CHAPTER 1

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Web

What's Inside:

- ■ **Informational sites—new opportunities for professional writers/editors**
- ■ **A brief history of the Web from a writing/editing perspective**
- ■ **The Web site development process**
- ■ **Roles of the writer/editor on a Web production team**
- ■ **Analyzing sample job ads**
- ■ **Overview of Web writing/editing tasks and skills**

I n 1998, we met with a Web/CD-ROM developer concerning his company's work on a project that we were managing. The material was riddled with text omissions and errors of spelling and punctuation. When we pressed him for better quality control, he shrugged and said to us: "Nobody reads text anymore." We tell this story not only to illustrate the interesting issues that can arise on a Web production team but, more importantly, to demonstrate a general mind-set with regard to the Internet that is now—happily for those of us who care about words—undergoing change.

What the developer didn't know then was that his view of the Web as a medium primarily for design, graphics, animation, and video was not going to last. The online world, as it turns out, is *not* post-reading. In fact, current research shows that text is the first and foremost concern of users when they visit a Web site. Usability researcher Jakob Neilsen (2000:100) notes: "Usability studies indicate a fierce content focus on the part of users. When they get to a new page, they look immediately in the main content area of the page and scan it for headlines and other indications of what the page is about." In our experience, corporations, governments, and other organizations are increasingly turning

to professional writers/editors to help them develop readable, coherent, accurate, and grammatical online text.

The Informational Site: Uncharted Territory

In the past, available Web-related work for professional writers/editors was primarily in online news and e-zines. As a result, there are already many books, articles, and courses devoted to

Let's Speak the Same Language

Terminology in the Web world is chaotic. People use the same term for different things, or different terms for the same thing. Here are some definitions to ensure that we're all speaking the same language.

Content: Written material on a Web site. When written text is enhanced by graphics and video and audio materials, these elements become part of the content.

Writing/Editing: Writing/editing text on a Web site. Please note that the terms *Web writing* and *Web editing* (and also *authoring* and *scriptwriting)* are also sometimes used to refer to programming in the Internet world.

Client: Person(s) responsible for the creation/maintenance of a Web site. The term encompasses many job titles such as project manager, knowledge manager, Webmaster, and information technology (IT) manager. If you're an in-house writer/editor, this person may be your boss!

Content Specialist/Subject Matter Expert: Person(s) who "own" the content through their specific knowledge of the topic.

Visuals: All forms of design and graphics such as color, backgrounds, and navigation icons as well as the media mix of illustrations, photographs, and animation.

Audio/video components: Elements of the site, created in a studio or on location, that are inserted as clips in the Web site.

Navigation: The routes that users take through a Web site to move from Web page to Web page.

work in that field. This book is designed to fill an important gap by providing useful theoretical and practical information about writing/editing for another, very significant part of the Web world—that of governments, corporations, educational institutions, non-profit organizations, and professional associations. These organizations require a variety of Web sites such as:

- *Public Internet sites*—accessible to any person seeking information.
- *Intranet sites*—in-house Web sites that can't be accessed by outsiders and are designed to provide employees with organizational information.
- *Extranet sites*—which OneSoft Corporation (1999:55) defines as the "bridge between the public Internet and the private corporation intranet. The extranet connects multiple and diverse organizations on-line behind virtual firewalls, where those who share in trusted circles can network in order to achieve commerce-oriented objectives."
- *Business-to-business (B2B) sites*—while accessible to any Web surfer, their purpose is strictly to inform other businesses about their products/services.
- *Business-to-consumer (B2C) sites*—while accessible to any Web surfer, their purpose is strictly to market products/services to interested customers.

For the purpose of this book, we'll call these *informational* sites as opposed to those that are news-oriented, those that supply training and require knowledge of curriculum design, and those that provide entertainment such as games and music.

This Book Is for You if...

Everyone working on informational sites—clients, designers, writers, editors, content managers, and programmers, for example—is learning on the job. Katherine McCoy, Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology (1999:8), succinctly describes the problem from the design perspective: "Most of the pioneering graphic designers who specialize in new media today have had to acquire this knowledge informally, largely through trial and error, in the context of professional design practice." As a writer/editor, you are, or will be, in

Web writers/editors have to learn on the job.

the same boat. Your client and other members of your Web development team will not be helpful because writing/editing is not their area of specialty. You will not know, until you're in the thick of it, what skills you can transfer to the Web from print, and what skills you may have to develop to help a Web production team achieve a high standard of excellence in content development. And, most significantly, you may learn good rules of thumb for online writing/editing, but these rules won't help you understand why the Web is a new writing and reading medium and they don't provide principles that can guide your writing/editing decisions.

Therefore, this book is for you if you're a **practicing professional writer/editor** who's interested in, or already in the process of, developing content for the Web. Your background may be in general organizational/corporate communications, technical writing, public relations, advertising, journalism, fiction, speechwriting, screenwriting, or playwriting.

This book is also for other experts on Web development teams who are interested in understanding the principles behind good content development and how a professional writer/editor can contribute. People who will find this book useful are:

- **Knowledge managers** and **business analysts** who provide strategies for the digital delivery of an organization's data and information.
- **Project/production managers** who oversee Web production teams including writers/editors.
- **Content specialists** and **subject matter specialists** who must adapt their knowledge and/or existing information to the Web.
- **Content contributors/publishers** who add information to large corporate/government sites through products such as Lotus Notes and other technologies.
- **Information architects**, **information designers**, and **content strategists** who organize content for the purposes of structure and navigation.
- **Web site designers** who must deal with the interactions of text and visuals on the Web page.
- **Content managers** and **content librarians** who must maintain and update content on existing sites.

- **Marketing specialists** who need to ensure that content meets the marketing goals of their organizations.
- **Professors**, **instructors**, and **teachers** who provide courses, seminars, and workshops in professional writing, workplace/collaborative writing, and/or writing for new media.

