

Rationale for the style of links on the University of Edinburgh website

The University Website Project made the decision to advocate a particular linking style for the body of webpages in late 2006. This decision was subsequently reflected in the specification of the formatting behaviour of content published through the Polopoly Content Management System.

This decision was based on a number of considerations:

- The University's devolved web publishing model
- Consistency
- Accessibility
- Scannability
- Readability
- Usability

The University's devolved web publishing model

The University has a devolved web publishing model. That is, there is no central, specialist team managing the website as a whole, as exists in other large corporate organisations.

A lot of staff publishing have little time for maintaining website content, and writing or online communication is not their specialism.

Creating accessible links within the flow of sentences is difficult and time consuming – often requiring redrafting of sentences. It's much quicker and easier to write explicit link text at the end of a paragraph.

As such, it was felt that the avoidance of inline links would reduce the risk of inaccessible links being published, and would speed up the editorial process for non-specialist staff.

Consistency

The Project's goal of re-using content across the site and minimising duplication meant that it was necessary to decide on one linking style and stick to it to achieve a consistent approach.

If it were to be possible to use inline links as well as the preferred style, pages created with content from multiple authors would lose their coherency.

Accessibility

For a link to be accessible, it needs to make sense out of context. That is, without any support from the text that surrounds it. This is because people who use screen readers often navigate the page and skip all text other than links.

As a public sector organisation, the University must work to ensure that its website meets legal requirements on accessibility. The approach adopted, in tandem with web writing training, is intended to minimise the risk of inaccessible links appearing on the University website.

In the crudest example, links that say "Click here" hold no meaning without the preceding text and are therefore inaccessible. Beyond this though, inline links are often only one or two words and are therefore quite cryptic and it's not always easy to anticipate their destination.

Writing accessible inline links that also read well within the flow of a sentence is not easy, and usually only achieved consistently by professional copyeditors.

Accessible inline links

It's possible to create inline links that are more accessible without excessive amounts of re-ordering of sentences. This is achieved with the link title attribute that displays additional information on mouse-over.

However, this does not accommodate the needs of motor impaired users and others who may not be using a mouse. In addition, the issue of impaired scannability is still present with this approach.

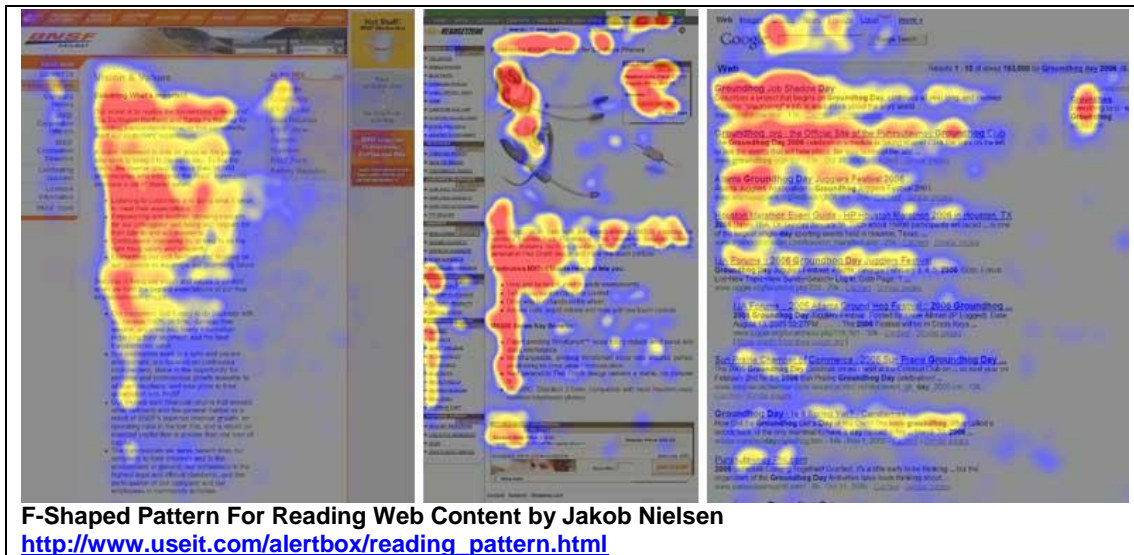
In other words, **the Web is a linking medium** and we know from hypertext theory that writing for interlinked information spaces is different than writing linear flows of text. In fact, [George Landow](#), a Professor of English literature, coined the phrases *rhetoric of departure* and *rhetoric of arrival* to indicate the need for both **ends of the link to give users** some understanding of where they can go as well as why the arrival page is of relevance to them. Book page at Amazon.com: Landow's book Hypertext 3.0

Jakob Nielsen's site www.useit.com employs inline links with the use of link title additional text to mitigate the cryptic nature of some links. However, to access this text a sighted user needs to be using a mouse.

Scannability

Eyetracking data shows that online readers skim the text and predominantly focus on the left hand side of the page.

