2012 LWVUS: Basics for Writing on the Web

As the League continues to enhance our online strategies and better utilize online avenues of communication with civic leaders, the media, and the public, there are a number of areas in which we can improve. Based on industry best practices, it is recommended that Leagues begin to adopt some of the following writing techniques for use on state and local League web sites. This will improve the usability of your League's web site content, and help you better connect with your audience. For more online help, be sure to check out the "Website Tips for Leagues" document.

WHAT ARE WEB USERS READING?

Studies show that people read information on the Web and in email newsletters much differently than they read printed information. Instead of reading word for word, they tend to scan pages for keywords or interesting headlines, and will tend to skip over long introductory paragraphs or lengthy, uniform blocks of text. Users are also unlikely to scroll down or seek out information that exists "below the fold" on a Web page.

Furthermore, research shows that modern Internet users, bombarded with thousands of messages and images per day, will be much more likely to engage with online text if it a) provides credible, useful, and straightforward information, and b) includes a feasible call to action.

WHAT ARE THE PREVAILING BEST PRACTICES FOR WEB WRITING?

Keeping these trends in mind, here are a number of accepted best practices for Web and e-newsletter writing:

- **Only write content that is appropriate and useful for our audience(s).** Before posting or creating any content for Web usage, we must identify the appropriate audience and write accordingly. For example, documents created for public use (press releases, action alerts) may be much different than those created for our members.
- **Keep all text clear and short.** Text must be clear and concise, and present one key idea per paragraph.
- **Convey the best information at the top.** The main idea of any document MUST be presented in the first line or two of text. Furthermore, the most important elements of any document should appear "above the fold" of the Web page, so that readers will easily find what they are looking for.
- **Remember the "Inverted Pyramid".** Many experts promote the idea of using an "inverted pyramid model" on the Web. While conventional wisdom teaches us to write in the pyramid format: (Introduction > Details > Conclusion); space constraints on the Web require the use of an 'inverted' pyramid structure:

Conclusion > Explanation > Details

- **Break long documents into sections.** Because Web readers scan information instead of reading each word, text must be broken up into sub-categories and indexed appropriately (by chapters or sections). These help increase navigability and increase the chances that users will read our material.
- **Use keywords and links to highlight important sections.** To improve the usability of Web writing, links to other major navigation sections of your League Web site should be provided as resources. Furthermore, bolded keywords (similar to subheadings) can help readers quickly seek out the information they want.
- **Provide a Call to Action.** All Web items for the public should conclude with an opportunity to get involved, join the League, sign up for your newsletter or the LWVUS E-Voice list, or learn about League events in the your community. This not only helps engage readers; it helps grow the League!