Display Content_ Health Literacy Online

Introduction

Writing easy-to-read web content is only the first step. If you want people to understand the content, it needs to *look* easy to read—both on desktop and on mobile.

Even health content written in plain language can look overwhelming if there's too much text in a paragraph or not enough space on the page. And if your site doesn't display or function well on mobile, users on mobile devices may give up before they even get to your content.

Web design and content go hand in hand. Use white space, layout, font, and color to help users understand the content on your website.

White space (also called active or blank space) is the space between lines of text or paragraphs, around images, in the margins of the page, and in headers and footers. White space allows for visual separation of design and text elements on a page and improves readability.

Try this

When developing your health content, imagine you're writing for a mobile screen. This will naturally force you to take into account many of the best practices outlined in this section. By writing for a mobile display, your content will be simpler and easier to understand across all screen sizes.

Limit paragraph size. Use bullets and short lists.

It's very important not to overwhelm your users with content regardless of screen size. These principles apply not only to mobile devices, but to desktops and laptops as well. All of the following can trigger web users with limited literacy skills to skip over content:

- Dense "walls" of text

- Long sentences

- Paragraphs with multiple numbers in the text

- Long words

- Paragraphs with more than 3 lines

The takeaway here is that users will skip information that *looks* difficult to read regardless of how simply it's written or how important it is.

Additionally, write for users' limited working memory. Breaking up content into manageable "chunks" or bulleted or numbered lists can help. For example:

- Use clear, stand-alone sections or "chunks" of text with headings.

- Make sure each chunk of text has only 1 theme or idea.

- Turn sentences into lists when possible.

- If your list has more than 7 items, break it up into several sub-lists.

Figure 3.1

Compare these webpages from healthfinder.gov. Users are less likely to read content presented in long paragraphs of text, as in version 1. Version 2 is easier to read because it uses bulleted lists and smaller "chunks" of text.

Version 1

Eat Healthy

Browse Sections ▼

The Basics: Overview

To be healthy, your body needs to get enough vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients. Eating healthy means getting plenty of vegetable and fruits, whole grains, fat-free or low-fat milk products, seafood, lean meats and poultry, eggs, beans and peas, and seeds and nuts.

Eating healthy also means limiting a) cholesterol, sodium (salt), and added sugars, b) *trans* fats, which may be in foods like cakes, cookies, stick margarines, and fried foods, c) saturated fats, which come from animal products like cheese, fatty meats, whole milk, and butter, and d) foods made with refined grains, like white bread, noodles, white rice, and flour tortillas.

Get a personalized Daily Food Plan to help you choose healthy foods.

Version 2

Eat Healthy

Browse Sections ▼

The Basics: Overview

To be healthy, your body needs to get enough vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients. Eating healthy means getting plenty of:

- Vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk products
- Seafood, lean meats and poultry, eggs, beans, peas, seeds, and nuts

Eating healthy also means limiting:

- Cholesterol, sodium (salt), and added sugars
- *Trans* fats, which may be in foods like cakes, cookies, stick margarines, and fried foods
- Saturated fats, which come from animal products like cheese, fatty meats, whole milk, and butter
- Foods made with refined grains, like white bread, noodles, white rice, and flour tortillas

Get a personalized Daily Food Plan to help you choose healthy foods.

Source: https://health.gov/myhealthfinder/topics/health-conditions/diabetes/eat-healthy

Keep the most important content above the fold—even on mobile.[24,30,61]

Users spend the most time looking at content they see first,[62] so make sure the most important and compelling content appears above the fold. Users also judge the content they can see to decide whether it's worth scrolling down to see more.[62]

When content is **above the fold**, it means users can read it without scrolling down.

Figure 3.6

The most important content in this topic about getting tested for HIV is visible above the fold.

Source:
https://health.gov/myhealthfinder/topics/health-conditions/hiv-other-stds/get-tested-hiv

Keep in mind that low literacy readers may have trouble with scrolling—eye-tracking data shows that the need to scroll makes it more likely that they'll skip content as they try to find their place again to continue reading. That's why it's important to minimize scrolling when you can.

If your content continues below the fold, the best cue to let users know they need to scroll down is a paragraph of text that crosses the scroll line. However, it's very challenging to ensure that this will display consistently on different screen sizes—so you may want to consider using a scroll arrow or scroll bar instead.

