

Nurse Author & Editor

Leslie H. Nicoll, PhD, MBA, RN, FAAN Editor-in-Chief

☰ Menu

SEPTEMBER 5, 2015 EDIT

Writing for the Web

Writing for the Web: 6 Tips for Creating Consumer-Friendly Health Content

Catherine Spader

NURSE AUTHOR & EDITOR, 2015, 25(2), 6

When healthcare consumers have questions, they turn to the web for quick answers and information. They search for a large range of health-related topics, from diseases and treatments, to caring for elderly parents, preventative health, and reducing healthcare costs.

This has created the perfect niche for nurses with a flair for writing. Web content editors love nurses with writing skills. They respect the clinical expertise of nurses and know that “RN” on a byline adds credibility to

articles and web content. They also understand that nurses have unique insight into the concerns and questions of healthcare consumers that writers without a medical background can't match.

To write for the web, you do not need an advanced degree, but you do need to have solid web writing skills. This includes understanding the needs of a lay readership. Here are six tips to write compelling content that engages healthcare consumers.

1. Embrace Web Style

Writing for healthcare consumers on the web is very different from academic writing or publishing in professional journals. Some websites, such as Wikipedia, publish articles written in a straightforward encyclopedic style. However, many websites geared specifically toward healthcare consumers are looking for clever content that grabs the consumer's attention quickly and is reader-friendly, concise, and easy to skim. As an example, this article is written in a typical web-friendly style.

Here are some common techniques used to present information into easy-to-digest bites:

- Use short paragraphs and multiple headings to break up a long “wall of words.” Headings and subheading make information quick and easy to find.
- List key points in bullet points.
- Group bundles of information together into sidebars.

Every website will have its own writing style and techniques. Be sure to

check a site's specific guidelines or contact the editor.

2. Provide “How to’s”

Editors often look for writers who can create web content that helps healthcare consumers in a realistic and convenient way. Content must meet needs consumers “where they are.” In other words, writers should acknowledge their challenges and concerns and provide useful information that answers questions clearly and helps them make good health decisions.

One of the most effective ways to provide practical information is to include plenty of specific “how to’s.” Consider these examples:

Instead of writing this: “Be sure to drink plenty of fluids to stay hydrated during a cold.” This is a cliché and not very useful.

Write this: “Drinking plenty of fluids can be difficult when you are not feeling well. Here are 7 easy ways to ensure you stay well hydrated when you have a cold.” Then offer seven practical examples in bullet points.

Instead of writing this: “Check your blood glucose regularly.”

Write this: “Checking your blood glucose level regularly can be time consuming and uncomfortable. The good news is that now there are many ways make this routine easier and more comfortable. Examples include...”

Instead of writing this: “Research all the options that can help your aging parent to stay at home.”

Write this: “Many older adults would prefer to continue to live at home if possible. There are many services and resources that can help them stay safe

and active in their own home. Here are some credible resources that are easy to access.” Be sure to include specific contact information, such as web links and phone numbers.

3. Count Every Word

Every word counts in web writing. Readers will not wade through a 1000 word article if they can get the same information in 500 words or less on another website. Web content is generally short, often less than 1000 words. It can also be as little as 50 words, depending on the style and goals of the website and the article.

4. Adjust Reading Level

Healthcare web content is read by a broad spectrum of consumers. Literacy levels of web readers vary greatly. This makes it important write at a reading level that is understandable for the average reader. Web content for healthcare consumers is commonly written at a sixth to ninth grade reading level.

Word provides a handy tool to measure reading level. The way to access this tool varies with the version of Word. Start by clicking on the “Help (?)” tool or “Search” and type in “readability statistics” for step-by-step instructions

5. Include Credible References

Citing credible sources and references is always important, even if you are writing about your own area of expertise. You *should* use your particular

expertise or specialty as a nurse as a starting point for writing, then back it up and expand your ideas and with reliable sources. Examples of credible healthcare sources include:

Government websites

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (cdc.gov)
- National Institutes of Health (nih.gov)
- PubMed Health (ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth)
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (healthfinder.gov)

Interviews with Experts

Look for credible experts to interview through professional organizations, such as:

- Nursing organizations. An extensive list of national nursing organizations is available at (www.nurse.org/orgs.shtml)
- Pharmacy organizations.
(<https://www.accp.com/stunet/compass/organizations.aspx>)
- Physician and scientific organizations.
(<https://www.uvm.edu/medicine/pathology/documents/ProfOrganizations.pdf>)

Professional Journals

Access to many nursing journals is available through [Lippincott's Nursing Center](#).

Other examples include:

- *American Journal of Public Health*
- *Evidence-Based Nursing*
- *Journal of the American Medical Association*
- *The New England Journal of Medicine*

Websites of Nonprofit Health Organizations

An extensive list of these organizations is available at <http://www.guidestar.org/nonprofit-directory/health.aspx>. Examples include:

- American Cancer Society (www.cancer.org)
- American Diabetes Association (www.diabetes.org)
- American Heart Association (www.heart.org)

6. Surf for opportunity

Now that you have the basics in hand, spend a little time surfing the Web for writing opportunities—there are many! Here are a just few examples of sites that provide Internet healthcare content:

- **A.D.A.M.** provides a large online clinical and consumer health information library. Contact: <http://www.adam.com/contact>
- **HealthDay** is a news service that produces and syndicates evidence-based health news for Internet sites. Editorial department

contact: <http://www.healthday.com/contact-healthday.html?f=editors>.

- **Wikipedia: Writing an Article:**

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Your_first_article.

To learn about opportunities on other healthcare sites, search the site for writer or author guidelines. You can also send the site's editor a query email if you have an idea for an article.

Compensation for web writing varies, depending on your writing and clinical experience, the budget of the website, and other factors. If you are a new writer, consider submitting without pay. This is a great way to get established, build a relationship with an editor, and see your first author byline.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine Spader, RN, is a health and medical writer, editor and consultant for web and print. She can be reached at cathyspader@yahoo.com.

Copyright 2015: The Author. May not be reproduced without permission.

Journal Complication Copyright 2015: John Wiley and Sons Ltd

Share this:



Related

[Writing for NA&E](#)

June 20, 2015

In "Announcements"

[Public Advocacy Writing](#)

November 20, 2014

In "Publicity"

[Building Blocks](#)

March 5, 2015

In "Writing Basics"