Geonetric
Digital with care.

THIRD EDITION

Web Writing for Healthcare

The ultimate guide to developing engaging, search engine-optimized content that drives conversions.

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Executive summary

No matter what new trend or technology you're optimizing for, well-written content that answers users' questions and helps them complete tasks always performs. Many of the tips covered in the original publication of this go-to guide, first published in 2015 and revisited in the 2018 second edition, are still best practice today — but we work in an always-evolving industry, with accessibility requirements, cultural shifts toward inclusivity, and an ever-changing search landscape now demanding your expertise.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated many aspects of healthcare's digital shift. This includes user-friendly digital content, now not only a competitive differentiator, but a critical crisis communications tool to inform members of the public and dispel dangerous misinformation. In this third edition, you'll learn how to develop SEO-friendly web copy that meets the needs of your users while supporting your organization's goals in a post-pandemic world.

Healthcare marketers have the opportunity to bridge communication gaps, improve health outcomes, and promote services that change lives. As virtual care grows, you also have a key role to play in helping consumers understand and access your organization's telemedicine services. Following the guidelines in this eBook can help empower your audience to take an active role in their health.

This eBook is packed with evergreen and emerging advice. You'll walk away knowing how to:

- Craft compelling calls to action that make it easy for users to take steps that align with your business goals.
- Create readable content for audiences with diverse health literacy levels and educational and cultural backgrounds.
- Develop text that meets today's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) — and those standards around the corner.
- Find the right tone and voice for your copy.
- Build trust in your brand through web content that meets consumers' needs and preferences.
- Reach prospective and current patients, employees, donors, and other audiences at different points in their journey and on various devices.
- Use keywords and other on-page SEO techniques to boost organic traffic.

To guide your content development, you'll also receive a web writing checklist and recommendations for helpful online tools. Whether you're new to writing healthcare web copy or just looking for a refresher, this eBook will teach you the fundamentals of creating effective web content.

Benefits of quality web content

Why do people come to your site? They want to find information or complete a task. Sure, it's important to have an eye-catching design and user-friendly functionality. But if your content doesn't meet the needs of your site visitors, they'll leave — and find what they're searching for elsewhere.

Effective online content:

- Answers questions in a way users understand and helps them make important decisions
- Builds relationships with current and prospective patients, employees, donors, and other audiences
- Is optimized for search engines
- Leads visitors to take action that aligns with your marketing funnel and business goals
- Meets accessibility requirements
- Promotes your services, doctors, events, expertise, and locations
- Helps people understand what makes your organization unique and how they benefit from choosing you
- Conveys your brand through a consistent voice, tone, and editorial style

But before you can create effective online content, you must first understand your readers. Only 12% of American adults are able to find and understand the health information they need to make informed choices about medical care and personal wellness.[1] As healthcare marketers, we have the opportunity to bridge communication gaps so people can take active roles in their health.

Why do we go online?

A 2021 Pew Research study says 85% of Americans access the internet each day, and a third of those say they're "almost constantly" online.[2] Users go online to complete specific tasks:[3]
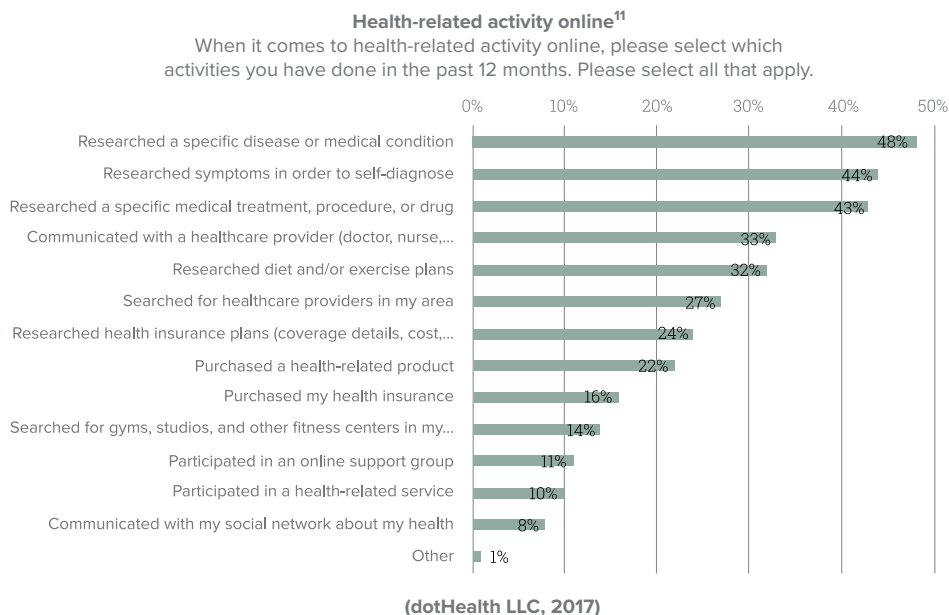
- Look up information about a location, including driving or walking directions, hours of operation, and more. A third of online searches on mobile devices are location-related.[4]
- Communicate with family, friends, coworkers, and others via text messages, instant messaging, email, social networking sites, and video calls and conferences.
- Choose entertainment when and where they want it, including videos, podcasts, and music.
- Shop for products and consumer services and make purchases and reservations.
- Work remotely, search for a job, or sell goods or services.
- Share experiences, such as business reviews, blog posts, videos, or other original content.
- Explore new or trending subjects.

