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Writing for the Web Retreat

Updating a Library Website

I t's probably safe to say that most library websites have at least a couple of pages that are slightly dated and wordy. In the 2022–23 academic year, the Northern Illinois University Libraries Website Committee decided to make some improvements to our website. Inspired by the idea of LibGuides parties,[1] the committee designed and hosted a retreat for committee members to engage in professional development, workshop activities, and dedicated time to make updates. What is exciting about website updates? Not a lot, but we think that the method of using a website re-writing retreat may be a useful tool for efficiently accomplishing this kind of task.

Northern Illinois University (NIU) is a public research university with approximately 15,000 students just west of Chicago. The Library Website Committee consists of six people from across departments and works on a couple of projects a year to improve public-facing web content. This complements the work of the Technology Support Services Team, who are responsible for maintenance of the website. In 2022–23, the committee improved several webpages that were hard to skim, unnecessarily wordy, and sometimes outdated. The goal of the project was to bring selected webpages in better compliance with plain text guidelines and best practices for writing for the web.

Planning the Retreat

The challenge with such a large project is that there are many stakeholders on various webpages, creating barriers to making large-scale changes. Therefore the committee devised a process to make changes. Before the retreat, committee members completed a survey where they reviewed the library website and suggested pages that needed revisions. Twenty-one pages were suggested as potential candidates for updating. Committee chairs then worked with library administration to identify stakeholders for each webpage. Each stakeholder was then contacted by a committee chair via email with background on the project and a request to make changes to the webpage(s) with an understanding that any revised text would be submitted to them for their approval before any permanent changes were made. A total of 17 webpages were included in the retreat, representing more than half of all webpages linked from the main menu of the library website at the time.

Once identified, the text of each webpage was copied into a word document in a central folder for all committee members to access. The committee chairs then used a table to assign

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each committee members 2–4 webpages to edit and 2–4 webpages to review after revisions had been made by other members. The table also later tracked if the stakeholder's approval for the edits had been received and if the page edits were ready for the web developer to implement.

The Retreat

The writing for the web retreat took 3.5-hours and included time for committee to engage in professional development, workshop exercises, and working time for the initial revisions to the 17 identified webpages slated for revisions. The event was broken down into three sessions, each with a specific goal. Each section began with a short video or two about a topic followed by a workshop exercise to improve a sample webpage based on the section's goals. We drew heavily from the Nielsen Norman Group's YouTube page[2] and website[3] to supplement our work. Finally, each section ended with time for committee members to edit their assigned webpages and incorporate what they had learned. The goal was that most of the editing would happen in the retreat with some asynchronous revisions afterwards. After the retreat, the committee chairs reviewed the edits and shared them with stakeholders for their approval. Once all the webpages had been approved by stakeholders, the website administrator implemented the changes on the NIU Library website.

Table 1. Writing for the Web Retreat Itinerary

Time	Activities
12:00–12:45	Lunch
12:45–1:00	Welcome and agenda

1:00–1:40	**Section 1 goal: Identify the audience for the webpage and what chunks of information exist on it.**
	• Presentation/Videos
	  • F-Pattern in Reading Digital Content[4]
	  • The Biggest Mistake in Writing for the Web[5]
	• Group Review of Courtesy Card webpage: Identify audience and chunks
	• Individual editing session 1

1:40–2:30	**Section 2 goal: re-write content in plain language with attention to headings, shorten content, bullet points**
	• Presentations/Videos:
	  • Plain Language for Everyone, Even Experts[6]
	  • Plain language presentation[7] and activities
	  • 4 Tips for Bulleted Lists in Digital Content[8]
	• Group review with Courtesy Card page for plain language
	• Individual editing session 2

2:30–2:45	Break

2:45–3:15	**Section 3 goal: revise pages for link names and library jargon**
	• Presentation/Videos
	  • Better Labels for Website Links[9]
	  • Writing Content for Generalists vs. Specialists[10]
	• Whiteboard Exercise: brainstorm library jargon and replacements
	• Individual Revising session

3:15–3:30	Closing

The first section of the retreat focused on identifying the audience for a webpage, the major chunks of information on it, and the impression we wanted to leave them with. Nielsen Norman Group recommends formatting and organizing webpages to complement the F-shape

Visitor Library Card

With a Visitor Library Card, you can check out most library materials for four weeks (see Circulation Policies and Circulation Loan Periods). You cannot use databases off campus or interlibrary loan services. If you need this service, you may consider membership in the Friends of NIU Libraries. Visitor Library Cards are valid for one year. A new application is required each year.

