# Writing Best Practices

## What we'll help you do -

*We're going to point out some writing do's and don'ts that will help get your creative juices flowing so you can highlight what's important to your audience in a way they will understand.*

## Know what you're looking for?

- **What's the first thing I should do?**

- **What type of page am I creating?**

- **What should I be thinking about when I write?**

- **Can you show me some examples?**
  - Example #1: Speaking to, not at, your audience
  - Example #2: "What's in it for me?"
  - Example #3: Starting your message
  - Example #4: Tell Your Story
  - Example #5: Clarify your copy

- **Next Steps**

# What's the first thing I should do?

*Before writing content for your page, double check:*

- Is this page necessary?
- Do I understand what the layout could look like?

**"Yes" to both? Great!**

Something to keep in mind: You are making a new page. Your new page exists so people can take advantage of your services. The goal of your page, and your copy, is to inspire **action** in your audience.

So now what?

# What type of page am I creating?

You've already asked this as you consider whether the page is necessary, and what type of page layout you would like. As you consider content, you will find that some of these tips may apply more to you, and others less so. Exercise your best judgment.

- Is your page marketing heavy? Or is it more transactional/straightforward?
  - This will likely be the most determining factor in terms of how you frame your content. Even if your page isn't marketing heavy, you can still interact with readers in a way that draws them into the page.
- Which components will you be using? How much space do you have to use?

# What should I be thinking about when I write?

*RELAX! Lots of people say "I can't write," "I'm not a writer" etc. Nonsense! You are a writer!*

*"Good writing is like math: **it has logic and structure**" - Ann Handley*

*Below are some well-understood, logical guidelines and structural tips for writing your content.*

1. What you are putting online is for **your audience**. Likely a <u>prospective student</u>. So, write it for them.

- Speak <u>to</u> your readers. Not <u>at</u> them. Load up on pronouns. "You" (not "students")
- Watch your perspective. Steer clear of writing about all of the great things about <u>your office/department/program</u> offers. Write about how the <u>audience</u> will benefit from those great things.
- "Forget about your features. Be a customer and ask, 'What's in it for me?" - Dave Gerhardt, *10 Laws of Copywriting*

2. Devote most of your time to the **beginning of your message**

- Many advertisers come up with <u>dozens</u> of headlines before choosing the right one. It's hard work, but worth it.
- You may not be an advertiser, but **you need to capture the attention of your audience** — *and keep it* — if you want them to engage with what's on your page.
    - i. We can't assume readers are going to read everything on the page
- "The headline has only one job — to stop your prospect and compel him to read the second sentence of your ad. In exactly the same way, the second sentence has only one job — to force him to read the third sentence of your ad. And every additional sentence in your ad has exactly the same job.." - Eugene Schwartz, *Breakthrough Advertising*
- If you are writing a transactional and straightforward page, your headline is probably not going to be too catchy. BUT — can the copy engage with the reader in a way that draws them in?

3. Tell the story **only you can tell**

- SWC offers a lot of great programs. So do other schools/departments. What makes YOURS better?
    - i. What is unique about *your* program, or how *your* office/department operates that will make readers stop and read?
    - ii. What outcomes can they expect?
    - iii. This applies to written copy, quotes, images, etc.

4. Make your copy clear and **easy to follow**.

- Be conversational! Be bold! Speak the language of your audience.
    - i. "Copy should be written in the language people use in everyday conversation." - David Ogilvy
- Use bullet points/lists.
- Use short sentences. And short paragraphs.
- Check your **readability level**: [HemingwayApp](#) is free.

5. Other tips:

- Don't be afraid to **borrow**. (Not steal). Much of the world's best content is inspired by others. How can you use content from another department, or a competitor, and <u>make it your own</u> by adding your unique value for the reader, working in your voice, etc?
- You can often avoid adverbs.
- Avoid passive language.
- Use strong verbs. (realize vs. find, cultivate vs. form)
- Contractions are OK. You'll be fine.
- It's OK to break grammar rules (sometimes). See: <u>being conversational</u>.
    - i. Start a sentence with *and*, *but* or *because*. "And why not? Because Ms. Dolan didn't like it?" - Ann Handley
    - ii. Sentence fragments. Sometimes they add emphasis.
- Write a first draft and come back to it later with a fresh set of critical eyes.