What information about health are we looking for?

The majority of Americans use the internet to find healthcare information.[5] Among those who use a smartphone or tablet, 85% have used their device to look up health- or medical-related information, and 95% of people have looked up health- or medical-related information on a laptop or desktop computer.[6]

Today, almost 80% of online health research begins at a search engine such as Google, Bing, or Yahoo.[7] Adults 65 and older, the segment of the U.S. population most likely to personally access a wide range of healthcare services, are increasingly becoming more comfortable using technology and turning to digital health resources.[8] Seniors, like all demographics, increased their internet usage during the pandemic.[9] The same study shows healthy living education and researching or purchasing medical services, including accessing telemedicine visits and purchasing medical supplies, bring seniors toward the internet.

The top health-related behavior users conduct online is researching a specific health condition or symptoms. Other tasks include learning about prescription medications, researching physicians and hospitals, and scheduling appointments.[10] When your site's content is interesting to users and relevant to their needs, you'll increase site traffic while positioning your brand as a trusted local source of information.

Health-related activity online[11]
When it comes to health-related activity online, please select which activities you have done in the past 12 months. Please select all that apply.

Activity	Percentage
Researched a specific disease or medical condition	48%
Researched symptoms in order to self-diagnose	44%
Researched a specific medical treatment, procedure, or drug	43%
Communicated with a healthcare provider (doctor, nurse,...	33%
Researched diet and/or exercise plans	32%
Searched for healthcare providers in my area	27%
Researched health insurance plans (coverage details, cost,...	24%
Purchased a health-related product	22%
Purchased my health insurance	16%
Searched for gyms, studios, and other fitness centers in my...	14%
Participated in an online support group	11%
Participated in a health-related service	10%
Communicated with my social network about my health	8%
Other	1%

(dotHealth LLC, 2017)

In addition to using the internet to choose a physician, a 2018 study found 51% of Americans rate healthcare providers online, write reviews, or share their experience via social media, and 70% say online reviews have informed their decision when choosing a doctor.[12] Another survey noted 57% of consumers use the internet to gather information about providers, and 45% consult health system websites.[13] Creating content that promotes your providers can help you connect with your market and improve patient acquisition. Learn more by reading Geonetric's eBook, **"Physician Marketing: How to Promote Providers to Today's Connected Health Consumers."**

What do users want from your organization's website?

Data around consumer health-related digital activities helps us see the big picture. But your hospital or health system website likely can't answer every health-related query. Nor does it need to. At Geonetric, we've found that our most successful clients focus their content on explaining the patient experience at their organization.

Most local healthcare organizations don't need to build out encyclopedic health education. This type of content is difficult to maintain and nearly impossible to rank first in search engine results pages for — and it's not what consumers come to your website to find. Consumers are likely to visit nationally known websites, such as those published by the National Library of Medicine, the American Heart Association, and the American Cancer Society, to research symptoms and conditions.

When consumers visit your website, they're generally looking for information that helps them decide where to seek care. They want to know whether you treat their condition and what it's like to receive care from your doctors, advanced practitioners, and nurses. That's why we recommend focusing your website's service line content on explaining your competitive differentiators and answering common questions related to getting care.

