NU Web Content Standards

Our guidance on delivering the basic standard of content for Newcastle University websites.

Web Content: Part I

Newcastle University

From Newcastle. For the world.

The basics ... but there is a more advanced way

This guide merely **gives you tools to meet a basic standard required for website content**, in relation to:

- writing benefit-led content
- tone of voice and personality
- readability and accessibility
- usability and style

To create great web content, you need to add user research to these basic standards:

- **qualitative data**, including:
  - user focus groups
  - interviews
  - user testing
  - social media monitoring

- **quantitative data**, including:
  - keyword analysis for search engine optimisation
  - web analytics to determine drop-offs in user journeys
  - internal web search data
  - market intelligence data

Stakeholder engagement is vital and competitor analysis can be important. Both require data validation. For a guide to creating great content, see: **The science behind great web content – Web Content Part II**

What is web content?

Content must exist for a reason. It must be **helpful, valuable, and based on what our customer should know**, not just what we want to say.

Content is not just copy – it is infographics, imagery, film, animation too.

Whether it's on a school homepage, webform, or campaign webpage – content must be **written with a clear call-to-action**. Each word, sentence, and paragraph must lead to that call-to-action.

Content must always: explain, inspire, and invite an action.

Content **must be written tactically**, always guiding towards an end goal. Make the call-to-action clear at the beginning and end of the content.

Use the body of the content to **lead a user towards making the decision to click the call-to-action**.

Why does personality matter?

If there isn't a logo or brand name visible, would a reader know it's us?

People naturally attribute human characteristics to brands, and **a customer's actions will often be a direct result of how they feel towards the brand**.

Any customer investment in us isn't a quick decision.

It **requires them to build long-term relationships with us** through all our channels and communications. Consistency of brand is key.

A **clear personality builds brand loyalty and trust,** sets us apart from our competitors, and conveys our confidence and clear vision for who we are.

Brand personality makes clear the difference between being aloof or a leader. Between being elitist or selective.

Why is tone of voice important?

When customers identify a tone of voice, they're also identifying a personality.

They start to **form an image of a person or company based on the tone of voice** you use.

Tone of voice is different to our personality.

Brand personality refers to the human characteristics, emotions, and attributes we embody.

Our **tone of voice is how we communicate our brand's personality, beliefs, and values**.

Our tone is not only how we sound, but also:

- the words we use
- how we use them
- our cadence and rhythm
- the length of our sentences

Writing benefit-led content

If stating our features and facilities is the 'how' of our offering, the benefits are the 'why'.

Benefits should be linked to known problems our audiences have.

They **should connect these problems with the specific features and services that can solve them**.

Focus on the positive impact of our facilities and services on the lives of our audiences.

Relevant **benefits will vary depending on who the audiences** are.

Travelling to Newcastle

| Directions | Travel Advice | Parking | Getting Around |

We make it easy for you to find us with our comprehensive directions service.

Whether you're taking to the road, public transport or a ferry or plane, we want to get you here with minimum fuss.

Our postcode is NE1 7RU if you're using a sat-nav or route planner.

Our simple directions search facility works with built-in GPS on mobile devices. It gives you:

- door-to-door routes via your choice of transport
- traffic information
- details of the next trains or buses to leave
- available internal or external flights with costings if required

As Google power this service, you can be sure the information is as up-to-date and accurate as it can be.

To find your way to us, just **add your location to the search box below and select Find Us**.

Enter your postcode or address to find directions

[ ] **Find Us**

Benefit-led content examples

Internal stakeholders
A new sports centre that we've recently invested in is the feature. But an affordable opportunity for staff to balance work and wellbeing in a convenient 'on site' location is the benefit.

Student prospects and decision-influencers
Security and CCTV across campus are features of our service. But peace of mind and reassurance that our campus is safe and student-friendly for their son or daughter is the benefit to parents.

Newcastle University community
An award-winning careers service is a feature. But work skills, self-belief, and confidence are the benefits to a current student or graduate using the service.

Observers and opinion-leaders
Our cutting-edge facilities are a feature. But furthering a business's own goals and aspirations alongside our expert staff and facilities is the benefit to professional partnerships

How people read on the web

User experience experts Nielsen Norman Group determined in the 1990s, using eyetracking technology in user testing, that people:

- **scan read web content** (79% of users they tested with in 1997)
- employ reading patterns in scan reading, including the:

  - F-shaped pattern (most prevalent)
  - Layer-cake pattern
  - Spotted pattern
  - Commitment pattern

Having continued to research with users in this area to the present day, these findings remain true. If anything, the level of scan reading has increased in 2019.