# Is there anything I should keep in mind in terms of SEO?

*Yes! There are over 250 ranking factors (items on your web page that help you rank better) that go into Google's search results. From Google's Search Advocate:*
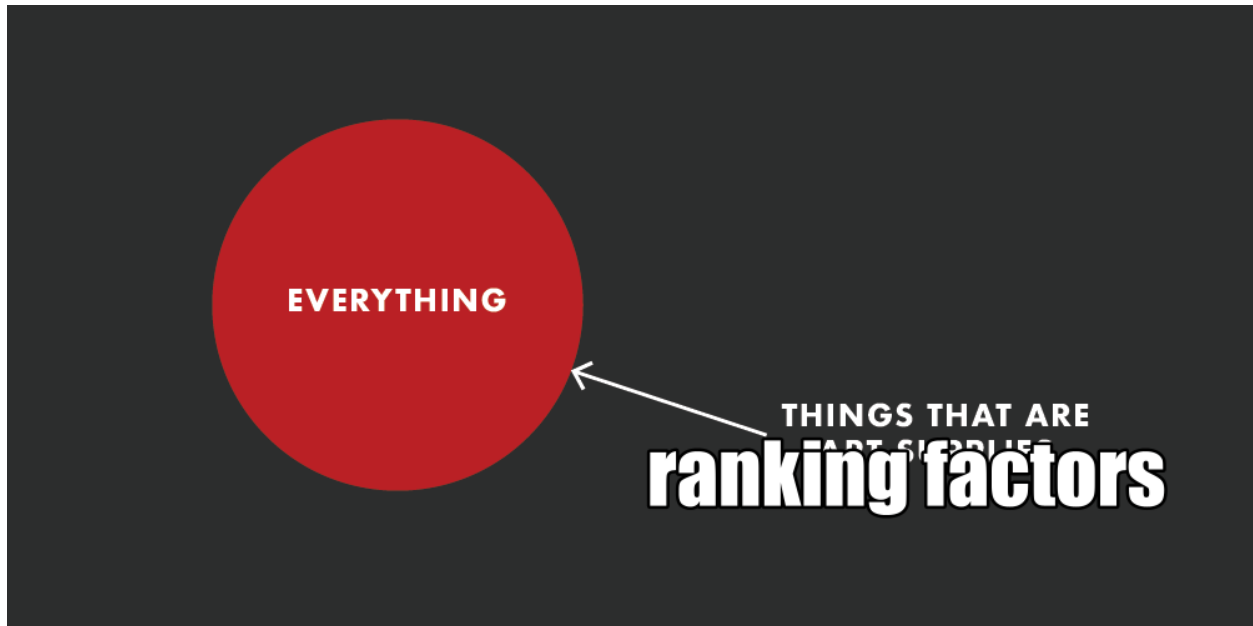


Generally, Google rewards quality content that answers the questions that users are asking — and content that is technically sound and easy to "scrape." Knowing that "everything" could be a ranking factor, let's focus on a few straightforward items:

## Headers (H1, H2, H3, etc)

- Headers help search engines recognize how your content is structured
- Only one H1 per page is suggested — that is the main title for the page. After that, organize as you would an outline
  - IE next main section H2, any subsection under that would be H3.
- "How to Use Headings on Your Website"
- BONUS: Headers help with accessibility as well!