How people read on the web

To understand how to write for the web, you need to consider how people read on the web. Studies show us that people don't read web pages the same way they read a print publication.[14] When we're online, the way we read depends on:

- Our task
- Our assumptions from previous experiences with the internet, your site, or your brand
- Our motivation (how important the information is to us) and focus level on the task at hand
- Personal characteristics. While some users prefer to scan even when highly motivated, others may be very detail-oriented, even when reading online.
- Type of content (e.g. text versus images), formatting, and layout

Writers can influence the way consumers scan pages through the way they structure and format the content. Clear, understandable subheadings help users quickly and easily find the information they're looking for — then they'll read the text below.[15]

Eye-tracking studies reveal that people whose primary language is English consistently use the following patterns when reading on a desktop or laptop screen:

1. **Classic F-shaped pattern,** where readers scan the main headline and skim content that grabs their attention. Then, their eyes scan down the left edge of the content. This pattern is often used when a page has large chunks of text and doesn't employ subheads or bulleted lists effectively, which may prevent users from finding the information they're most interested in.
2. **Layer-cake pattern**, when eyes scan headings and subheadings without reading the content below. A heat map or gaze plot of this pattern shows horizontal lines, similar to the alternating layers of frosting and cake in a layer cake. This pattern, one of the most effective ways users can scan webpages, relies on useful headings and other web optimization tactics.

Nielsen Norman Group has identified **many other scanning patterns**. The important takeaway is that, when you understand how people read webpages — and the range of devices they use — you realize the importance of first sentences, headings, subheads, link text, and bulleted lists. Thankfully, studies show that user experience best practices relate more to human behavior than changing technology.[16] Get to the point, and answer your site visitors' questions quickly. If your content is relevant and engaging, they'll keep reading.

The harsh truth

Most of the time, users won't read all your content. Usability expert Jakob Nielsen says that users have time to read, at most, 28% of the words during an average visit.[17] When you follow our steps for great writing for the web, you'll help your users find the content they're most interested in. That's the content that helps them accomplish the task that brought them to your website in the first place: driving conversions that support your business goals.

Web writing best practices

Effective web writing boils down to three core guidelines:

- Keep it simple.
- Focus on the user.
- Make it easy to take action.

Keep it simple

Simple, concise writing benefits everyone — including people reading on their smartphones and those using screen readers or other assistive devices. To keep your writing simple:

- Explain any technical terms, abbreviations, and acronyms.
- Get to the point — put the most important information first.
- Eliminate redundant, outdated, or trivial content (ROT).
- Use an active voice.
- Use **plain language**,[18] writing your readers can understand the first time they read it.

Health literacy and readability

Health literacy is the ability to understand and use health information to make informed choices, access medical services, and practice self-care.[19] Patients with varying levels of health literacy depend on the internet to help them make decisions about their healthcare.[20] Stress caused by a health situation — like a new diagnosis or a visit to the emergency department — can reduce someone's ability to understand information and make choices.

A person who struggles to read or comprehend medical information may have trouble:

- Filling out complex medical forms.
- Finding a provider and scheduling or attending appointments.
- Following discharge instructions, including dietary recommendations.
- Practicing self-care and managing chronic conditions.
- Sharing their health history or explaining symptoms.
- Taking medications as prescribed.
- Evaluating the reliability of a source and telling the difference between fact and misinformation.[21]

While health literacy challenges cross all socioeconomic groups, those who struggle most are typically adults over age 65 without a high school diploma who have no insurance or receive Medicare/Medicaid. People with communication barriers may feel embarrassed to admit they can't understand, or they may be too intimidated to ask questions.

Lifetime impact of low health literacy

Poor health literacy is linked to:

- Higher hospitalization rates.
- Higher risk of complications.
- Increased healthcare costs.
- Longer recovery times.
- Poorer health outcomes.
- Shorter lifespan.[22]

A person's health literacy level may also affect satisfaction with care because it can cause miscommunication between patients and providers.[23]

What this means for healthcare marketers

You need to work thoughtfully to reach people with low health literacy. Through clear, inclusive content, you can successfully help guide these patients to make appointments, understand treatment options, and trust your organization.

Write for readability

The first step to creating understandable content is researching the health literacy levels and demographics of your target audience. A helpful tool is the **Health Literacy Data Map** compiled by The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This interactive map estimates health literacy levels for census block groups throughout the United States.