As part of this research, Nielsen Norman Group determined solutions to help website users scan read content effectively.

Helping scan readers engage with your content

Nielsen Norman Group advocate, based on their extensive user research in this
area, employing **scannable text**, using:

- highlighted **keywords**/phrases (**hyperlinks** serve as one form of highlighting; **bold** is another)

- meaningful **sub-headings** (not "clever" ones)

- bulleted **lists**

- **one idea** per paragraph (users will skip over any additional ideas if they are not caught by the first few words in the paragraph)

- the **inverted pyramid** style, starting with the conclusion

- **half the word count** (or less) than conventional writing

Scannable

F-shaped pattern

Nielsen Norman Group's research identifies this as the most prevalent way that most people read webpages.

They **read the headline and introduction** and then look for **visual cues on the left** as they proceed down the page.

Setting your content up to cater for this behaviour allows users to get a summary of the page and pick out pertinent bits for them.
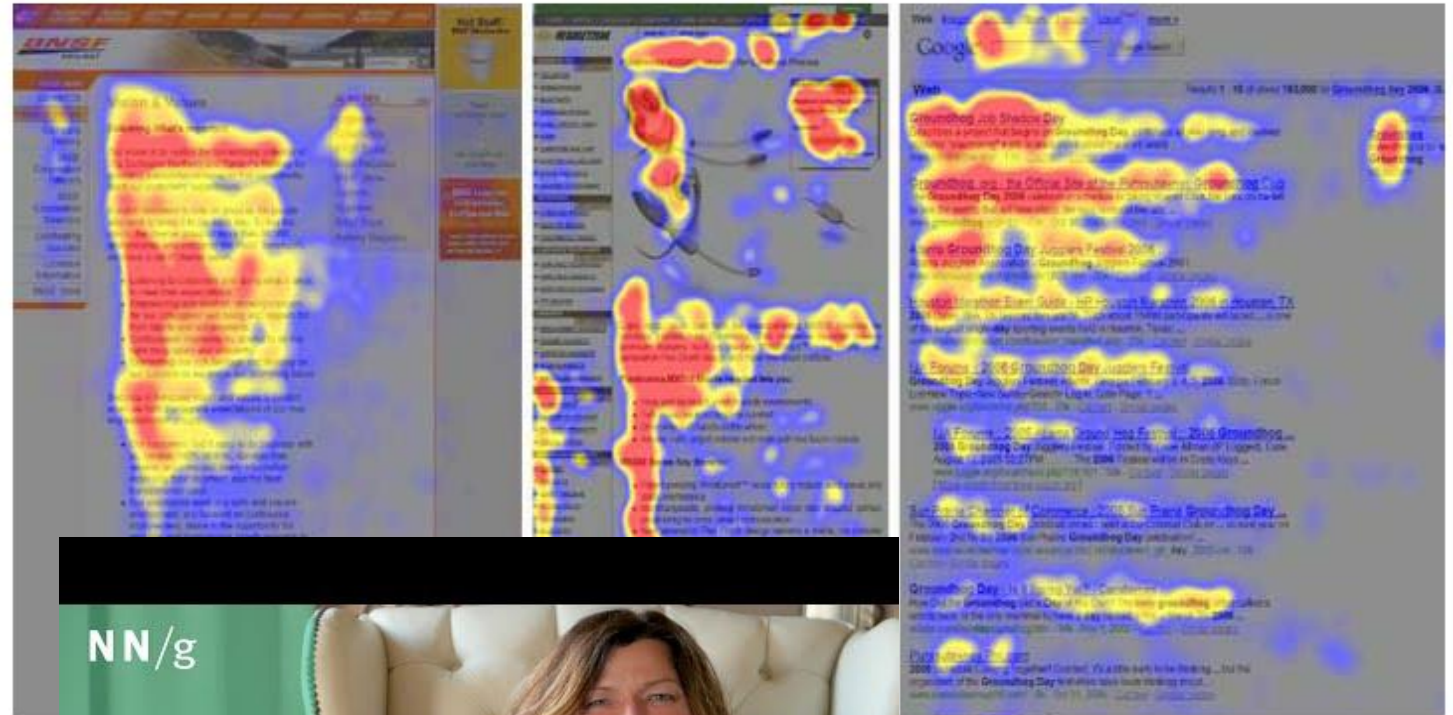
Video for F-Pattern in Reading Digital Content

Scannable

Attention leans to the left

We read from left to right in most countries across the globe (not all). Scan reading for most therefore means attention leans to the left.