## Title, Meta Description

- When you perform a Google search, the main items that show up in results are the page title, the meta description, & the page URL. These also show up when posted on social media. See below.
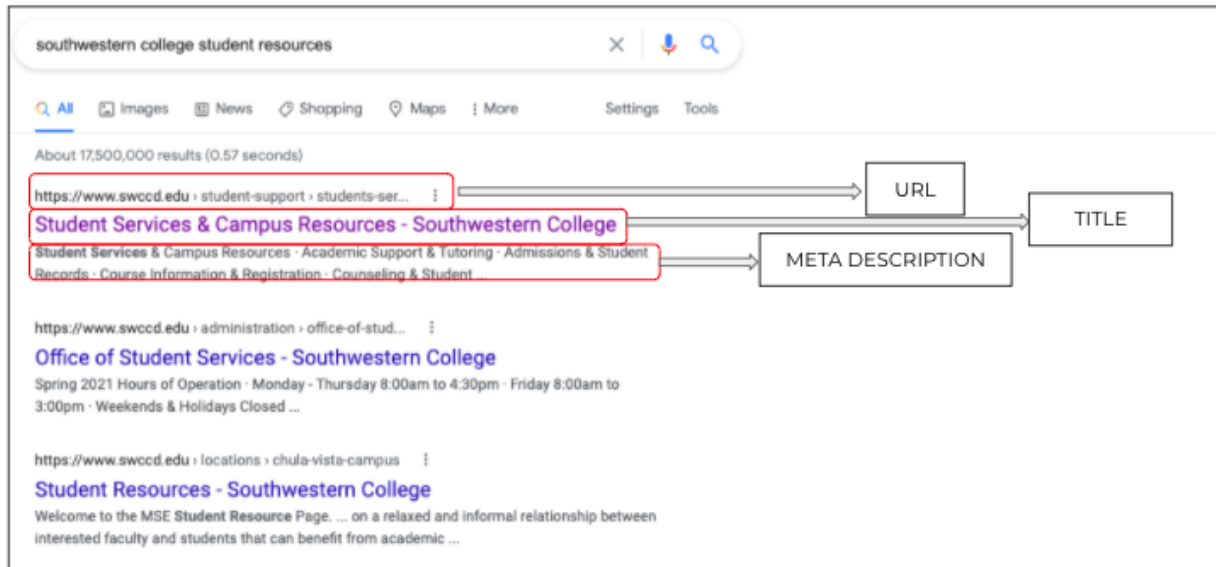
- Because of limited screen space, character limits are suggested to avoid ellipses, increase chances of ranking, and provide the best user experience.
  - Title: Under 60 characters
  - Meta Description: Under 150 characters
- These descriptions can be included in OmniUpdate and should describe the page and invite the user to engage. Example:
  - Title: Student Employment & Internships | Southwestern College
  - Meta description: Looking for an internship to put on your résumé? Howabout job interview tips or job opportunities? Let us help you prepare for your career.
- URLs for new pages should reflect the hierarchy of your sitemap.
- For example, if you are making a page below Tutoring called "Math Lab" you would first review the URL for the "parent page" and add on to that
  - swccd.edu/student-support/tutoring/
  - swccd.edu/student-support/tutoring/math-lab
- Separate layers of the sitemap using slashes. Separate words using hyphens. Do NOT use punctuation.

# Can you show me some examples?

*There are lots of small ways to make copy more engaging. And lots of small improvements add up in mass. Here are some examples of slightly reframing content to speak to our audience better. Would you do anything differently?*

### Example #1: What's in it for me?

| Not this | THIS! |
|---|---|
| Learning Communities are linked classes taught by trained faculty members who combine the content of the linked courses so that learning becomes easier and more relevant for the student. Teams of students share the same classes, and, with the support of their instructors and counselor, work together toward meeting the goal of educational success. Learning Communities may offer special workshops, field trips, and/or activities which make the classes more enjoyable, productive, and social. Come to the Counseling Center and ask to speak to a counselor who can assist you with any of the below programs. | Improving your grades doesn't always need to mean meeting with a tutor, one-on-one. In fact, group settings can be a great way for you to learn and grow — in the classroom, and out of it.<br><br>Learning Communities add a social component to learning. You'll be able to collaborate with others while improving your own work.<br><br>In Learning Communities, faculty members combine the content of linked courses. This makes learning easier and more relevant for you and your group. Learning Communities may offer special activities — like workshops or field trips — that make classes more enjoyable, productive, and social. You'll share the same classes as your community, with everyone pushing toward the same goals. |

### Why it works

- Focused on the student. Not on the Learning Communities.