What You'll Learn

This book presents a discussion of the Web as a new communications medium, based not only on our personal experiences in developing Web content, but also on the work of researchers in applied linguistics who study writing and reading, analysts who study the effect of Web development on human cognition, and usability experts who test the interactions between users and Web sites. In addition, we'll tell the stories and report on the insights of professional writers/editors and other specialists who work in Web development.

Online Writing/Editing Challenges

Throughout the book, we'll address the many challenges that Web writers/editors face in developing content for this new medium such as:

- Why do users read so quickly online and what does this mean for content development?
- What is the best way to structure information that is logical and accessible to users?
- How should online text be written, formatted, and presented to make it consistent, coherent, and easily readable?
- How do visuals create meaning on the Web page and interact with text?
- What are the benefits of nonlinear reading and how can writers/editors use strategic linking to help users gain knowledge?
- What are the fundamentals of developing Web content that exist regardless of ongoing advances in technology? At the same time, how can technology be used to enhance Web content?

- What issues are involved in writing/editing for a global audience?

- What should be considered to make a site accessible to persons with visual, motor, and other disabilities?

- What are the best practices for maintaining content after a site has been launched?

Career Advice

This book is also designed to help professional writers/editors in their career development. You already have excellent writing/editing skills, know how to organize and synthesize information, and are accustomed to creating audience-based text in other media. What you're looking for now is a guide to best practices for Web writing/editing that allows you to approach content development with confidence and increases your marketability in this new field. Therefore, we'll also examine the business of being a Web content developer. In this book, we'll answer questions such as:

- How do I get into the field of Web content development?

- What value do I bring to the process of Web development and how can I explain this to clients?

- If I'm a freelance writer/editor, what should I know about estimating, contracting, and scheduling?

- What skills will I need to be an effective member of a Web development team?

- How can I ensure that my professional standards with regard to text and its presentation will be incorporated into a final Web product?

Resources to Further Your Knowledge

At the end of every chapter, we'll also provide a list of print and online resources relating to that chapter's content. Given the vast amount of information already published about Web development, we've chosen quality over quantity and have included those resources that we find most reliable and useful. As well, we've tried to provide a range of resources that will appeal to people with a variety of interests and tastes, from those who want to "tread lightly" to those who wish to delve into the theory and research.

Examples, Exercises, and Links on Our Web Site

The companion Web site at www.wiley.com/compbooks/hammerich provides additional information for your use. On it, you'll find:

- Examples of Web pages that demonstrate various aspects of design such as how color can affect content delivery.
- Exercises for those who wish to practice strategies described in the book.
- Downloadable checklists and other teaching tools.
- Links to the Web resources provided at the end of each chapter.

Getting from There to Here

A funny thing has happened on the way to the Web. Content became "king" not once, but twice. And, in between, developers got caught up in the excitement of the look-and-feel and interactive potential of Web sites, and lost sight of the most important people of all—the users.

Back in Them Olden Days

The Internet began in 1969 as a way for universities and the U.S. military to exchange information about science and technology, using rudimentary hypertext software that enabled readers to connect one document to another or one bit of information to another. But the early Internet had major problems. As Tim Berners-Lee (2000:18), the creator of the World Wide Web, describes it: "The Internet was up and running by the 1970s, but transferring information was too much of a hassle for a non-computer expert. One would run one program to connect to another computer, and then in conversation (in a different language) with the other computer, run a different program to access the information. Even when data had been transferred back to one's own computer, decoding it might be impossible."

Text was the medium of the early Internet.

By the early 1990s, Berners-Lee and his associates had solved the major technological problems that finally allowed the Web to be a single global information network as we know it today. But early Web sites were essentially print documents "dumped"

online. Although developers in multimedia CD-ROM technology were eager to migrate to the Internet and incorporate audio, video, and animation onto the Web, the technology was too cumbersome and computers too slow to allow users to make efficient use of multiple media effects. Written content, then, was the medium of the early Web. People used it to get textual information, even if presentation and readability was less than optimal.[1]

Fast Forward to Today

Rapid advances in technology with regard to visuals and audio/video components, downloading speeds, and information management involving databases opened the doors to innovations in design and interactivity. Excitement built around the possibilities of the visual impact of Web sites, rather than how such innovations could enhance written content. Business, governments, and other organizations turned to designers, not writers/editors, to create their Web sites. Many design houses, in turn, evolved into Web production firms and added technology specialists to program sites and develop complex functionality such as search engines and databases. These events, combined with an overall cultural trend towards more use of visuals in print documents,[2] were fueled by a belief that design and technology bells-and-whistles were the key factors in attracting users to a site and creating *stickiness*—the ability to keep them there.[3]

The result was that text was generally ignored. Many Web site owners continued to dump existing print materials on their sites while others created content without much concern for readability. Sloppiness with regard to spelling, grammar, and punctuation prevailed. The perception was that text was "dead," no one read anymore, and a picture was always worth a thousand words anyway. However, to paraphrase Mark Twain: "The report of the death of Web text was an exaggeration." Studies began to show that user behavior was at distinct odds with the conventional wisdom. Two studies were particularly influential:

> Research shows today's users focus on text.

- John Morkes and Jakob Neilsen (1997), usability researchers, discovered that much of the writing on the Web—which was wordy, often promotional in tone, and presented in lengthy paragraphs—was not suitable for Web reading and discouraged readers from staying on sites.

- The Stanford-Poynter Eyetrack Study 2000 provided users with head-gear that tracked their eye movements as they surfed news Web sites. This research found that users looked at text before moving their attention to graphics.

Users, it turns out, look at text first and graphics second—and they want clear, concise content. Explosive growth in the number of Web sites, all of which compete for user time and attention, means that no site can afford to turn off readers with badly conceived and written content. It's no surprise that text is resurfacing as a major focus of Web developers.

New Roles for Writers/Editors

As a professional writer/editor working in other media, it's likely that you play a minor role, if any, in the production of your words in their final form. For example, speechwriters don't deliver their words; playwrights and scriptwriters don't customarily produce their theatrical works; journalists, novelists, and corporate communicators are usually not involved in the design and print of their publications. Generally, the writer's/editor's role is finished when production takes over, with the exception of copyeditors who work with page proofs and scriptwriters/playwrights who may work on-site for revisions.