Google are as aware of this behaviour as anyone else. Their search results cater for it, with nothing in far right of the page.

It's key in presenting content that you make as much impact down that side as possible.
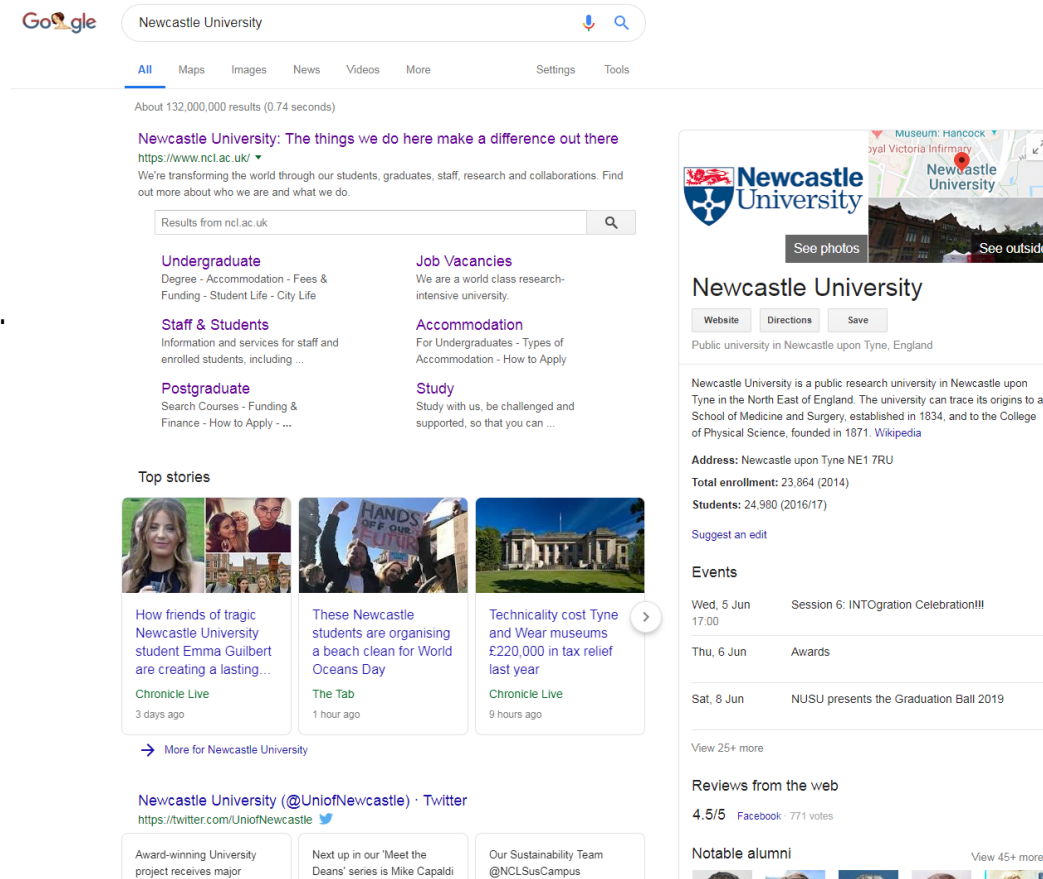
It means front-loading sentences/bulleted lists with keywords and phrases pertinent to the subject of the page.

Scannable or not

The example on the left gives you:

- **clear titles** to allow users to pick and choose content
- **summarises the content** of the page **using bold**
- delivers **clear calls to action and forward paths**

It's **easy to scan**, with users able to pick out key points. It works with the F-shaped pattern, **placing content where users should see it**.

The example on the right gives you:

- few visual cues to scan the page
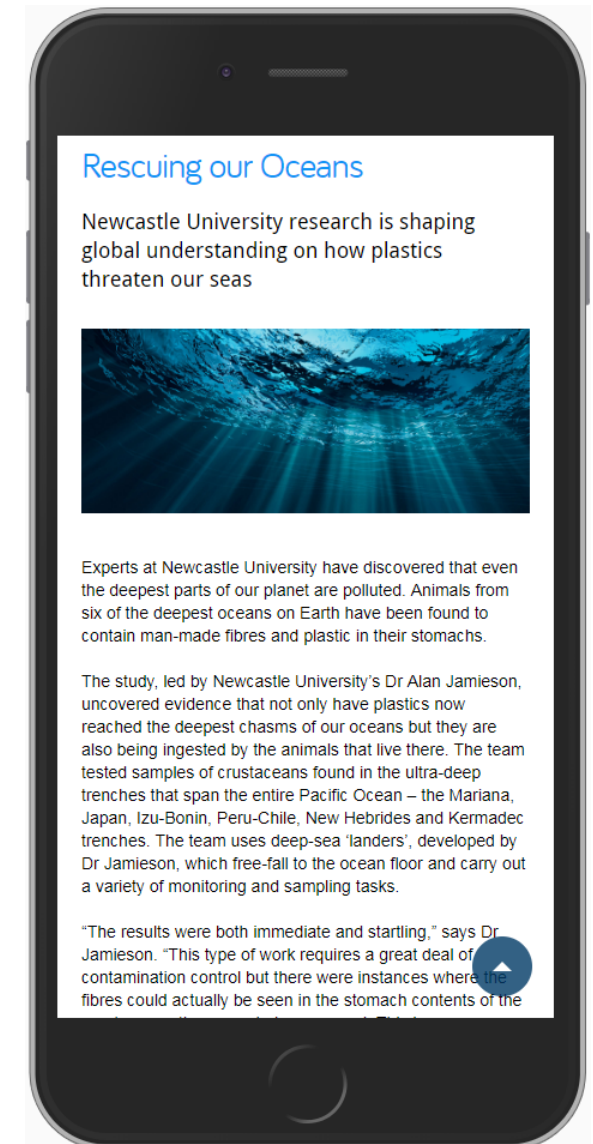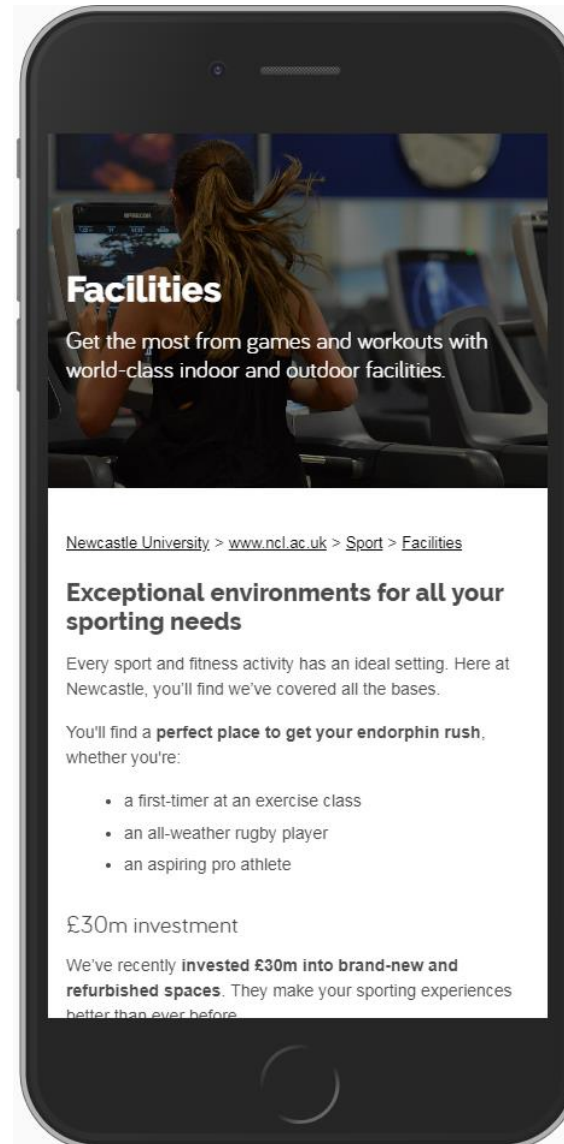
Readability

To achieve the best results for scan readers, **we need to keep sentences short and active**. Applying the Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level Formula helps define how easy it is to read content.

Generally, it prescribes that Plain English content should mean:

- **sentences of no more than 20 words**
- **active rather than passive voice**
- **a readability score of 60+ out of 100 based on the formula**
- **a grade level of no greater than 9**

Nielsen Norman Group's research with website users helps us determine how easy it should be for our audiences to efficiently read our content.

- **General = no greater than grade level 9**
- **Expert = no greater than grade level 12** (this accepts a certain level of necessary jargon)

Sentence length

Shorter the better

It's important that sentences are short and convey a single point.