Eligibility

- Illinois residents who are not affiliated with NIU or any of the other I-Share institutions
- Active members of the NIU Alumni Association regardless of state of residence
- High school students or older

Application Requirements

- A social security number
- A state-issued photo ID or school/college ID to apply and when checking out items

Terms of Use

- Additional information for Visitor Library Card holders
- Informacion sobre Tarjetas De Visitantes

Apply

- Visitor Library Card form
- Applicacion para Tarjetas De Visitantes
- Visitor Library Card for Minors form

Bring the completed application to the Circulation Desk at Founders Memorial Library. Cards are delivered to applicants by mail.

Courtesy Card

Illinois residents (who are not affiliated with NIU or any of the other CARLI institutions) and NIU alumni may apply for a courtesy card. Courtesy card holders may check out most library materials for four weeks (see Circulation Policies and Circulation Loan Periods for a full explanation of courtesy card privileges). Courtesy cards are valid for a period of one year; a new application is required each year.

Courtesy card holders are not eligible for interlibrary loan services; if you need this service, you may wish to consider membership in the Friends of NIU Libraries.

Courtesy card holders are not eligible for off-campus database access.

To apply for a courtesy card, print and bring the Courtesy Card form (Spanish) or Courtesy Card for Minors form to the Circulation Desk at Founders Memorial Library. Complete information is required on the application; cards are delivered to applicants by mail. You must be at least a high school student or older to apply.
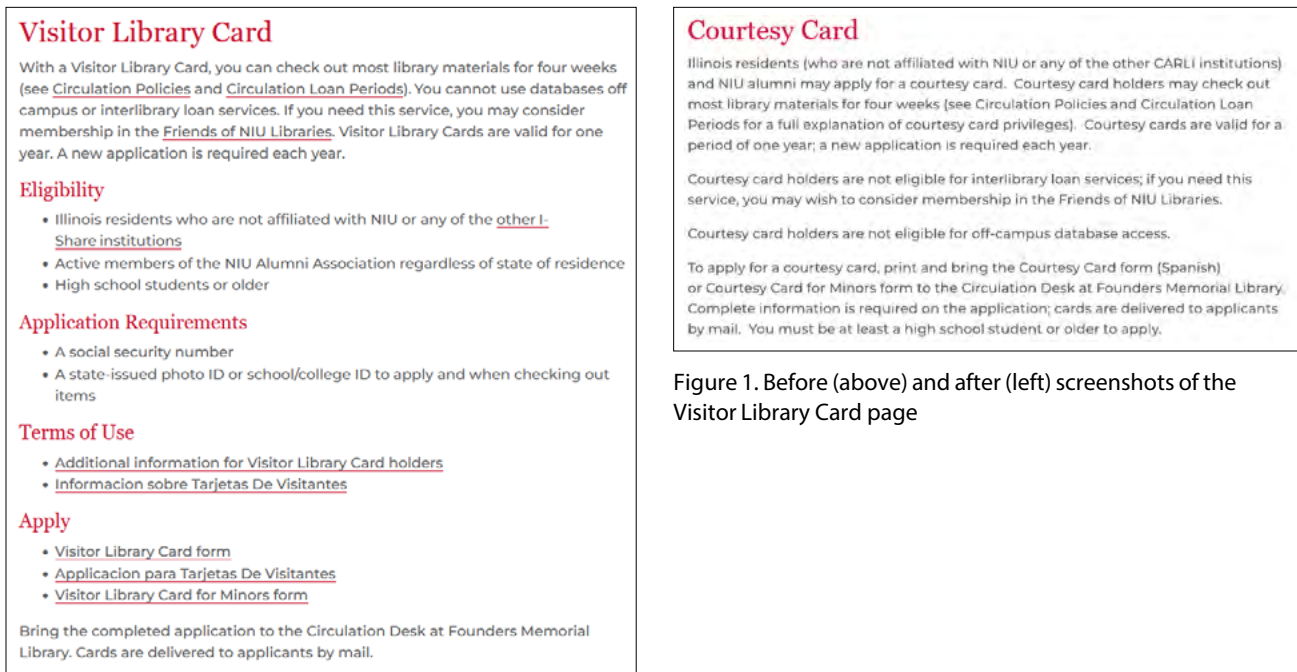
Figure 1. Before (above) and after (left) screenshots of the Visitor Library Card page

scanning pattern that readers often use. In this session, we practiced chunking content into smaller groups of information so that it is easier to skim and has a greater chance of being viewed by the reader.

