

Guidelines for Writing Brief Answers to Questions for the Web
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Writing brief answers for the web is different from writing academic papers. Your audience is the general public. They will not know technical jargon or theory. Their primary interest is in understanding an issue, finding out something or solving a problem.

These guidelines were developed to compose brief answers to questions, often called “frequently asked questions” or “FAQs.” FAQs are useful building blocks in learning structures on the web.

These writing guidelines address four general issues that are important to effective communication with the general public about issues of family life. These issues are web searching or browsing behaviors of people on the web, writing style, credibility and the practice or application of behavioral and social science research.

At the end of the article are some references that provide additional information and examples on writing for the public on the web.

Web Searching Issues

A variety of studies of how people search for information on the web indicates that people spend very little time looking at the information on a page in order to decide if this page is useful or addresses their interests. In general, people “scan” rather than read text on a webpage initially. One of the consequences of this finding is that in order to help people rapidly assess information, writers must structure their writing so that people can quickly judge the relevance of the information. If people cannot make this judgment, then people usually try another page.

The first sentence should answer the question. In writing on the web you have to assume your reader will scan the document and look for evidence that they are going to find what they are looking for. They are unlikely to read the whole answer, so the first sentence of a good answer should provide a complete idea that generally answers the question that is being asked.

The complete answer should be no longer than 200 words. Web writing needs to be brief. If an answer requires more than 200 words, it may not be read. If the question is complex and has several parts, break up the answer into sub-questions.

Sentences in addition to the first sentence should provide examples and additional clarification. Don’t waste your sentences. Provide clear examples or suggest things someone can do in each sentence.

Use bullets, highlight keywords, headings and other graphical elements. Used effectively these techniques draw people's attention the main ideas in the text as they scan the page.

Writing Style Issues

The ease of reading and the level of readability of text on the web is also important to consider.

Write at an 8th grade reading level or even lower. Academic writing is often written at the 12th grade reading level. Assess the reading level of your writing in Microsoft Word using the settings on the Tools menu, Options, on the Spelling and Grammar tab, check the "show readability statistics" box. You can also paste your text into this online site <http://www.editcentral.com/gwt/com.editcentral.EC/EC.html> to get a check on the reading level. The reading level can be lowered by shortening the length of sentences, reducing the amount of technical jargon, and using fewer words with 3+ syllables.

The length of sentences should be 15 words or less. Good web and popular press writing has short, clear sentences. Look for words you can eliminate.

Limit the use of technical jargon. Academics use a large number of technical terms, acronyms, etc. that rarely make any sense to the general public. It is best to avoid these terms. If you have to use a technical term, provide a definition.

Answers should be written in the active voice. Avoid using the passive voice in writing answers as these sentences are usually more complicated. In the active voice the subject performs the action expressed in the verb.

Active:

Parents make a difference in the lives of their children.

Harsh or punitive discipline can cause long-term problems for children.

Passive:

Children's lives can be affected by their parents.

Long-term problems of children can be affected by a parenting style that involves harsh or punitive discipline.

Credibility Issues

In addition to scanning a web page for clues about whether the material is relevant, readers also look for evidence of credibility of the material. In part, web readers make this judgment based on the design of the website, but they also look for specific evidence about whether the information looks up to date and the source of the information.

Answers should identify the author's name, credentials and affiliation. It is good practice to identify authors and their affiliations as this is a way to indicate to people the source of information. Credibility is at least in part conveyed through identification with trusted (or not trusted) sources of information.

Answers should include the date of their creation. Since there is continued growth in our knowledge and understanding it is important to have material dated. This reminds us to continuously update material and why some answers may be different.

Answers should include links to additional resources or related ideas. Good answers to FAQs are **short** answers so there is always more to learn or related ideas that may extend someone's understanding. Good answers should provide links to related topics or to more in-depth information on the same website or other reliable sources (websites, books, experts, etc). People also judge the credibility of a website based on the extent to which the site links to sources outside of the specific site. Websites with only internal links are sometimes suspect.

Application and Practice Issues

Good answers to questions require knowledge of scientific information and skills in applying this information to the issues and challenges of children and families.

