

## **Writing for Blackboard**

Key principles

Writing for learning

### **KEY PRINCIPLES**

#### **1. Use an inverted pyramid approach**

Most users of the web find screen-reading difficult and avoid scrolling lengthy web pages. There is a greater expectation to read things of interest and relevance in less time than in print.

Conventional academic writing generally makes readers wait for the conclusion. It introduces the topic or issue; provides some background and rationale; presents an argument and finally arrives at a conclusion. This approach is symbolised by a pyramid which is widest at its base.

Instead, state the conclusion up front, followed by supporting details and background. This way the pyramid is inverted and readers find what they are seeking at the top. Hyperlinks can also be used to link to background information elsewhere on your site or other websites, removing the need for lengthy text.

#### **2. Write for screen reading**

Usability studies show that screen-reading takes around 25% longer than reading in print. These studies also show that users don't actually read every word; they scan the screen seeking out keywords and groups of words of particular interest to them.

To help your readers, use plenty of white space between and around the text and use headings and sub-headings throughout. Avoid using the whole screen width as it's quicker to scan a narrowed column of text. See an example from First Line Management in Figure 3.

#### **3. Write short paragraphs**

Write short paragraphs consisting of short sentences, limited to one key idea per paragraph. You should aim for paragraphs of three to four lines, or less.

Text can also be arranged into simple tables or boxes as phrases or key words to minimise text length.

#### **4. Use headings & sub-headings**

As we know reading on screen is difficult, you need to "signpost" your writing as much as possible. Use short, meaningful headings and sub-headings that clearly indicate what the text is about. Keep the font size, format and punctuation (i.e. capitalisation) consistent for each type of heading.

#### **5. Integrate hyperlinks**

When [creating hyperlinks](#) within text, write them as a natural part of your text, as shown. You would expect this link to take you to some information on creating hyperlinks. Using “click here” is poor web practice and should not be used.

If you’re linking to a specific page within a website, create the link using the full URL that will take the user to this page – not the homepage or some other page. This is the beauty of hyperlinking after all.

## **6. Communicate visually**

Often a concept or relationship that takes several paragraphs to explain could be communicated in one paragraph and a simple diagram or flowchart. Consider your content and look for opportunities to communicate visually as well as in text. e-Learning & Web Support can help you produce such diagrams.

## **WRITING FOR LEARNING**

Blackboard allows you to start whacking in web content and uploading electronic versions of print documents with great ease. After which both you and your students will likely experience equally great confusion. But wait, there’s a better way!

### **1. Organise and sequence content**

Two major things are different for learners when working online. The first is that you are not nearby to lead them to the information or resources they need next. The second is that the web is non-linear i.e. there are multiple paths learners use to access and move between web content.

You need then to organise your content in a logical way during a planning stage before you actually put content into Blackboard. One possible organising model is to use Modules for major topic areas; break these into Units; and then further into individual pages made sequential using Blackboard’s Learning Units.

Other models include task-based e.g. Tasks 1-12 over a semester; or time-based e.g. Week 1, Week 2 etc. The organising model you choose will depend on the nature of your subject and what role Blackboard is playing. Is it supporting your face-to-face teaching, or are learners working online, in a self-paced way?

### **2. Chunk information**

The difficulty of reading on-screen means that your content ideally needs to be broken down into approximately screen-sized chunks (which varies with screen resolution) to avoid scrolling and lengthy text. Four to five short paragraphs is a suggested rule of thumb.

A variety of short and longer pages interspersed with pages containing images or diagrams is recommended where learners are working through a sequenced topic as is the case with Blackboard Learning Units.

Rather than only thinking about your topic in terms of “what comes next”, the web also demands us to think about connections between topics and resources that can be made and reinforced by hyperlinking.

### 3. Signpost your content

The more content is broken down into chunks, the greater the need to help learners know in which topic they’re working and how it relates to others. Each topic needs a meaningful heading, and ideally you’ll provide some form of overview which reveals all the topics and provides links to each as in Figure 1:

DESIGNING SURVEYS & QUESTIONNAIRES > COURSE MATERIAL > TUTORIAL OVERVIEW

**Tutorial Overview**

1. Design a survey	2. Write effective questions	3. Implement your questionnaire	4. Analyse your data
<a href="#">Getting started</a>	<a href="#">Principles of good question design</a>	<a href="#">Sequence</a>	<a href="#">Data reduction</a>
<a href="#">Sampling</a>	<a href="#">Question types</a>	<a href="#">Titles &amp; instructions</a>	<a href="#">Summarising</a>
<a href="#">Ethics</a>	<a href="#">Writing different question types</a>	<a href="#">Layout</a>	<a href="#">Data display</a>
<a href="#">Logistics</a>	<a href="#">Avoiding common pitfalls</a>	<a href="#">Printing</a>	<a href="#">Frequencies and percentages</a>
<a href="#">Your survey plan</a>	<a href="#">Question quiz</a>	<a href="#">Piloting</a>	<a href="#">Drawing conclusions</a>
		<a href="#">Survey checklist</a>	<a href="#">Verification</a>
			<a href="#">Reporting your findings</a>
			<a href="#">Data analysis quiz</a>

**Fig. 1 Example of an Overview page with links to individual topics**

It’s worth investing the time in devising a topic naming and/or numbering system. This will also help you structure your Blackboard site.

Another easy way of signposting is to colour code units or topics through consistently coloured headings, diagrams and highlighted areas e.g. Module 1 = violet, Module 2 = teal. See Figure 2.

### 4. Use diagrams & images

Relying solely on text can become tedious for learners and limit the appeal to different learning styles. Diagrams and images can communicate concepts, relationships and processes very effectively online. 3D animated diagrams, for example, are an option for explaining difficult concepts in many subject areas. e-Learning & Web Support can help with the production of such graphics.

### 5. Engage the learner

Given the way users quickly scan, skip and jump between links on the web (and just as quickly become confused), we need to design in ways of engaging learners with our web content in Blackboard. Here are some suggestions:

1. Develop a conversational, but succinct writing style using the first person e.g. “you” and “I”
2. Make content relevant by appealing to learners’ interests
3. Make explicit why the content should concern learners e.g. “...As junior designer soon you’ll be expected to...”
4. Introduce a topic with an interesting or humorous lead statement
5. Reinforce key points by extracting and highlighting statements in the left margin
6. Use legible, well-labelled diagrams and images to communicate your subject
7. Build in self-test activities or quizzes to provide feedback to learners
8. Build in the help you anticipate learners will need e.g. FAQs, how-to guides, glossaries (yes, they take time but are reusable!)
9. Personalise your site with a colour scheme that says something about you
10. Highlight the ways to make contact with you and each other.

## EXAMPLES OF CONTENT TEMPLATES

My Blackboard System Admin Home Help Logout

**Have your own writing style and not someone else's...**

**A good style is error free and presents a positive professional image of the writer and the organisation.**

As you've seen already in Unit 1, having effective business writing skills is an essential requirement for every supervisor. Developing your own style takes confidence and may take some time to perfect. A good style incorporates the use of simple direct language, considers the needs of the recipient and uses a format that is appealing, readable and facilitates understanding.

**Unit 2 Activity List**

In this unit, you'll look at your own business writing style and identify ways to improve your skills in this area.

Activity	Name	Completed over (approx. time)
2.1, 2.2, 2.3 & 2.4	What is the essence of a good writing style?	3.5 hrs
2.5	How do you know your documents are readable?	3 hrs

**Fig.2 Unit introduction page template in First Line Management (FLM101)**

The screenshot shows a Blackboard LMS interface. At the top, there are navigation tabs for 'My Blackboard' and 'System Admin', along with 'Home', 'Help', and 'Logout' links. A breadcrumb trail indicates the current page is 'Performance management cycle' under 'UNIT 1: PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT PLANNING'. On the left, a vertical menu contains buttons for 'Announcements', 'Course Information', 'Staff Information', 'Course Schedule', 'Course Material', 'Communication', and 'Tools', along with 'Course Map' and 'Control Panel' icons. The main content area features a circular diagram of the performance management cycle with five stages: 'plan', 'do', 'monitor', 'review', and 'adjust', connected by arrows in a clockwise direction. Below the diagram is a text box defining performance management as a continuous process of planning, managing, reviewing, rewarding, and developing employees' performance. A citation for Richard (1999) is provided at the bottom of the text box.

Performance management cycle

Performance management cycle

Performance management therefore, is "a continuous process of planning, managing, reviewing, rewarding and developing employees' performance with the twin objectives of improving the organisation's performance and effectiveness and enhancing the individual employee's abilities and job satisfaction."

Richard, R. (1999) Human Resources Management in New Zealand. Auckland: Addison Wesley Longman .

**Fig. 3 Standard page template in First Line Management (FLM102)**

Wendy Fountain  
2003