That way it's **easy for users to understand what you're saying, one point at a time**.

Therefore sentences shouldn't really be any longer than 15 to 20 words.

Anything **longer than this and users start to tire or lose the thread** of what you're trying to tell them.

For example:

Especially thanks to Dr Ralph Rayner, the chairman of Sonardyne, for making this happen and to Mr John Ramsden, managing director of Sonardyne, who visited us on the day, talked to students about their plans for the future and gave a lecture about Sonardyne and emerging technologies in the field.

50-word sentence – grade level 16 – poor readability

Thanks to Dr Ralph Rayner, the chairman of Sonardyne, for making this happen.

Thanks also to Mr John Ramsden, managing director of Sonardyne, who:

- visited us on the day
- talked to students about their plans for the future
- gave a lecture about Sonardyne and emerging technologies in the field

Same content – grade level 7 – good readability

Passive voice

Who and what first?

Passive voice = detail > action > subject – this means you give users other details before telling them what's been done and by whom.

Active voice = subject > action > detail – you're telling your audience who's involved and what they're doing before the detail.

Audiences get frustrated with content when you don't answer who and what first.

Use active voice.

Passive example

The entire stretch of highway was **paved by the crew**.

Active example

The **crew paved** the entire stretch of highway.

How do we test content on readability?

There are a **variety of tools available online to help test and edit content for readability and grade level**.

The two that we've commonly used are:

- [Siteimprove](#) (for testing)
- [Hemingway App](#) (for testing and editing)

Accessibility

Some interesting statistics:

- The estimated number of people **visually impaired in the world is 285 million, 39 million blind and 246 million having low vision**.

- **1 in 12 men and 1 in 200 women worldwide are colour blind** = **300 million people.**

- Dyslexia International suggests that **between 5-10% of the population experience dyslexia, which equates to around 700 million people worldwide**.

- More than 5% of the world's population – or **466 million people – has disabling hearing loss**.

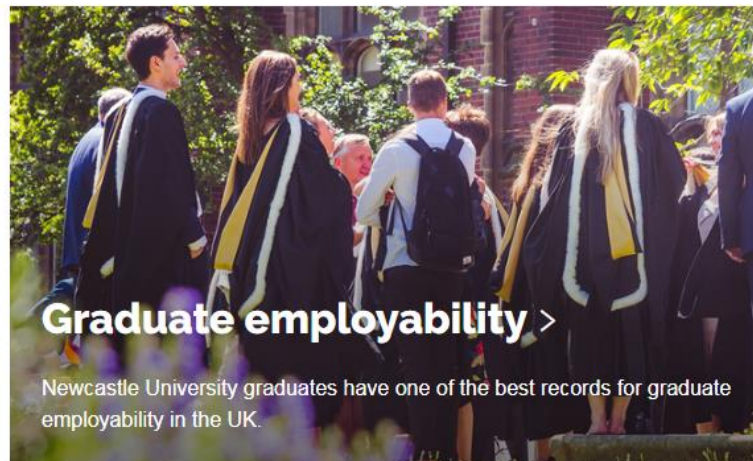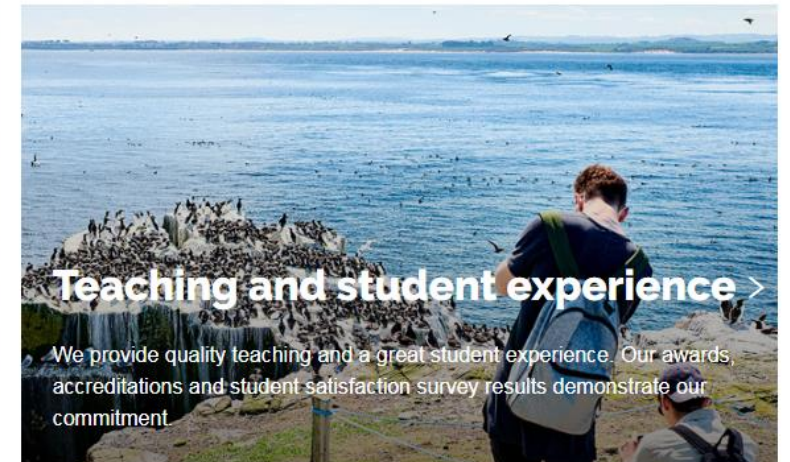# We should not hinder users with these issues by providing inaccessible content.

Accessibility

Legibility of text – Don't tinker about with colour of text or size. No-one can read yellow on a white background in 7pt.