There are two main reasons why this is the case. First, speeches, plays, films, newspapers, reports, newsletters, and so on have long-established conventions (for both writing and production) based on a solid understanding of usability. Those working in traditional media can learn by reading or referring back to examples which set enduring levels for excellence. Great speeches and plays are printed in anthologies; classic novels remain in print; Oscar-winning films and Emmy-winning television shows are stored on tape; and governments and major corporations archive their publications. The second reason is that technological change has occurred at a relatively slow rate in traditional media as compared to the Internet, giving everyone the time to experiment, evaluate results, and decide whether or not the new technology adds value to their processes and products. These media are also supported by an infrastructure of critical reviewing and prizes that provide writers/editors and producers with constant feedback on success and failure.

Communications Milestones

- **Oratory and theatrical performance have been around as long as humankind.**
- **The Gutenberg printing press was invented in 1436.**
- **Mass circulation of print materials occurred after the development of steam-powered presses in the 1800s.**
- **Film production and radio broadcasting have had a century's worth of development.**
- **Television production began after World War II.**
- **The first computer was hooked to the Internet in 1969.**
- **The World Wide Web started in 1993.**
- **The Google search engine was founded in 1998.**

The Web Is a New Frontier

In contrast, the Web today is like the Wild West, a geographical frontier of the past where there was so little law and order that people made the rules up as they went along. The Web is, metaphorically, a new communications frontier with few existing guidelines. According to usability researcher Jared Spool (as quoted by Head:1999): "The only definable trends on the Web are change, experimentation, and uncertainty…[and] a standard for good Web writing is far from being established, let alone practiced." And with digital technologies changing so quickly and bandwidths expanding so rapidly, what can be included on sites is undergoing dramatic change. For example, five years ago, audio- and video-clips took too much time to download; today, they are increasingly part of site content. Constant and dramatic change means that what was experimental yesterday is a convention today, and likely to be passé tomorrow.

Web conventions happen almost overnight.

Analysis of the Web as a communications media is also a new area of research, drawing in investigators from areas such as psychology and cognitive science, physiology and ergonomics, software engineering and computer science, art and design, and composition and reading. Researchers began to publish articles and books about usability and user impact in the early 1980s and the academic discipline of human-computer interaction (HCI) appeared in the late 1980s. As in any research field, it can take years for theory to evolve and good practice to result. Also,

as HCI specialist Christine Faulkner (1998:1) notes: "HCI is a discipline concerned with the optimization of these two complex systems: computers are highly complex machines and human users are highly complex organisms." Combine these complexities with the constant evolution of computer technology and human pleasure in the new and different, and you have a field of study where the parameters are changing constantly, making it difficult to establish enduring theories that will lead to solid principles for practice.

And, finally, there is virtually no public historical record with regard to the Web. Sites disappear, leaving nothing behind for exemplars, either good or bad. Although the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences has Webby Awards to celebrate excellence on the Web, these awards are obscure in comparison with the Oscars and Pulitzer prizes. The result is that almost everyone who works in Web development makes judgments based on his or her own experience as a user. Only a few know about researchers who analyze Web sites for usability with regard to readability, visuals, and navigation, and even fewer are aware of the work being done by semioticians who have started to explore how different modes of communication interact and make meaning when combined in a document.[4]

As we conducted the research for this book, we were struck by how much the Web has been affected by fads rather than rationality. Buzzwords pop up and disappear. Good ideas arise, get discarded when a new bell-and-whistle appears, and then are resurrected when users remain unhappy with content, design, or navigation. For example, in the late 1980s, researchers in technical communications were already concerned about the effect of design on text. Roger Grice (1989:41) wrote: "Use of color may aid in initial learning by making the information more distinctive or memorable. But use, actually misuse, of color can be a distraction, and the color may get in the way of use and understanding…If color is used with no apparent reason, users may spend time and energy trying to figure out meanings for the colors, wasting their time and possibly misinterpreting the information in their attempt to derive a reason for the uses of color." Cautious analysis like this, however, disappeared beneath the deluge of experimental online designs, animation, and so on.

> Web development has been affected by fads.

But what goes around in Web research, seems to come around. Now, usability experts are suggesting that the overuse of color, graphics, and animation is getting in the way of users' ability to

read and understand content. When it comes to Web development, the online world is constantly reinventing the wheel. And, when problems arise, developers often go back to traditional media for answers, guidelines, and rules. The truth is that, although the Web *is* a new medium, it can also be viewed as a new delivery tool for the same type of content that exists in other media such as text in print, audio on radio, and audio/video on film and television. Therefore, one of the aims of this book is to demystify the Web and dig beneath the hype, fads, and buzzwords to get at the essential, enduring principles of good information structure and online writing.

Making a Difference: Your Contribution

Writers/editors are the new kids on the Web block. This means you'll bring new knowledge, a fresh perspective, and a different vocabulary to the medium. You're likely to find yourself involved in every aspect of site development because a Web site, unlike a book or film, is an ongoing process, not a finished product. New technologies mean design, navigation, and database changes. New organizational needs and goals require content change. And users often won't come back unless a site demonstrates that it has *freshness*, that is, it continuously reinvents itself. As the person most knowledgeable about content in this ever-changing environment, you're likely to take on production roles that you never experienced as a writer/editor in other media. For example:

> Writers/editors bring a new "eye" to the Web.

- If you're writing on a topic that you know well, you may also function as a content specialist, helping to develop or revamp the concept of the site and what information it should include.

- If you're helping to build a site from scratch, you may work with, or actually be, the information architect or content strategist, organizing topics into hierarchical levels and determining navigation.

- If you're still working on the site after it has been launched, you'll be a content manager or content librarian working to upgrade content, add new information, and continually build and check linkages.

And, no matter at what stage you enter the development process, you may also find yourself acting as:

- A project manager, if your organizational skills are strong and recognized by the client to the point that he/she passes many management tasks over to you.

