Link text

Part of the ‘Effective Digital Content’ training

Links are at their core are why the internet exists - it is a world wide web of connected information that people can travel between easily. This is why it’s incredibly important to get them right.

# First click is vital

One of the most influential studies into web usability found that if the first link the user clicks is the right one for their task, 87% will eventually succeed at that task, but if it isn’t, only 46% will succeed. Smaller studies since then continue to show similar results, leading to a usability testing technique called ‘First Click Testing’.

So it’s really important that people understand where they’re going when they select a link. Writing link text is some of the most important web writing you’ll do.

# Unhelpful link text

The worst words you could use as a link are words like 'Click here' or 'More'. That's because they have no information value. All those words really do is tell people they can click, but the formatting should tell them that anyway.

Generic phrases like ‘Click here’ are also very bad from an accessibility viewpoint. Someone using a screenreader may ask for just the links on the page to be read out. If every link just says ‘Click here’ or ‘Read more’, they have no idea which one to select, so they have to go back and read the entire page for the context, which is very frustrating. You’re already starting to lose the confidence of your readers.

# Better link text

You should make sure that your link text uniquely reflects the destination of your page. If the title of the page you’re linking to is well-written, you can use this as your link text. This makes it clear to the user that they’re in the right place, and also reassures search engines indexing your site that you are a reliable site, which isn’t trying to trick users into clicking links.

# F-shaped scanning

Remember that users are still scanning the page, so always start your link text with the key thing about the link destination that makes it unique.

# Consider all the links on your page

Make sure you consider all the links on your page. This image shows a page from the Edinburgh Medical School. Links are highlighted in red – and you can see there are a lot! Be sure to use different link text for different pages.

# Link text consistency

For example, all EdWeb sites have a ‘contact’ button set as part of the navigation. If you have another link somewhere that reads ‘Contact’, you need to make sure it goes to the same place – and if not, make it clear from the link.

Conversely, if you use different text to link to the same location, this can confuse people, and we’ve noticed in user testing that it often leads people to think that one is the ‘wrong’ link.

Don’t worry about keeping links short or snappy – it’s better that they are clear.

# You should never…

You should never have to explain that users need to click a link.

# Explaining navigation

At best, this is redundant – if the link text makes it obvious what the link does, further explanatory text just clutters the page. Often, though, this text is added because the link doesn’t make it clear. If this is the case, you should be editing the link text, not adding further explanatory text.

# Don’t tease your users

Commercial sites with business models based on advertising that comes from clickthroughs might often use ‘clickbait’ or ‘teaser’ link text. Never be tempted to do this!

# The opposite of clickbait

In fact, always aim to do the opposite – instead of forcing people to select a link to find out what’s behind it, write so that people never click a link without understanding exactly what they’ll find.

For a great user experience, you don’t want lots of clicks. You actually want people to achieve their goals in as few clicks as possible – or at least be confident that they are clicking the right links.

# Where does the link go?

You should also make sure it’s clear if the link takes the user away from your website. The default expectation will be that a link will lead to another page within your website. If you’re linking to an external site (including other University subsites), you should explicitly say so.

# What does the link do?

Warn people if the link does something other than opening a web page, too. Most people have been surprised at some point by a link suddenly opening their email client, or downloading a PDF. Tell people what’s going on.

# New tabs or windows

You also need to make it clear if it’s going to open a new browser tab or window. Research shows that this is very unpopular. At best it’s confusing, and means people can’t use the back button, and at worst it can make your content inaccessible to screenreaders and mobile devices.

The only real case for doing this is popup help text for an online form – where you clearly need to access both sets of information at the same time.

Many people worry that not opening a link in a new tab will make people leave the site. This leads to a point which sits at the heart of good writing for the web

# You can’t trick your users…

– **you can’t trick people into staying on your site** – and nor would you want to. Providing good content and answering people’s questions will bring them back to your site. Nothing can make them stay if they don’t want to.

# Focus on tasks

Remember, too, that keeping a visitor on your site is in itself pointless. You no more want to keep users browsing your site for a long time than you would want them talking to you for a long time on the phone – the point is to achieve the task and move on.

# Link titles

A quick note on link titles. These are the additional pieces of information that – depending on your browser – may appear when you hover over a link.

Don’t worry too much about link titles. They should certainly never contain key information, as they can’t be seen by all browsers. Use them where appropriate for added value, but your default will be to not use them at all.

# Link titles and screenreaders

Certainly never use them to repeat link text – a screenreader will just read the text out twice.

# Examples

Let’s look at a few examples of good link text.

This link takes the user from the Website and Communications website to this course, on Learn. It starts with the name of the course, then details what the user needs to do, clarifying that they will need to log in to the system.

This link from a UX blog post links through to a YouTube video. It leads with the key word ‘Watch’, which instantly tells the user that the link takes them to a video. It explains briefly what’s in the video, finally clarifying what site the link goes to.

And finally, this link from the Communications and Marketing site to download a chapter of the ‘Brand Essentials Guide’ gives both the chapter and guide name, clearly indicates that the link downloads a PDF, and gives the size of the download.