Once you know the likely proficiency of your organization's geographic service area, you can tailor your content accordingly using a combination of tools and strategies.

Web writing for high health literacy

Do readers with high literacy levels and specialized knowledge, like physicians, researchers, or academics, prefer more complex writing? The answer, according to a study by Nielsen Norman Group, is no.[24] Everyone appreciates simplicity and scannability on the web. Feel confident you're representing your organization in a professional manner — and reaching the widest audience — when you make your content as straightforward as possible. That's why Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) recommends aiming for a ninth-grade readability level or lower for the general public, and the Nielsen Norman Group recommends 10th grade for specialized audiences and highly educated professionals.

Write with clarity

Writing clearly with plain language makes you a strong, effective communicator. When your readers have barriers to comprehension, writing simply makes it easier for them to understand and take action.

To simplify your content:

How to write with Clarity	Example
Write with a user-focused approach. Speak directly to the reader.	"Your doctor will ask questions about your health history and your current symptoms."
Use common terms instead of medical jargon. Provide context clues. Don't assume your readers understand medical terminology or the names of the latest therapies and technologies.	• Write "cancer doctor" instead of, or along with, "oncologist." • "Your oncologist is a doctor with training and experience to diagnose and treat cancer."
Break down complex medical concepts into short words and sentences. Add definitions or provide examples after complex terms.	"Your doctor may recommend a bone density scan. This is an imaging test that measures the strength of your bones."
Avoid clichés and idioms that aren't familiar across cultures.	"Clean bill of health"
Use short sentences. Break complex, long sentences into shorter ones. This approach reduces confusion and breaks information into easier-to-process units.[25]	Say "Talk to your doctor about this procedure. Ask about potential risks and benefits. Your doctor will explain what to expect before, during, and after surgery," instead of "Your doctor will explain how this procedure is performed, including its potential risks and benefits, as well as what you can expect before, during, and after surgery."
Write in active voice.	"Your doctor will find the best hearing aid for you," instead of passive voice, "The best hearing aid for you will be selected by your doctor."
Use positive language. Avoid adding negatives that could cause stumbling blocks to user comprehension.[26]	Say "Bring a doctor's order for your test with you to the laboratory," instead of "Don't visit the laboratory without a doctor's order for your test."

Use grade-level calculators

Readability calculators (such as the Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level tests, which are built into **Microsoft Word**) use algorithms to estimate the grade level of a piece of writing. These algorithms consider:

- Number of syllables in a word
- Punctuation
- Sentence length
- Use of contractions
- Word length

You also can take advantage of free, online readability tools like **Hemingway Editor**. It not only calculates the grade level of your content, but also points out complex sentences and instances of passive voice.

Use person-first language

Use **People-First Language** to show that you view your readers as people, not medical conditions. For example, say "a person with diabetes," instead of "a diabetic." Keep empathy top-of-mind when describing health conditions and procedures. Avoid phrases like "suffers with" and "life-limiting." When possible, exchange words with negative connotations, such as "disease," with more neutral-sounding words, like "condition."

The **National Center on Disability and Journalism's Style Guide** is a helpful resource for writing clearly, accurately, and compassionately about health conditions and disabilities.

Improving health outcomes and patient satisfaction

Explain ways your audience can participate in their own care. Tell them to bring a loved one to their appointment to help them remember all of the information they receive. Or, suggest patients write down all of their questions before their consultation.

Get to the point

Good journalists know you don't save your best material for the end of an article. To grab readers' attention, you should put the most important information first. This approach is called the inverted pyramid.

Start with the main point/conclusion

Include supporting information

Share less important details
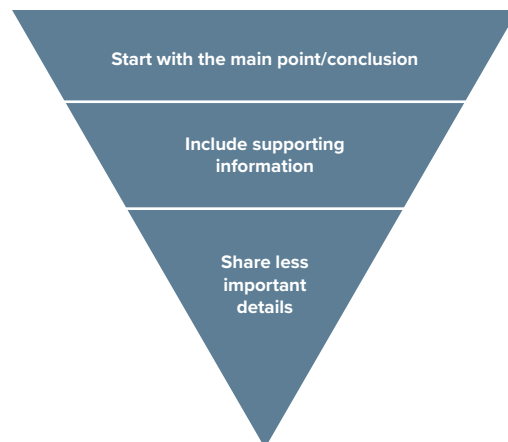
With the inverted pyramid, start with your conclusion. Then, add supporting copy in order of importance.