Formatting links separately at the end of paragraphs increases their visibility, and presents clearly styled points of departure from the page in a consistent location.



As users scan a page they're looking for trigger words that cause them to stop scanning and to read in more detail. Some elements stand out in the flow of text; for example subheadings, bold text and links.

More often than not the text of an inline link is not directly related to the paragraph's purpose so the prominent link text is not helping the reader to decide whether to stop scanning and read at that particular point.

Readability

As we read online, we are prompted by the presence of inline links to pause – however briefly – and consider whether to read on, or to follow the link.

Presenting links distinct from the flow of the text makes for more readable copy. The reader is not distracted by the link mid sentence.

The **University of Edinburgh** founded in 1582,^[3] is an internationally renowned centre for teaching and research in Edinburgh, Scotland, UK. It is the sixth university to be established in the [British Isles](#), making it one of the [ancient universities of the United Kingdom](#).

The university is placed amongst the best in the world, ranking 20th in the current [THES - QS World University Rankings](#).^{[4][5]}, as well as 17th in the current [Global University Ranking](#).^[6] It played an important role leading the city of Edinburgh to its reputation as a chief intellectual centre during the [Age of Enlightenment](#), and helped give the city the nickname of the [Athens of the north](#). Alumni of the university include some of the [major figures of modern history](#).

Opening paragraphs of the University of Edinburgh's entry in Wikipedia
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Edinburgh

For example, while the quantity and style of linking employed by Wikipedia may be appropriate for such a content-rich website (*and note that every link goes to another Wikipedia article*), it also makes for very distracting reading.

"I've found that the most effective links are written like headings, not part of sentences at all... [and] that putting links in sentences reduces readability and clickability."

Gerry McGovern – Content management specialist

Why web links are calls to action (www.gerrymcgovern.com/new-thinking/you-should-follow-me-twitter)

Usability

Research carried out by Jared Spool (www.uie.com) indicates that the most effective and successful link text occurs when the phrase turned into hypertext is around 8-9 words long.

It's not practical to use inline links if we are to advocate this approach to improve the usability of our link text. If inline links were to employ this quantity of words, links would potentially consist of whole sentences or wrap onto additional lines (which have also been shown to impair usability).

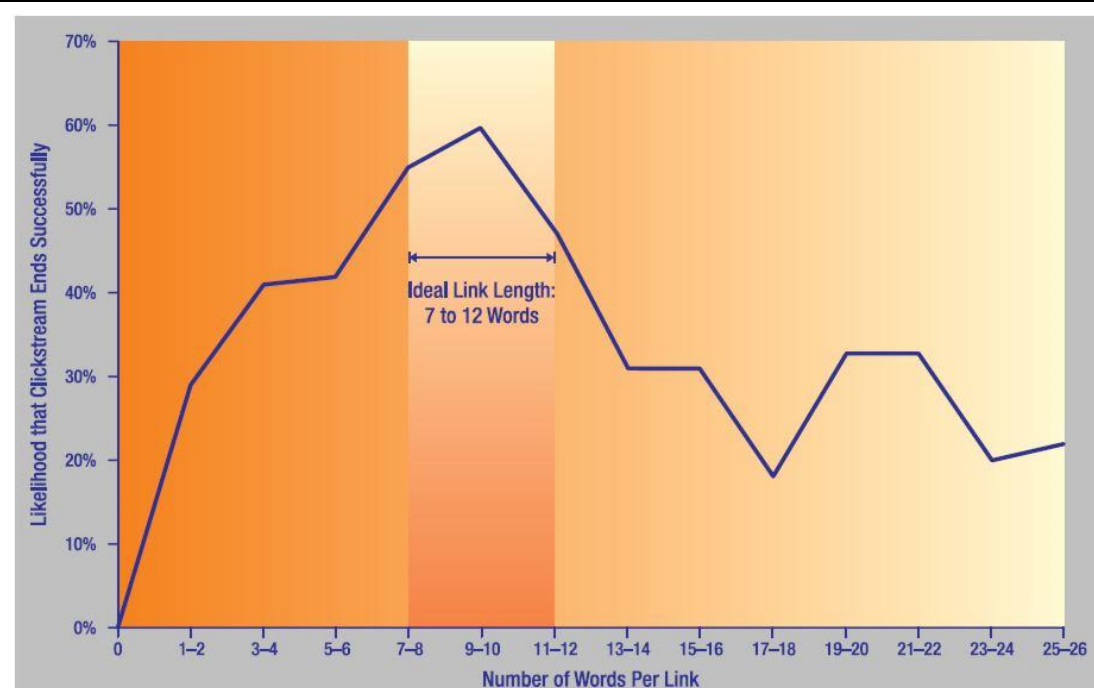


Figure 10: Our research shows that links seven to twelve words long are more likely to take users where they want to go.

Jared Spool analysed hundreds of usability studies, cross referencing the number of words contained in a link with whether the participant made an appropriate choice. He found that links of between 7 and 12 words worked best. (Designing for the Scent of Information: Spool, Perfetti, Brittan)