- ○ "You" not "the students"
- ○ Leads by speaking to the student's problems/concerns
- Improves readability level: Grade 15 → 9

## Example #2: Starting your message/Speaking to your audience (not at)

| Not this | THIS! |
|---|---|
| CalWORKs Mission Statement<br><br>"To empower individuals seeking quality career and technical training with supportive services towards self-sufficiency, lifelong learning and career advancement opportunites."<br><br>Southwestern College CalWORKs staff and faculty excitedly welcomes you! The CalWORKs Program at Southwestern College provides assistance to TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) participants. At Southwestern College, the CalWORKs program is referred to as H.O.P.E. (Hope and Opportunity for Parents Education). | Providing H.O.P.E. for Working Families<br><br>Attending college is hard as it is. If you are studying at Southwestern College, have a family at home, and are eligible, the California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program provides financial assistance to help make sure you can succeed in the classroom — and at home.<br><br>At Southwestern College, the CalWORKs program is referred to at H.O.P.E. — Home and Opportunity for Parents Education. And hope is what we try to provide. |

## Why it works

- Flipped mission statement around to focus on reader
- Some short sentences. Punchy intro sentence.
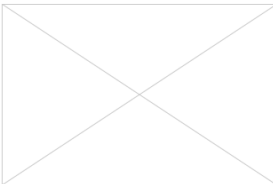- Readability: Post-graduate → Grade 11
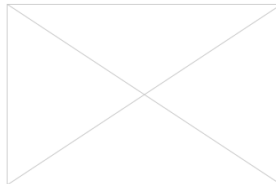
## Restorative Justice



## Learning. Restoring. Succeeding.

Our students thrive inside the classroom — and outside of it.



### 'Larger Than Physical Boundaries'

Shawn Khalif was originally sentenced to 25 years-to-life, and spent 16 years incarcerated at Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility. While appealing his sentence, Shawn started taking courses with Southwestern and

### 'I Have Proven to Myself I Can Succeed.'

Maurice "Mo" Faulkner first took a financial planning course at Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility in 2016. After receiving a Second Chance Pell grant administered through the Restorative Justice program, Mo
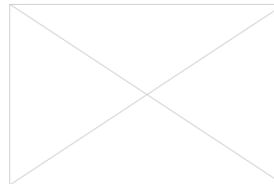
### 'I Can Only Be Supportive and Caring'

Jennifer Gomez, a peer mentor with our **Rising Scholars Mentorship Program**, is a survivor of addiction and the criminal justice system. As a mentor, she works with individuals who are system and justice impacted to help them along

## Why it works

- Stories connect with readers
- Shows proof of the success of the department
- These stories are unique to the Restorative Justice department

## Example #4: Clarify your copy

<table>
<tr><td>

**Not this**

Extended Opportunity Programs and Services is a state-funded, special assistance program for students who are socially, economically, and academically or language disadvantaged.

EOPS assists students with counseling, money for books, emergency loans, priority registration, unlimited tutoring, and specialized support workshops.

</td><td>

**THIS!**

Looking for extra support to help get you through school? Depending on your circumstances, you may be eligible for Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS). This program provides many services for low-income and disadvantaged students.

Our goal is to help provide accessible education to students who are less prone to attend college. We also understand that support means more than helping you in the classroom. EOPS can help you with everything from counseling to financial aid to tutoring — and more.

</td></tr>
</table>

## Why it works

- Starts with focusing on student problem - not the department
- Focus stays on the reader ("you")
- Rhetorical questions are conversational
- Readability level: Postgraduate → Grade 10

# Next Steps

*Now what? Check out these resources to help you take the next step*

I am seeking basic information related to web training and updating my page **>**

I need to identify my page's goal and audience **>**

I don't know whether to add a new page or edit site structure **>**

I need to choose a page template **>**

I'd like to see a glossary of key terms **>**