Using this organizational method for your content makes even more sense when you consider eye-movement patterns and the way web users read online. Try to apply the inverted pyramid style to each page on your site.

Make it scannable

The way you organize content helps visitors understand what's on a page, what they need to do, and how to take the next step. Content arranged using visual cues is the essence of creating a scan-friendly web page.

Because we know that people go online to find specific information, we want to make it as easy as possible for them to find what they're looking for. As a writer, you can do that by using a page structure with visual cues that support scanning or skimming. Follow these best practices:

- Cover one topic per page.
- Include in-text links to other relevant content on or off your site.
- Keep paragraphs short — three sentences or fewer.
- Use bold or italic text, but do so in moderation.
- Use bullets and numbered lists.
- Use straightforward headlines and subheads.

These techniques help search engines better understand your page content, too, making it more likely that your site will rank well in organic search.

Short, focused paragraphs

Short sentences and paragraphs make reading easier, especially on mobile screens. To help users absorb your message, communicate just one idea in each sentence and paragraph. Keep tabs on your word count. This helps you recognize where you need to trim fluff and make your writing more concise.

Short, concise paragraphs make it more likely your site visitors will remember what they read. This tactic is especially important for visitors using mobile devices, where small screens make paragraphs look longer.

Concise, meaningful headings and subheads

A heading is a headline or subhead of content tagged with an HTML heading tag. These tags define levels of headings (H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, and H6, with H1 being the highest).

Headings communicate to both users and search engines what the page is about. They're also used by assistive technologies to provide in-page navigation. That's why it's important to keep them short and straightforward — and incorporate keywords your audience is using. Additionally, concise headings also prevent them from dominating a small screen on a mobile device.

Use only one H1 per page — that H1 should be the title of your page. Then, think of your subheadings as an outline that organizes your content and guides readers through your page. Each new section should begin with an H2, then add H3s and H4s as needed for subsections.

To keep your content scan-friendly, use a heading at least every three paragraphs, or whenever a section of content covers a new topic.

Bulleted lists

Bulleted lists are one of the most effective tools for web writing. They group similar information and summarize ideas. They grab attention and are easy for readers to scan. Bullets also provide a fast and simple way to transition from one section to the next.

When using bullets, keep grammatical structure consistent within the list. Some tips:

- Don't use punctuation marks at the end of list items unless they form complete sentences.
- Keep your bulleted lists to fewer than about nine items and no more than two levels deep.

- List items alphabetically to support scanning, unless listed items are organized chronologically or by another logical order.
- Start all items in a list with the same part of speech (noun, verb, adverb, etc.).

Bold and italics

Bold and italic text are other effective ways to catch readers' attention and draw them toward important content. Be careful how much you use these typographic effects, though, or they lose impact. To support accessibility, use semantic tags to convey the style of the copy for people using screen readers.[27]

Link text

In-copy links drive visitors to other relevant content on your site and help users learn more about a topic. Links also stand out from normal text and catch a scanner's eye.

Link text, also known as anchor text, should contain a clear indication of what users will find when they click the link. "Click here" is too vague. Instead, create link text specific to the content it links to, such as "Get driving directions." Be succinct and incorporate keywords when possible. Your goal is to both accurately describe the linked-to content and encourage users to click.

Unique, specific link text helps all users quickly identify supplemental information they're interested in and improves the accessibility of your site.[28] Use links to connect related service lines or refer visitors to health library information.

A good linking strategy can also help improve your SEO. Accurate link text also helps search engines determine what a web page is about and for what queries they should display the page.

Keep it scannable: An example

Here's an example of a page of content before Geonetric's content experts rewrote it. It's mostly a series of grey blocks of text. The headline stands out — so you can tell what the service is. But it will take time and reading line-by-line to discover the topics covered on this page of text, which are called out in boxes to the right.

Cone Health[29]

Make it easier for users to scan the page and find topics more quickly. Break the same information contained in the previous version of the page into smaller chunks based on the identified subtopics.

- Clear subheads
- Short sentences & paragraphs
- Bulleted lists
- Callout box

Cone Health[30]

Subheads let users quickly see what information is covered on this page and zero in on what's most important to them, and bulleted lists support easy scanning. You'll also notice we created a call-out box to highlight information about the need to first see a doctor for an eye evaluation, so it stands out more clearly. We also added a link to the clients' list of ophthalmologists to make it easy for the user to find a doctor within this health system.