- An Internet site assessor who visits other Web sites to analyze similar sites for content, technology, and design and their effect on user appeal, usability, and readability.

- A design consultant, helping the client/project manager/designer make judgments on color, fonts, and visuals from the perspective of enhancing text.

- A statistics evaluator who assesses user information regarding time spent and pages visited to determine how the site can be improved or revised.

- A focus-test advisor, providing scenario-setting questions for users to see if they can easily find information.

- A usability tester yourself, testing the site to ensure that the content and navigation work well together.

- Your own copyeditor and proofreader, as many clients don't hire specialists to perform these functions.
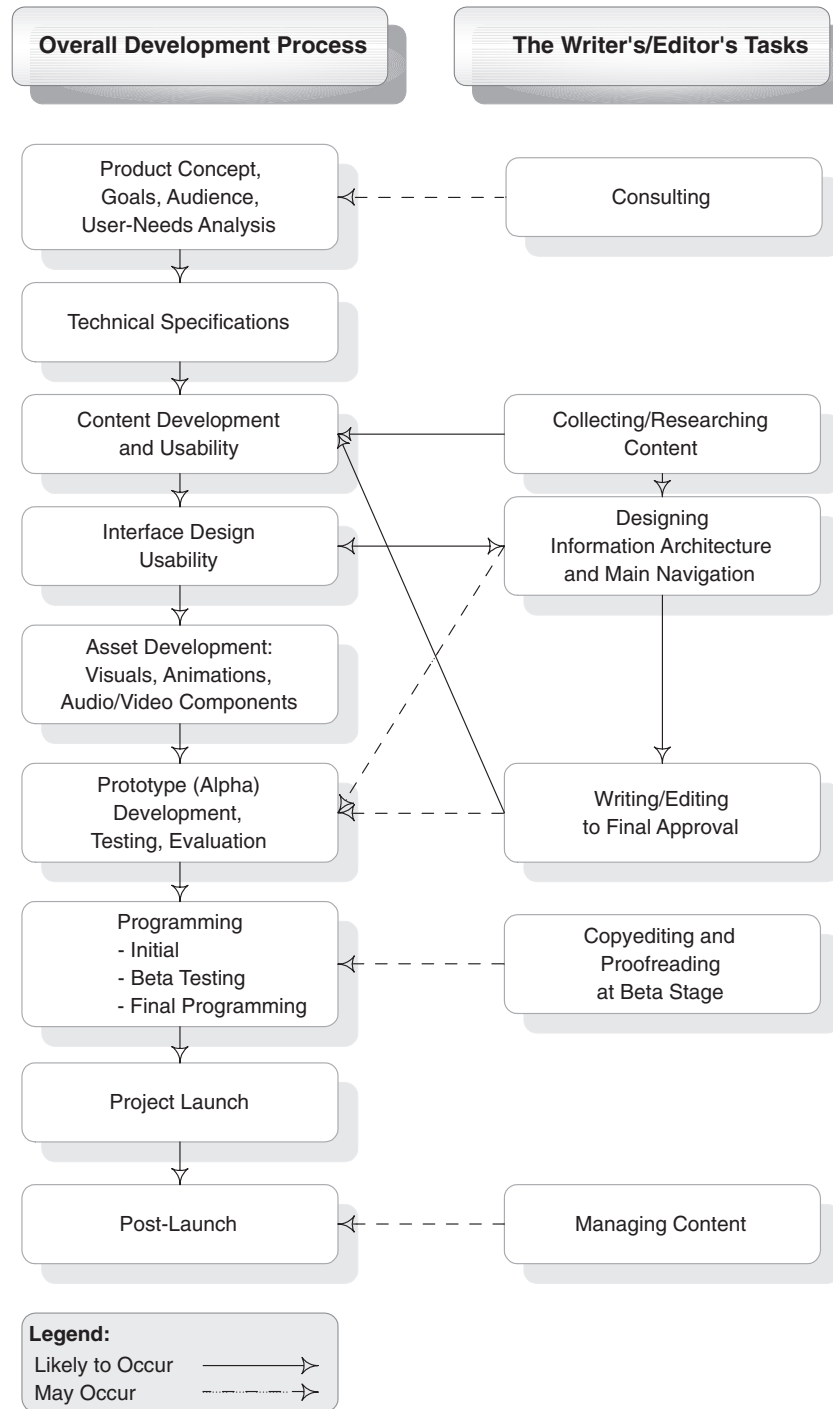
You and the Process

Given the possible roles you could play, you may be wondering when you'll actually be writing/editing. Figure 1.1 provides an overview of the process of Web development, although you should note that this process can vary based on the size and scope of the project. Essentially, however, developing a Web site should be a straightforward process with the writer's/editor's tasks fitting into a logical sequence.

Each step in a site's development brings together those team members with the required specialties to move the process forward. The team may be small with each individual working on many tasks, or large with specialists in different areas. In the steps outlined below, you may be working with other team members to accomplish your tasks. Please note that the timelines for many of these tasks overlap.

Consulting on the Product Concept

If you're part of the initial stage of the development process, you'll take part in brainstorming sessions and possibly focus-

Overall Development Process

The Writer's/Editor's Tasks

Product Concept, Goals, Audience, User-Needs Analysis

Consulting

Technical Specifications

Content Development and Usability

Collecting/Researching Content

Interface Design Usability

Designing Information Architecture and Main Navigation

Asset Development: Visuals, Animations, Audio/Video Components

Prototype (Alpha) Development, Testing, Evaluation

Writing/Editing to Final Approval

Programming
- Initial
- Beta Testing
- Final Programming

Copyediting and Proofreading at Beta Stage

Project Launch

Post-Launch

Managing Content

Legend:
Likely to Occur
May Occur

Figure 1.1   Web site development and how the tasks of writers/editors fit within the process.

