextual links in the right-hand menu.

Whether these links are to other HEFCE web pages or to another site they should have a **connection with the content of the page** and relate to **why the user has come to that page**.

Search and search engines

Content that is well-written for the web is also well-written for search engines. So, if the HEFCE site follows most of the guidelines set out on these pages, it should be easy to find through the search engines.

This means, in effect, that search engines are another reason to write content specifically for the web.

About search

There are many different search engines available that use slightly different techniques. But most search engines now follow the model pioneered by Google that main search listings should be 'objective'. Google achieves this objectivity by maintaining an index of searches automatically rather than relying on manual classifications.

Google uses a mechanism to trawl through the web called a 'spider'. This spider extracts key bits of information about web-sites and web pages that it can match to search terms entered by searchers. The spider will try to establish the nature and importance of web pages by looking at factors such as:

- Words on the page, in links, the page title, headings, filenames
- The 'quality' 'trustworthiness' and 'importance' of a page

Google's video on how search works explains this in a little more detail.

Writing for the web and 'search engine optimisation'

Google's aim is not to encourage web-sites to write content in a particular way but help users find the best, most relevant and most useful content. It gives more importance to page elements like headings and links, because it expects that they will give important clues about the nature of the content.

So if a page is well-written, well-structured, uses headings and links appropriately Google will work its magic without any effort. **It should not be necessary to write content specifically for search engines**.

Search engine optimisation (sometimes just abbreviated as 'SEO') is a practice for boosting a web-site's rank in the search listings. It quickly became known as a 'dark art' since less reputable practitioners hawked claims (such as guaranteed #1 rankings in Google) they could not deliver or could only deliver through illicit practices.

It is possible to improve the ranking of a web-site or a set of web pages in the search engines, but much of this turns on good writing for the web as such, rather than writing specifically for the search engines.

Appendix C Web writing guide extracted from HEFCE intranet

HEFCE's search box

The HEFCE site has its own search box. This uses Google technology and operates in much the same way. So there is no need to produce content specifically for the HEFCE search box.

But if we find that key search terms are not matching to the relevant pages of the site, we do have the power to add search results to the list of top results that match to specified search terms.

Surfacing content

Quite often on the HEFCE site we want to draw more attention to new content than it would otherwise get if left in its natural place in the information hierarchy.

We can do this in different ways:

News items

If you are looking to maximise publicity for a change or addition to the site, then news items may be a suitable channel of communication. For the most part we use news items to draw attention to important publications, but they can be used to advertise any bit of content on the site. All news items are posted on the web-site's homepage, and advertised through admin-hefce, the monthly e-newsletter, Twitter and our RSS feed.

Spelling and grammar

The guidance on grammar and the guidance on spelling that we offer for all our publications apply equally to the web.

Correct grammar and spelling are important to ensure clarity of communication and effective presentation.

Poorly constructed sentences full of spelling errors will also do nothing to placate the general impatience with which most users approach web pages.

A few key rules

- Active voice

  The active voice is particularly important. It makes the meaning clearer because the reader can see who or what is the agent of the action. It generally also reduces the length of a sentence. So on both counts it makes reading easier.

- Redundant words

  A **diverse range** of adjectives or adverbs can (as here) lead to tautology but also takes up more space.

- Hidden verbs

  These are verbs that have become nouns. They tend to make the sentence longer and more cumbersome.

Appendix C Web writing guide extracted from HEFCE intranet

Example of hidden verbs

Compare

The Quality Assurance Agency **is carrying out a review** of the institutional audit method.

with

The Quality Assurance Agency **is reviewing** the institutional audit method.

Readability

There are two main reasons to think about the readability of web content:

- Even **high-literacy users prefer to read text written for lower literacy audiences** when reading online.
- **Accessibility guidelines** recommend that web content should use clear language.

Much of the written material that we produce on the site is, by its nature, complex and technical. So it is not always possible to write for lower literacy audiences. But to the extent that we can, we should.

No hard and fast way exists to improve the readability of web content. A few tools use algorithms to assess factors such as the average length of sentences and the percentage of complex worlds.

Some of these tools are more reliable than others, but all should be treated **only as a guide**. Microsoft Word offers a quick, easy and fairly reliable tool.

Checking readability in Word

- Go to the **Microsoft Office Button** and select **Word options**
- Select **Proofing** and ensure '**Show readability statistics**' is checked
- When you then run the spell checker in Word it will also display the percentage of sentences in the passive voice, the Flesch Reading Ease Score, and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level.

The Flesch Reading Ease Score assesses the readability of the text by giving it a score out of 100. The **higher the score, the more readable the text**.

The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level indicates what reading grade the text is suitable for, based on the reading ease score. A **grade level between 8-10 is ideal**, though we may find that much of our text is higher than this.