

Does your website catch goldfish?

The goldfish is popularly believed to have a very short attention span – something approaching seven seconds. Strangely enough that's about the same attention span of the average web surfer; if you don't catch them fast, they will escape your net.

Websites should be more of a Derby than a Grand National – in other words, no obstacles in the path of the visitor to your site. Don't expect them to work hard to get your message – they won't, they'll just leave and find another website that is 'easier'.

You might be surprised to know that, mostly, visitors to your website don't read it at all! Is this because you don't write killer copy? Is it because they're not interested in your products or services? Or is there some other mysterious reason?

Of course, copy plays a part in attracting people to your website, but you can easily prevent people from reading perfectly good copy by presenting it in a way that is hard to read. Web-design and readability don't always go hand-in-hand. Most web-designers have not been trained in **how** people read, only in making a page visually attractive.

The problem is that the words are often seen as one of the visual elements rather than as a message that needs to be read in order to ensure people move through the site.

So there a number of issues to consider:

- The copy must hit the reader's hot buttons
- The words should be in the right place for people to read them easily
- The font style and size must be easily readable
- The words need to be in a colour and on a background that aids rather than hinders the reading process.

It's important that your message is written for the reader and engages with them quickly. This means you need to know what people are looking for when they come to your website – and make sure that you let them know they're in the right place as quickly as possible. If you don't make that connection in the first six or seven seconds, you may have lost them. We're all really quick to click that 'back' button and go to somewhere that loads quicker and is easier to follow when we get there.

If your headline connects with the reader you've got a better chance of keeping them. So, your headline needs to:

- Engage with them (tells them you're going to solve their problem, or that you understand the issue they've got)
- Be the biggest thing on the page (at least 18 point in size)
- Be in the right place (placed about one third of the way down the screen; that's 'prime real estate' and where most people's eyes fall when they look at the screen).

That's the first step.

People read screens in an 'F' pattern – actually they scan rather than read. So what else will encourage them to read your copy?

- On screen a serif font is harder to read – so Verdana, Arial or Tahoma are good; Times New Roman, Palatino, and Garamond are not so good.
- The font size needs to be at least 10 point – and darker than the background. White (or light) writing on a darker background dazzles the eye (unless it's big and bold).
- Paragraphs should be left aligned – justified text creates a nice neat block, but makes it easier for the reader to lose their place (and can create some interesting gaps between words as the lines are forced to a particular length).
- To ensure your message gets across, a few key words in bold will help to attract attention, but don't pepper your text with bold words; less is more.
- If you have critical points that you really want people to read, turn them into a bullet point list – people read lists when they don't read paragraphs!
- Remember to write what they want to know – not everything you want to tell them! Too much information will stop them reading.

Finally, don't assume that your visitor will arrive on your home page; if they've searched on Google or any other search engine for a particular term or phrase, they won't. Make sure that every page engages the reader for the subject matter of that page. This is a good start to creating web pages that keep people on your site. The longer they stay the higher the likelihood that they'll buy.

Happy fishing!

... and finally

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Lesley Morrissey is an expert in readability and specialises in helping people to develop a website that works for their business.

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