Answers should be based on scientific evidence. The hallmark difference between good answers to questions and the usual material that you find on the web is the use of scientific information as the basis for the answers. Good answers should be based on current theory and research. Our scientific understanding is still limited and so there is never complete research evidence regarding all the questions and practical issues that people encounter. This requires extrapolation from existing evidence and developing critical judgment skills about how the known information might inform questions. Our knowledge from science and practice is limited. The answers to questions will also change as new information is discovered. When possible, acknowledge the limitations and weaknesses of our scientific understanding in your suggestions and recommendations.

Answers should be based on the best educational or clinical practice. In writing answers to questions, there is more to writing an effective answer than just getting the facts right. An effective answer is also based on knowledge of how people learn or respond to issues and information and it involves understanding the lives and context of the people asking the question. A central challenge of writing on the web is that many different people will see this and it is difficult to identify the audience. One solution to this problem is to be specific about who the answer is for or distinguish between different audiences (e.g., general public vs. professionals or fathers vs. mothers).

Moral imperatives should be avoided. The tone of an answer should not suggest or imply that a parent or family member who does not do something is deficient or

fundamentally wrong. Avoid using words like “should” or “ought.” Likewise, it is better to suggest what people should try to do rather than focus on something they ought not do.

Avoid using phrases such as “research indicates” or “research has found”. In general, you do not need to tell your reader the source of the information in an answer. This is implied. They should be able to find out this information (if they care) some other place in the website such as the “about” section that explains the sources of information on the website. If for clarity or variation in the sentence structure you want to indicate the “source” of an idea, then use generic terms such as: “scientists have found...” “clinicians recommend....,” “parent educators suggest..., etc.”

Answers to questions that include potentially dangerous behaviors or complicated issues need special handling. Providing short answers is not always appropriate to every question or at least the answer should not encourage the reader to limit themselves to mere information sources. For example, when questions imply dangerous or potentially dangerous situations, it is important to address the real danger. Here are some examples of dangerous or complicated questions:

- My mother lives two blocks away so when I take my baby to visit her, I just put the infant carrier on the car seat next to me. My mother says I need to buckle her into the car seat, what do you think?
- I have heard that vaccines cause autism, so my friends are refusing to have their babies immunized, what should a parent do?
- My 6-month-old seems to look at me less, stares off into space, and doesn't smile or make sounds like he was a couple of months ago. My pediatrician says I shouldn't worry about this, but I am worried. Any advice?

Answers to these questions should include the information about child deaths in cars without car seats and the frequency of accidents near people's homes. The autism question is very complicated, but this is probably a question that should include the danger of contracting various childhood diseases, encouragement to talk to a pediatrician and links to more in-depth sources of information about the link between vaccines and autism. When particular symptoms or behaviors are reported, good answers should encourage people to seek professional help. (In this case, it would probably be a professional who can do in-depth development assessments.) Answers to dangerous or complicated questions should usually include suggestions for additional sources of help including telephone hotlines, local professionals or services. An answer can include information about why professional help is important and what to expect from professionals.

Answers should acknowledge the limits of the type of help that is being offered.

Anytime a person or an organization offers advice or information they assume a responsibility for harm that comes to a person who acts on this advice. Therefore, it is important to be clear about the limits of the advice or help being offered. In general, answers to questions like FAQs are general answers that apply to general patterns of human development and family interaction, they can never include the unique issues of a

single child or a particular family. Also, human development and family life is complicated and when serious and troubling issues arise short answers to questions are unlikely to be helpful. It is important to encourage readers to seek professionals in their school and community to get help. One way to note the limits of help provided by FAQs is through the development of a standard disclaimer that appears with answers to questions. Here is an example disclaimer for Just in Time Parenting:

Example Disclaimer:

The answers written in the FAQs and newsletters on this site give equal space and time to both sexes. If we write him or her, we are talking about all babies. Every baby is different. Normal children may do things earlier or later than described in this FAQ. This FAQ describes typical children at each age. Each child is special and develops at his or her own pace. Furthermore, the information provided here is not presented by a medical practitioner or clinician and is for educational and informational purposes only. The content is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health care provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or any other serious condition. Never disregard professional medical advice or delay in seeking medical attention because of something you have read.

Additional sources of information about writing:

Kendall-Tackett, K. A. (2007). *How to write for a general audience*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

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