Creating Main Navigational Links

On most projects, I'm not only the writer, I'm also playing a key role in the site's navigational structure. My goal is that, within seconds, a person can tell whether to stay and read, or move on to another page. To make it easy to find information quickly, I usually recommend a three-column approach, with the main menu on the left and the sub-menus on the right. The left column stays basically the same, so you can always find your way around the site. The right column might have sub-categories of the main topic, related topics, or helpful links. Up top goes the most important information. Wherever possible, I try to keep the site's section names short and informative. If these names are too clever, they may become confusing.

Teresa O'Connor, Independent Consultant
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testing—the time when site owners and other team members take an idea and begin to give it substance. At this point, concepts about the goals of the site and the target audience are established, while considerations with regard to potential content and the site's look-and-feel begin to emerge.

Collecting/Researching Content

Your task is to firm up content which consists of:

■ Gathering information, if you're going to be developing all the content from scratch

■■ Working with content specialists, which means you'll need to obtain the content and/or set up a schedule for its delivery

■ Collecting already existing materials, either in print or on an already existing Web site, that require updating

Designing Information Architecture and Main Navigation

As you're doing the preliminary work on the content, you'll also develop, or assist the information architect in developing, the preliminary information structure and navigation pathways. In addition, you'll work with the Web site designer to determine what visuals and audio/video components are appropriate. Your task, at this point, is to identify elements of the content that need specific graphical treatments. For example, one of our Intranet projects included fact boxes, quotes, and tips as well as regular text. The designer had to determine how best to present these different elements in a consistent style throughout the site. With this information, the designer can begin to create the design—from the overall look to the smallest element.

Writing/Editing to Final Approval

In this step, you'll either create new content, update existing content, and/or edit text submitted by one or more subject matter specialists. However, even if most of the site is based on content delivered by others, chances are you'll have to create new text for areas of the site such as "FAQ's," "Help," and "About Us." Web writing/editing means developing content Web page by Web page. This doesn't mean you compose on the Web site itself. Putting the words online is the programmer's task. Rather, you develop content in a word-processing program for delivery to the programmer. (For more information on the nuts-and-bolts of online writing/editing, see Chapter 7, "Writing/Editing *for* the Web Page; Writing/Editing *to* the Web Screen.")

If you're a freelance writer/editor, your work may end with content approval, but if the client wishes and the budget allows it, you may be asked to take part in testing and evaluating the prototype—the stage when some of the elements of the site are put together for the first time. Whether freelance or in-house, your role will be to look at the text within the context of the navigation and design. How do the words look on the screen? Are they easily readable? Are there problems with fonts, margins, link titles, and so on?

Copyediting and Proofreading at Beta Stage

You may participate in this step if the client has the desire and/or budgetary flexibility to put the text through copyediting and proofreading during the Beta testing of the site. We suggest that you work from a print-out of the site, no matter how many pages are involved. If you don't, you may miss a page. It's also extremely difficult to copyedit and proof onscreen because that would require making notes for the programmer as opposed to providing marked-up copy which is much easier to follow. At the same time, you must keep track of text that won't appear in the print-out such as mouse roll-overs and pop-up windows. You'll have to check this type of text onscreen.

Managing Content

It's a common fallacy that, once the site has been launched, everyone can walk away from it. Every site requires a maintenance plan that may involve members of the original team. For example, the client must evaluate results through feedback from users

When the Process Isn't Followed

My organization built two applications for our job matching site—one for internal users and another for work search candidates who visit the site. The internal application included several weeks of scrutiny, analysis, and focus-testing. On the other hand, the external application had, maybe, three days of discussion with zero input from my marketing group. When we got the product, it was a mess. The language was organizational jargon that would befuddle users, and it was filled with broken sentences and bad grammar. I'm passionate about having text perfect online, which meant I spent hours and hours editing the 400 pop-up messages alone. What we learned from this experience was that people like me should be involved in the process from the get-go.

Andrea Ritter, Content Editor/Provider

and usage statistics, address any technical issues that may arise, and ensure that content remains current. As the writer/editor, you may continue to work on such tasks as adding new material, updating original material, archiving content, and creating new links. (For more information on content management, see Chapter 9, "Keep CALM: Content and Logical Management.")

The extent of your involvement with the Web team depends on whether you're on staff or freelance. If you work in-house, you're likely to be highly involved; if you work off-site, the organizational budget will determine how much time the client will be able to use your services. However close or distant you may be from other members of the team, a key point to remember is that site development involves many other people. Some may be full-time employees; others may be outsourced contractors. Some team members will be very visible to you; others will be tucked in the background. Chances are, you'll be working most closely with the client and/or project manager, the designer, and content specialist(s) if your main role is writing/editing.

How Much Technology Do You Need to Know?

The technologies that underlie Web development are changing so rapidly that even the technology experts are in a constant state of catch-up. Design specialist Randy Weeks (1999:16), writing in a book for Web designers, asks: "Do you know every difference between every version of every browser with regard to every Java, Java-script, ActiveX, animated GIF, table layout, frame design, download method, XML, SGML, PC vs. Mac display/load/transfer consideration? Neither do the experts. They may know them today, but this afternoon they'll have to brush up. Next week, they'll have to be talking about changes, and next month they'll be loading patches, adjusting code and writing new, better and crash-free ways of doing almost everything."

If the technology experts can barely keep up, how can you be expected to understand this continually changing environment? If you're like most writers/editors, you want to work with content, not technology. Some of you may even consider yourselves techno-phobes. On the other hand, you may have a curiosity about technology and, if you work in Web production, willingly get more involved with the technical aspects of development. Whatever your leanings, you'll find that Web writing/editing

requires a basic understanding of technology with regard to its *potential* to deliver content.

Although technologies have changed considerably since Alex Soo-jung-Kim Pang (1998) was involved in developing an electronic equivalent of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, his story of the tussle between content and technology is both fascinating and typical.

> The experience involved in creating [a] set of timelines created for the 1998 Britannica CD…The basic screen interface consists of a column with years, flanked by two large columns for text; on the outside are two small columns for pictures. Navigational buttons and pull-down menus surround this main body. This design allows readers to load into each text column a different subject, such as science and literature, or architecture and women's history, and thus to compare them. The timeline was created in Shockwave. Since the program is four megabytes, this is something of a technical *tour de force* as Shockwave was designed for creating small animations and programs. All the data—pictures, writing, everything—are in a special Shockwave-only format.

