Best Practices Using Digital Text in Distance Learning: Suggestions from Current Research

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Short description (75 words): Multimedia has been widely used in today’s distance learning, yet a significant amount of the online content is still in the digital text format. While traditional writing style guides offer a certain level of reference, more guidance is needed for the effective design of digital text in distance learning. This study examined current research on the topic and drew suggestions for best practices using digital text in distance learning.

Keywords: Instructional Design, Visual Literacy

Abstract:

Introduction

Presenting content with multimedia is an effective and widespread practice in distance education (Mayer, 2001), but online learning still necessitates a significant amount of text information. Traditional writing style guides are not always effective or appropriate for maintaining focus and retention in the context of online learning (Escamilla, 2021). A comprehensive, peer-reviewed Digital Style Writing Guide does not exist for instructional designers to reference. This presentation hopes to open a dialogue about best practices in using digital text in distance education, draw suggestions from current research, and advocate for a Digital Style Writing Guide that maintains the integrity of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards of accessibility.

Method

A query for “best practices text distance learning” through the authors’ university library homepage resulted in three peer-reviewed articles. A Google search using the same keywords produced academic support materials from the University of Leicester, the National Council of Teachers of English, the University of South Carolina, the Purdue Writing Lab, and Edutopia. The highest number of search results came from the websites shiftelearning.com and eLearningindustry.com. An additional Google search for “ADA website compliance” produced a guide from Digital Authority Partners. A total of eighteen references are included in this review.

Results

Due to the word limit, the findings are presented in bulleted format. We will expand the findings and provide examples at the presentation.
Headings

- Use descriptive headings to clarify what the learner will need to know and do on each page or section to group information or tasks (Burns, 2021; Cagiltay, 2014; Escamilla, 2021; Gutierrez, 2021; University of Leicester, 2016).
- Use different colors or font styles but not necessarily different font sizes (Burns, 2021; Cagiltay, 2014; Escamilla, 2021; Gutierrez, 2021; University of Leicester, 2016).
- Number headings and use enough white space around them to make them meaningful (Burns, 2021; Cagiltay, 2014; Escamilla, 2021; Gutierrez, 2021; University of Leicester, 2016).

Fonts

- Different font styles are acceptable to draw attention to specific information but avoid too much variability in font size (Burns, 2021).
- Be consistent in the use of different fonts (Cagiltay, 2014).
- Boldface or slightly larger fonts increase attention to the content, but better to bold only individual words or phrases in the body (Escamilla, 2021; Jones, 2021).
- Body text should be in one size font (11 or 12), 14 for subheadings, 18 for headings - do not vary font size in the body of a text (Gutierrez, 2021).

Titles

- Add a title to each subheading (Escamilla, 2021).
- Number titles if possible (Escamilla, 2021).
- Create a relevant title that helps learners remember what they need to know (Escamilla, 2021).
- Use words like “what, when, why, how” to trigger curiosity (Escamilla, 2021).
- Use a colon and put the most critical words on the left to avoid wordiness and draw attention to the title’s second half (Escamilla, 2021).
- Avoid filler words like “a, and, it” and never begin a title with filler words (Escamilla, 2021).
- “Headlines should be 4-7 words and summarize the screen. Bolding text makes it stand out and easier to find.” (Escamilla, 2021)
- Write titles that grab the attention of a learner, such as: “Titles That Make A Promise, Titles That Are Intriguing, Titles That Identify A Need, Titles That State The Content” (Jones, 2021).
- Use left alignment (Gutierrez, 2021).

Tone, Form, and Word Choice

- Use personalization with “you,” such as “What should you do?” Instead of “What should be done?” (Jones, 2021).
- As in a conversation, write like one speaks (Escamilla, 2021).
- Avoid unnecessary descriptions, phrases, or clauses (Escamilla, 2021).
- Use words like “Remember” to reference bullet point items (Escamilla, 2021).
- Use connecting words like “first, second, therefore, however, on the contrary” at the beginning of sentences (Escamilla, 2021).
- Avoid compound or overly complex sentences. Simple is best, nouns and verbs, and provide simple directions (Escamilla, 2021).
● Provide a brief introduction with the most critical points in 14-20 words. Simply explain unique vocabulary (Escamilla, 2021).

● Avoid “weak” words such as: “For the most part, absolutely, each and every, figure out, ask the question, very and basically - if it doesn’t convey meaning, don’t use it.” (Gutierrez, n.d.; Jones, 2021)

● Be concise using words like “now” instead of “at the present time.”

● Active voice is less wordy than passive voice (Gutierrez, n.d.; Jones, 2021).

● Avoid repetitions, overly complex words, or excessive use of adverbs (Gutierrez, n.d.; Jones, 2021).

● Use short paragraphs, 3-6 lines long, and break up any paragraph longer than six lines (Gutierrez, n.d.; Jones, 2021).

● Use bullet points to add visual white space (Gutierrez, n.d.; Jones, 2021).

● Avoid using verbs ending with “-ing” because they interrupt the flow of a text (Gutierrez, n.d.; Jones, 2021).

● Use “chunking” to break down topics from simple to more complex. Use a title label to help students skim for what they need (Burns, 2021).

● Use hyperlinks within a document to help avoid unnecessary scrolling (Cagiltay, 2014), to help define unfamiliar terms, or direct to other online texts (University of Leicester, 2016).

● “Note that we take in 25% less when we read online, and so a good rule is to write only 50% online of what you might write in print.” (University of Leicester, 2016)

● Check written text with a free online “readability tool” (https://www.webfx.com/tools/read-able/) (Cousins, 2013).

● Allow for white space between lines of text on a page to allow the eye to rest and to draw attention to the most critical information (Gutierrez, 2021; Gutierrez, 2014).

Discussion

While multimedia has proven valuable to distance education, instructional designers will still need best practices for using digital text. Screen reader software accessibility is a requirement for ADA compliance, yet screen readers do not recognize some of the above suggestions, such as bold or colorful text. A Digital Style Guide would help software developers to address this problem. Further research and collaboration are needed on this topic.

References


https://www.academia.edu/4314006/Teaching_in_a_Web_Based_Distance_Learning_Environment_An_Evaluation_Summary_Based_on_Four_Courses