Try this

View your website using different monitors, browsers, and devices to see how your content displays on the screen.

Finally, be aware that users may mistake horizontal lines or large sections of white space at the bottom of their screen for the end of a webpage. That's a good reason to look at your site on many devices and screen sizes. If you find either of these at the bottom of a page, consider making some changes "false bottoms" might stop people from seeing all of your content.

Make your site accessible to people with disabilities.

All Federal Government websites must be accessible to people with disabilities. This is often called Section 508 compliance (referring [to Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act](#)). The guidance in Section 508 helps us design websites that work for everyone.

Here are a few of the important considerations addressed under Section 508:

- **Make sure screen readers and other assistive technologies can read your site**. That way, users with physical impairments will still be able to access your content. Usually, this involves confirming a logical reading order of your page, making sure important content is near the top of what the screen reader will "see" first, and making sure that images have appropriate alt text. You can find other criteria in the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0](#).
- **Mark up page titles and section headings consistently**. This will ensure that users with and without a screen reader can easily identify the major content sections on the page.
- **Check that users can navigate your site using only a keyboard**. That way, your site will still be accessible for users who have mobility or vision impairments and aren't comfortable using a mouse or touch screen.
- **Choose strong color contrast, especially for buttons**. Many users with vision impairments are not actually blind, but rather have low vision or color blindness. For these users, it's very difficult to tell the difference between similar colors—low-contrast text may disappear.
- **Test content that requires the use of plug-ins or dedicated software for accessibility**. There are additional accessibility requirements for other plug-ins that take a user out of a web browser. It's important to test non-HTML elements in their application to make sure they are still accessible to all users.

[Get more information about web accessibility](#) from the Web Accessibility Initiative.

Make websites responsive.

Today's users expect websites to work well on every screen they touch—whether it's a phone, a tablet, a desktop computer, or whatever else we haven't thought of yet. More and more, users are accessing the web from mobile devices. And for some—especially low-literacy users—mobile devices may be their *only* means of web access.[17]

With this shift in how we're accessing web content, web designers have a variety of options for serving content to mobile users, including native mobile apps, web apps, and mobile websites.

For most health websites, responsive design is the best choice.

Responsive design websites show users content in a format that's tailored to the screen size, platform, and orientation of the user's device.

Figure 3.11

AIDS.gov's responsive design delivers content in different formats based on the user's screen width.
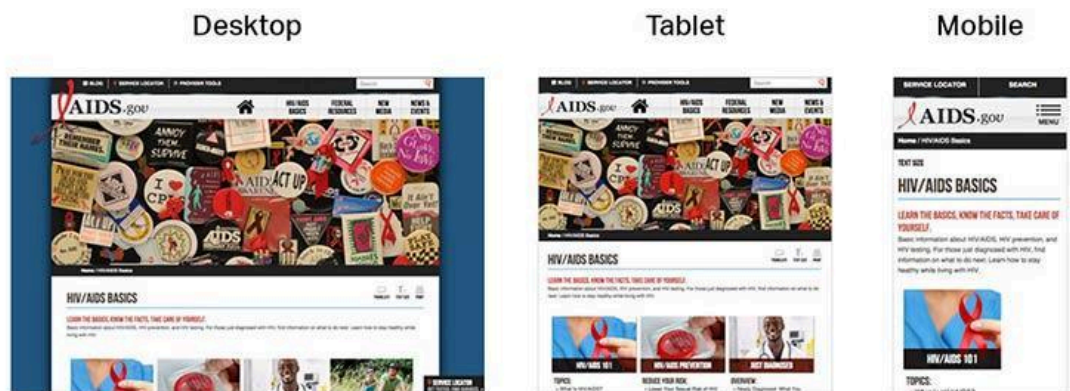
Source: https://www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/ at several screen widths

Figure 3.12

CDC's responsive design template offers a good experience for users on mobile. The site is reprioritized so that users don't need to "pinch" or zoom into content when they land on the page.

Source: https://www.cdc.gov/

A main advantage of responsive design is that a single website can deliver content optimized to appear on a wide variety of devices and screen sizes. But keep in mind that responsive design is limited in that only format—not content—can be tailored based on a user's device. That's why it's so important to develop content for the smallest screen size. By doing so, content developers must make tough choices and create a thoughtful, logical content hierarchy and cut (or link to) superfluous information.

Most of the time, users won't think about how your site was built—they just want a seamless experience across devices