> As the project unfolded, we discovered a variety of things that required us to make changes in the design, text, or programming. The need to keep loading times short—a Shockwave animation reloads every time you go to it, rather than being cached—forced us to keep the pictures relatively small, and put a 250-entry limit on each subject. The original design called for a timeline that displayed ranges of dates, as many printed timelines do. However, the sorting engine that figured out which entries belonged where, and wove together entries from two different subjects, couldn't handle such complexity. This in turn required revising the timeline text. Entries on things as broad as the development of Gothic art or the start of the Renaissance had to be rewritten to refer to specific years or events. Since each timeline entry occupied a

To Program or Not to Program

At the moment, some Web writers/editors are getting involved in actual HTML programming as a result of job requirements, the need for additional skills in order to find work, or simply from a desire to be involved in that aspect of production. We consider programming tasks as part of the technical component of site development rather than content development. If you wish to develop skills in this area, you'll find numerous books on this topic in your local library and bookstore. The HTML Writers Guild (www.hwg.org) also provides comprehensive information and online resources.

fixed amount of space, no entry could be longer than a certain number of characters. Any change to the design—such as resizing the space, or changing the point size of the type, or switching to a new font—would affect that limit, and force yet more changes in the text. However, readability had to be balanced against content: the easiest-to-read entries would have been so short as to be almost meaningless.

You'll also need to know how your writing/editing decisions affect the work of the team's designers and programmers. For example, if you add internal links, you'll alter the information architecture and increase the work of the programmer. In turn, you'll need to understand what technologies are available and cost-effective for your client and will meet user needs. For instance, would animation or video instead of written text be a better content solution for a particular section of your site? If so, does the project budget allow for the costs of animation or a video shoot? How will animation or video affect the downloading of the site? Answers to questions like these will influence how you can organize and deliver information.

You need to understand how technologies affect content delivery.

Throughout this book, and particularly in Chapter 8, "Content + Technology: A Surprising Alliance," we'll provide information about technical issues of Web development to help you understand:

New Opportunities for Writers/Editors

The more experience you have in new media, the easier it is to adapt to writing or editing for it. You have to surf the Web and soak in different styles. You need to look at the kind of sites you want to write or edit for. If it's corporate, then visit business sites. Pick out the ones you like and analyze them. There are a lot of doors opening in areas such as corporate Intranets and e-learning, and content is exceedingly important. Equally important for the growth of informational sites is the fact that governments which were funding the infrastructure for the Web—the wires and pipes—are now starting to look at what's going down the pipes.

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- The technical vocabulary used by members of Web teams.
- How different technologies affect Web development and usability.
- The pros and cons of different technologies.
- Which technologies have an impact on text presentation.
- Ways you can use technology to achieve your goals for content delivery.

Getting Work

Your ability to get work in informational site development will depend on many factors, including your writing/editing skills, your ability to search effectively for work, and the opportunities open to you. However, all the writers/editors we interviewed for this book spoke about the importance of knowing as much about the Web as possible—from the medium itself to the kinds of skills required to work within it.

The First Step: Surf, Surf, Surf

Have you ever analyzed your reaction to different Web sites? Do you know what kind of sites hold your interest, and why? Your chances of writing/editing successfully for any medium—film, novels, theater, how-to publications—increase exponentially when you spend a lot of time studying that medium.

What Employers Want: The Job Ads

One strong indication that content is becoming king in Web development is the increasing number of job ads posted online and listed in newspapers for Web writers/editors. Such ads hardly existed in the late 1990s when Web project managers didn't consider writers/editors essential to developing Web content. Exploring job ads in depth, including reading between the lines, will help you better understand what employers are looking for when hiring Web writers/editors.

In the following section are three ads that employers posted during January, 2001 to The Writing Employment Center (www.poewar.com/jobs/index.html). We suggest you read these ads quickly just to get the gist and see what you think the

> ## *Web Writer/Creative Writer (not technical)*
> Responsible for developing themes and writing creative, user-oriented web content for broker, shareholder and public audiences within established Clients for the Client.com and global web sites. Review, revise, and update existing content. Compose letters, Emails, invitations, confirmations and other collaterals that support products and services delivered on the sites. Research competitive sites. Recommend template changes and improvements in processes and procedures.
>
> Job ad reproduced with permission of poewar.com.

job entails. After each ad, we discuss words/phrases in each ad to analyze the obvious, and not so obvious, clues to the skills required for Web writing/editing, and the many roles the writer and/or editor can be asked to play as part of the job.

Creative Writer (not technical): For many people in the writing field, the term *creative writer* means someone who writes fiction, poetry, plays, and so on. But in the business world, this term has different connotations. At first reading, *Creative Writer*, with the addition *not technical*, suggests two possibilities. The first is that the employer wishes to emphasize the fact the company does not want a writer who must also handle HTML programming and other technology-related tasks. A second possibility is that the employer has realized that content delivered by financial experts is too technical for the average user and wants a writer outside of the financial field who can bring fresh ideas to the subject matter as well as be able to express complex financial issues in a simple and clear manner.

Developing themes: Thematic development refers to the ability to highlight particular messages through the structure of a text. This suggests that the company has had difficulty organizing information in a way that helps it express its goals and needs.

Writing creative, user-oriented web content: The term *creative* is used here to describe a writer who can create readable prose for nonfinancial experts.

Global web sites: This information indicates that the writer will be developing content for two different audiences: users of the highly targeted Client.com site (which is probably being visited by an audience familiar with the company's financial products), and users of public sites. The writer may have to develop different content and write in different styles for these two separate

audiences as well as have knowledge of *localization*—how to write so the content doesn't have a negative impact on people from other cultures. (For more information on localization, see Chapter 9, "Keep CALM: Content and Logical Management.")