The second section of the retreat focused on re-writing webpage content in plain language to make the message clear, direct, and concise. A usability study by the Nielsen Norman Group demonstrated that even proficient readers preferred succinct content.[11] We re-wrote section headings with action verbs or questions to make content more accessible and skimmable. In accordance with plain language principles, we condensed information, re-wrote at an 8-10th grade reading level, stayed in present tense, and used "we" and "you" pronouns when referring to the library and patrons. Summarizing information in bullet-point lists enhances readability while maintaining web accessibility, while formats like the table are easy to read but difficult for screen readers to process.

The third section of the retreat focused on meaningful link language and avoiding library jargon. Links to other material should always direct the user to what they are expecting by using succinct and informative link text instead of phrases like "click here" and "more." We brainstormed examples of library jargon on our website and decided on replacement terms.

Outcomes

The website retreat had a couple key outcomes. First, 17 webpages were updated, which represented more than half of the webpages linked from the main menu of the library homepage at that time. Our goals for the retreat were to reduce the number of words on pages and make them more scannable by chunking content with headings and more bullet points. Before revisions, the 17 webpages together had more than 6,000 words on them, and the committee was able to reduce this by 2,500. The committee also added at least 15 new headings to webpages and reformatted many paragraphs into bulleted lists. A sample before-and-after screenshot of one webpage below shows the addition of subheadings and bulleted lists and a word reduction by 15%.

Another major outcome of the retreat was increased library worker knowledge on best practices for writing for the web. Most committee members are stakeholders of library webpages in some way. By building up the committee's skills in writing for the web, the hope is that our webpages will improve as they continue to change in the future.

Conclusion

Editing library webpages for readability is a necessary project for libraries. Using a retreat format to make largescale changes that involve lots of stakeholders is a collaborative, educational, and timesaving practice. The process was manageable and efficient, resulting in a more accessible, skimmable, and usable website. Additionally, library workers who attended the retreat left with practical experience and stronger knowledge on writing for the web. The authors would like to extend our thanks to everyone on the Library Website Committee for their work on this project, to stakeholders across the library for allowing us to update their pages, and to our library administration for supporting the project. ⚲

Notes

1. Natalie Ornat, Beth Auten, Reese Manceaux and Catherine Tingelstad, "Ain't No Party like a LibGuides Party: 'cause a LibGuides Party Is Mandatory," *College & Research Libraries News* 82, no. 1 (January 8, 2021): 14, https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.82.1.14.

2. NNgroup, YouTube channel, accessed October 17, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/@NNgroup.

3. "Articles & Videos," Nielsen Norman Group, accessed October 17, 2024, https://www.nngroup.com/articles/.

4. Nielsen Norman Group, "F-Pattern in Reading Digital Content," August 25, 2017, YouTube video, 2:40 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XU1-Rz2Q7-E.

5. Nielsen Norman Group, "The Biggest Mistake in Writing for the Web," August 24, 2020, YouTube video, 3:04 https://youtu.be/dHX8RRYPHJI?si=d7Mx4zGvqegiTY_0.

6. Nielsen Norman Group, "Plain Language for Everyone, Even Experts," May 18, 2018, YouTube video, 2:37 https://youtu.be/bAvW1A7UiYM?si=cUeeURDr-SLULJFV.

7. Based on content from "Plainlanguage.Gov | What Is Plain Language?," accessed October 17, 2024, https://www.plainlanguage.gov/about/definitions/.

8. Nielsen Norman Group, "4 Tips for Bulleted Lists in Digital Content," August 26, 2022, YouTube video, 3:19, https://youtu.be/QC2qQ5XP6cg?si=MUaOBmpF6lQ-CtMa.

9. Nielsen Norman Group, "Better Labels for Website Links: the 4 S's for Encouraging Clicks," October 25, 2019, YouTube, 2:51, https://youtu.be/NjNTrM_0HQE?si=VWCS1cEK4DD9fS5O.

10. Nielsen Norman Group, "Writing Content for Generalists vs. Specialists," July 8, 2022, YouTube video, 3:09, https://youtu.be/i6EPjkaIpvE?si=wLXVuVJmCGTSY58e.

11. Hoa Loranger, "Plain Language Is for Everyone, Even Experts," Nielsen Norman Group, October 8, 2017, https://www.nngroup.com/articles/plain-language-experts/.