Text on an image – Colour contrast can be an issue, especially for legibility of text that users need to read.

Alt text – Screen readers tell a partially-sighted or blind person there's an image but can't tell them about the content if you fail to include alt text.

Research excellence >
We have a world-class reputation for research excellence. We were 16th in the UK for research power in the latest Research Excellence Framework, and our research has global impact.

Teaching and student experience >
We provide quality teaching and a great student experience. Our awards, accreditations and student satisfaction survey results demonstrate our commitment.

Graduate employability >
Newcastle University graduates have one of the best records for graduate employability in the UK.

League tables and rankings >
Our commitment to academic excellence, teaching quality and student experience is demonstrated through our position in global rankings.

**Examples of text over images offering poor colour contrast.**

Accessibility

Don't use an image or video in place of words - Images that try to convey lots of detail won't be accessible to partially-sighted or blind users. Video can be [**inaccessible in certain countries**](#) (China, Sudan etc) and to those with poor internet connections. Video requires subtitles for hearing-impaired people. SEO is also an important factor as too few words mean the page won't rank highly.
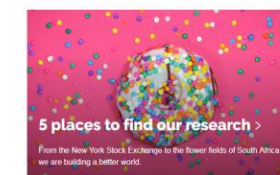
Fonts weight - Please **do use bold** to help you summarise elements of the page for scan readers.

But **don't use italics**. They're difficult to read on screen and for those with dyslexia. Similarly, keep **capitals to only when they're necessary**.

[Helpful posters about Accessibility from the Government Digital Service.](#)
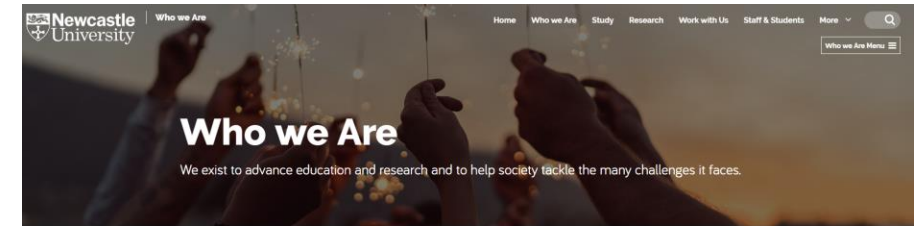
This page relies too heavily on a video that might not be accessible to all.

Usability of content

- **Expandables** – use this content type for copy that's not pertinent to every audience for the page. See our style guide for more.

- **Carousels/Sliders** - limit to between 3 and 4 images with titles, summaries and links.

- **Quotes** – should be full sentences, with punctuation, and should be as short and concise. They should add opinion and reflect the benefits of the call to action.

- **Hyperlinks** – make these descriptive of where you're sending people. Not click here. Make sure they work by using this handy tool. Remember, a broken link is a broken promise.

- **Video and images** - check out the guide to presentation of online videos. We have image size guides for Vision and Go Mobile.

- **Documents** – should be in PDF format and no more than 1MB where possible. There are free online PDF compression websites for optimising documents.

Tools, references & books

Tools

- **Hemingway App** (free)
- **Siteimprove** (University subscription)
- **Colour Contrast Analyser** (free)
- **Check My Links** (free)
- **I Love PDF** (free)

Books

- **Content Design** – Sarah Richards
- **Content Strategy** – Kristina Halvorson
- **Killer Web Content** – Gerry McGovern
- **The Stranger's Long Neck** – Gerry McGovern
- **Letting Go of the Words** – Janice Redish
- **Don't Make Me Think** – Steve Krug

Video

- Nielsen Norman have short videos covering topics in their articles.

Articles

- Text Scanning Patterns: Eyetracking Evidence
- The Layer-Cake Pattern of Scanning Content on the Web
- How Chunking Helps Content Processing
- Plain Language Is for Everyone, Even Experts
- Inverted Pyramid: Writing for Comprehension
- Writing Digital Copy for Domain Experts
- F-Shaped Pattern of Reading on the Web: Misunderstood, But Still Relevant (Even on Mobile)
- 7 Tips for Presenting Bulleted Lists in Digital Content
- Reading Content on Mobile Devices
- Website Reading: It (Sometimes) Does Happen
- Horizontal Attention Leans Left
- The Impact of Tone of Voice on Users' Brand Perception
- Better Link Labels: 4Ss for Encouraging Clicks
- Writing Hyperlinks: Salient, Descriptive, Start with Keyword