Review, revise, and update: Because Web sites can be altered more frequently than print and at a lower cost, the writer will be expected to regularly update text, that is, acting as a content manager or content librarian. This task will also entail copyediting and proofreading.

Research competitive sites: Researching other sites will require the writer to analyze the following elements: content in terms of scope, style, tone, and delivery; how this content interacts with visuals and navigation; whether other sites have a competitive edge; and, if so, what extra value they bring to users.

Recommend template changes and improvements in processes and procedures: Because this sentence occurs right after *Research competitive sites*, it suggests that the two statements are connected and that the writer may be expected to make recommendations based on competitors' materials. However, the phrases, *template changes* and *processes and procedures*, also suggest that part of the online content involves delivery within designated formats, and/or there are forms that users must fill out on the sites. In either case, the writer must analyze template and form specifications, make judgments as to their usability, and alter the formats for greater ease of use.

Work closely with the Web Creative Manager: This phrase provides a clue to the organizational hierarchy built around the site's development. The Web Creative Manager is likely to be

Web Content Editor

As Web Content Editor, you'll work closely with the Web Creative Manager to drive online sales through effective, compelling content. In addition to providing top-level creative with regard to tone, messaging and information architecture, this challenging position plays a major role in maintaining the overall quality of site content. As Web Content Editor, you will plan, develop and organize content, and you will collaborate with content developers and visual designers during the creative process. This position will be proactive in identifying opportunities for enhancing site content and will play a supportive role in helping to develop the skills and capabilities of the content staff.

Job ad reproduced with permission of poewar.com.

the designer/technology expert who manages the site and has to deal with text coming from a number of content contributors who are not writers but specialists in their own field. Although it isn't clear from the ad what this company sells, reading between the lines suggests that these content specialists, who may be engineers or other technically oriented product developers, are either unable or unwilling to write material for the average user. In either case, it's likely the Web Creative Manager has been frustrated by the text and asked the company to hire a professional editor.

Drive online sales through effective, compelling content: The product developers have written the content, but the editor will have to massage, and likely re-write, text to give it punch and appeal. The emphasis on sales suggests that the writer must be able to write promotional materials.

Top-level creative with regard to tone, messaging and information architecture: The editor will have to develop a style to advertise the product(s) and promote the company's goals—concepts that are closely connected to developing *effective, compelling content*. The more interesting part of this phrase is *information architecture.* It suggests that the company may believe that the site needs to be revamped. This means the editor must also be capable of re-organizing the site's structure and navigation.

Collaborate with content developers and visual designers: The editor will be part of a team and have to develop an understanding of the needs, issues, and concerns of two separate clientele: the content specialists and the visual designers. This phrase also hints at past difficulties between these two groups. The editor may find him/herself in a mediating role.

Website Writer and Editor

Create, coordinate, write and edit multicultural tolerance stories for online delivery for organization website. Develop relationships with story contributors, sources and internal staff to ensure that current, relevant content is presented on the site; conduct regular reviews and audits of content to ensure innovation, interactivity, quality and relevance necessary for high volume visits; interview industry sources to obtain editorial material; adhere to prescribed deadlines; develop clear, concise and factually accurate copy; link information into appropriate magazine departments; maintain and apply advanced knowledge of new media concepts to relevant websites, capabilities, and projects.

Job ad reproduced with permission of poewar.com.

Enhancing site content: This phrase reiterates the issues of editing the content to be more appealing, but the employer may also be looking to the editor to make recommendations with regard to visuals and navigation.

Helping to develop the skills and capabilities of the content staff: The company wants better writing performance from its content specialists. The editor may have to act as a writing teacher/ trainer—an interesting career dilemma because success in this aspect of the job may mean the editor could teach him/herself out of a job!

Create, coordinate, write and edit: This position is journalism-related, likely involving a periodic publication such as a monthly newsletter. The writer is expected to develop story ideas, gather information, write the stories, and act as his/her own editor. The journalistic aspect of this job is also demonstrated through phrases such as *interview industry sources* and *adhere to prescribed deadlines*. The type of stories required—about multicultural tolerance—suggests that the employer might be a non-profit organization.

Develop relationships: As an information-gatherer, the writer/editor will need to stay on top of the news and build good sources both internal and external to the organization. If the employer is a non-profit organization, as we speculate, this hints at a political aspect of the job, that is, enhancing relationships to build good will and possibly gain funding for the organization.

Conduct regular reviews and audits of content: The writer/editor will act as a content manager or content librarian. The term *audits* suggests that he/she will also be analyzing site-visit statistics to determine usage, and whether the content is still appropriate to the organization's current needs. Fact-checking may also be involved.

Clear, concise and factually accurate copy: Any writer/editor would be expected to provide clear and concise text. The phrase *factually accurate*, however, suggests that the writer/editor will have to apply rigorous journalistic standards to content by double-checking information and sources. Non-profit organizations are special interest groups and, as such, can be suspect with regard to credibility as they promote their agendas. Clearly, this employer wants to ensure a public image of integrity and reliability.

Apply advanced knowledge of new media concepts: The writer/editor is expected to be cognizant of, and understand, the most up-to-

date technologies and design in Web development, and how they can be applied to this particular site.

Know the Tasks

As you can see from the analyses of these job ads, the work scope of a Web writer/editor is broad—well beyond that of professional writers/editors in other media. Table 1.1 outlines the range of tasks involved in Web writing/editing.

Table 1.1   An Overview of Web Writing/Editing Tasks

RESEARCH TASKS
Collect relevant print information from content specialists or library-style investigation
Gather other information through interviews with content specialists and other sources
Surf similar sites for ideas about information architecture, navigation, design, writing style, and so on

INFORMATION-ORGANIZING TASKS
Synthesize and organize information into logical groupings
Balance the client's/project manager's needs with those of the audience
Consider the various ways users might navigate through a site and ensure content will remain coherent
Structure information in logical ways at different levels of the site

WRITING AND REWRITING TASKS
Anticipate and write to users' needs and questions
Express complex ideas in accessible language
Write clear, concise text
Create short, explanatory headers and titles
Know when to make effective use of bulleted lists
Write text with "punch"

SUBSTANTIVE EDITING TASKS
Create a text style guide or adapt the house style guide for Web usage
Correct ambiguities at every level of text: section, paragraph, sentence, word

continues

Table 1.1   (Continued)

SUBSTANTIVE EDITING TASKS (continued)
Notice inconsistencies in facts, names, spelling, and other elements
Check all tables, charts, and figures for accuracy in text content and visuals
Reorganize written content for greater clarity
Improve flow and coherence of text
Edit paragraphs and sentences for greater clarity

COPYEDITING TASKS
Ensure that each level of head is consistent in presentation across the document
Check all titles against table of contents
Note inconsistencies in font styles, colors, and sizes
Ensure consistency in footnotes and bibliographies
Correct grammar and punctuation
Help the translation process (if there is one) by ensuring that *only* copyedited material goes to translator

PROOFREADING TASKS
Check text for details that occur because of production errors and omissions
Check text for any errors, omissions, or inconsistencies missed during the copyedit
Recognize when a text line breaks poorly and correct to enhance flow of meaning
Ensure that *all* corrections have been made properly
If text has been translated, compare the English and foreign-language versions for consistency in format

TEAMWORK TASKS
Listen well and understand the needs and concerns of others
Articulate your issues in a pleasant manner
Explain problems and solutions in a clear way
Focus on team goals
Adapt easily and quickly to change
Work under pressure
Work with a variety of personalities and temperaments
Acknowledge your mistakes
Keep a sense of humor

continues

Table 1.1   An Overview of Web Writing/Editing Tasks (Continued)

DESIGN TASKS
Visualize how text and graphics can work together
Evaluate font styles and color usage for greater readability
Recognize when design overpowers or enhances text
Recognize when a visual can be more effective than text
Suggest visuals to enhance or replace text

TECHNOLOGY TASKS
Understand technical terms and concepts at a basic level
Understand the capabilities and limitations of software products that involve programming
Know how information architecture affects navigation and vice versa
Understand how different technologies affect usability
Keep up to date with technological advances in new media

What's Next?

This chapter was designed to give you an overview of the state of Web writing/editing by combining theoretical and practical information with regard to developing Web content and working in the field. We believe that this combination of theory and practice is crucial for writers/editors who wish to excel at their craft. Experience has taught us that if writers/editors understand the theoretical underpinnings of Web content development, they will not simply follow rules of thumb, but have a better idea why the rules of thumb exist, when they should be applied, and when they will not suit a particular type of content. In other words, understanding the principles of Web content development will allow you to practice your craft more thoughtfully and, when you create innovative ways to deliver content, to have a better understanding of what will be appropriate to the medium. Therefore, the following chapters are designed to deepen your understanding of the context of Web content development and assist you by providing practical advice and solutions to the challenges you'll encounter in your work.

Resources for This Chapter

Books

Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity by Jakob Neilsen. To date, this book is the definitive work on usability. Chapter 3, "Content Design," provides good rules of thumb for writing online text. (New Riders Publishing: 2000)

The Non-Designer's Web Book by Robin Williams and John Tollett. A light read for individuals new to Web development. (Peachpit Press: 1998)

How to Write for the World of Work: Sixth Edition by Thomas E. Pearsall, Donald H. Cunningham, and Elizabeth O. Smith. A good resource for many different types of workplace text from proposals to instructions. (Harcourt College Publishers: 2000)

The Copyeditor's Handbook: A Guide for Book Publishing and Corporate Communications by Amy Einsohn. A guide for beginners and a refresher text for experienced copyeditors that includes exercises and answer keys. (University of California Press: 2000)

Weaving the Web: The Original Design and Ultimate Destiny of the World Wide Web by its Inventor by Tim Berners-Lee. A nontechnical history of the Web with thoughts about its future. (HarperCollins: 2000)

Web Sites

The Webby Awards (www.webbyawards.com). Links to sites chosen by the members of The International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences as outstanding in their category.

Writer's Resource Center (www.poewar.com/index.html). Information for writers interested in all types of Web writing. Provides an Employment Center and Freelance Forum.

Poynter.org (talk.poynter.org/cgi-bin/lyris.pl?). Click on the second blue box to reach a Web page that provides discussion lists for online writers.

The Journal of Electronic Publishing (www.press.umich.edu/jep/) and First Monday (www.firstmonday.dk/). Many articles in these scholarly journals describe case studies about content development and discuss issues of theory and practice.

Endnotes

1. There is an interesting print parallel that shows how difficult it is for one technology to completely overtake and transform another, and for developers to truly understand the new technology as a new medium for content expression. According to literacy researcher Kathleen Tyner (1998:19), early printers didn't try to make their books look any different than those that were handwritten. "Gutenberg's 42-line Bible is barely distinguishable from that of a master scribe. It took several generations before the look of the book changed from that of the manuscript and it was not until at least the mid-17th century that page numbers began to appear at the bottom of a printed page."

2. This trend is being explored by researchers in a variety of fields to determine causes and evaluate its impact. For example, document design specialist Karen Shriver (1997) provides an extensive overview of this change and ascribes it to developments in society and consumerism, advances in science and technology, changes in the way writing and graphic design are taught and practised, and professional developments in the field of writing, graphic design, and typography.

3. Deborah Shaw (2001), a researcher in information science, describes *stickiness* as "a term apparently first used to connote the user's difficulty in leaving a Web site in 1997 (Bentley, 1997). Stickiness refers to spiders' design of their webs with sticky filaments to capture insects which light on the web; in the business world, stickiness involves retaining users and driving them into the site (Bedoe-Stephens, 1999) or getting them 'to leave something of themselves behind' (Bo Peabody, quoted in Seybold, 2000)."

4. Discourse analysts Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996) were among the first linguists to realize that textual analysis must include the visual as well as verbal components in a multimodal document. Their framework for analysis provides one means of exploring how the mix of verbal and visual makes meaning for users. See Chapter 5, "Is Seeing Believing? The Art of Visual Rhetoric," for more information on this topic.