We shifted from a passive voice to an active one. We also began directly addressing the user directly, using the word "you" instead of using the third person. That's part of our second step.

Focus on the user

If you follow the guidelines already discussed, you're well on your way to another pillar of good web writing: focusing on your user.

Although it's easy for you to talk about your organization and its accomplishments, that information won't keep your site visitors engaged. Instead, put yourself in their position and focus on how your organization, doctors, and services benefit them.

Define your audience

In most cases, if you're writing for a hospital or healthcare website, your primary audience is patients and their families. But there are likely some sections of your site aimed at other groups. For example, the audience for your careers section is job seekers.

Once you've identified the audience for the page or section you're writing, take a minute to visualize them. Anticipate and answer your users' questions by considering:

- What does your user want to know? What questions might they be seeking answers for?
- How will your service or product make your user's life better or easier? What's in it for them?
- And what's the next action users should take after reading this page? Do you want them to make an appointment? Sign up for a screening? Register for a class? What's the end goal that you and they are moving toward?

Write in second person

Keep the answers to these questions in mind as you begin writing the text for your page. This page isn't for you — or your organization. It's for your users. So speak to them, not at them, as if you're having a conversation. If a patient or family member were to walk into your office, call you on the phone, or send you a text, you would address them directly. You'd use the word "you" instead of "patient." Do the same thing in your web page writing. Write to the one person who is reading your web page, not to a nameless, faceless crowd.

That's one of the biggest ways you can make your web page text warm and conversational. Another is to write like you talk. That means using all those techniques we talked about earlier for keeping it simple — using the active voice, short sentences, and everyday words.

Make it easy to take action

People come to your website to learn something or do something. Effective web copy helps you push your users toward the information they seek as well as the actions you want them to take. On almost every page, you should include a single, prominent, strong call to action (CTA) that directs the user on what to do next and prompts an immediate response.

The best calls to action are clear and concise, relevant to the page's content and audience, and prominently displayed, even on mobile, so that the audience sees the CTA when they're scanning the page.

Use active words

Use active words to make your calls to action effective. Encourage visitors to take the next step with verbs such as "register now," "enroll," "sign up," and "learn more."

Keep your engagement online

If possible, let your user take action online. If a user initiates contact with your organization on the website, they most likely want to complete tasks such as scheduling appointments, viewing medical test results, paying bills, and completing and submitting medical forms online. Don't make them pick up the phone to take action unless that activity meets your goals and theirs.

Track how CTAs perform

Whenever possible, choose a call to action that you can track. That helps you measure the effectiveness of your page so you can make adjustments as needed to improve your site's performance.

Creating a style guide

To maintain consistent and effective voice, tone, and messaging across your communication channels, develop an editorial, or writing, style guide that provides clear guidance on using copy to convey your brand attributes.

A writing style guide should include:

- Definition of your voice and tone, with example sentences that do and don't match it
- Documentation of grammar, punctuation, preferred spellings, and other technical standards; this may include references to standard style guides, such as The Associated Press Stylebook or The Chicago Manual of Style

- Formatting guidelines, such as when and how to use bulleted lists and bold text
- Clarification on industry- or organization-specific terms, such as department or location names

If you're ready to develop a style guide, **read our tips and guidelines** to help you make the most of your efforts.

Voice and tone

Your voice and tone are already out there — in your community interactions, in your day-to-day encounters with patients and visitors, on your website, in social media, and in print materials. If you haven't documented a specific style for your communications, now's the time.

What's voice?

The voice of your site refers to the personality of the content. Your voice depends on the style you choose — formal or informal, professional or personal — and the types of words you use — simple or scientific.

Imagining a person reading your copy will help you establish your voice. Do you want your site to sound as if it were written by a medical school faculty member or a compassionate care provider? Your voice should stay the same throughout the site.

What's tone?

The tone refers to the attitude or feeling of the content. Think of how you talk. You likely use a different tone when talking to your coworkers versus a close friend. It's the same on your site. Do you use a tone that's more informative or persuasive? Is it playful or serious? Do you use clear words that are to the point or phrases that are more caring and expressive?

Developing your voice and tone

Here are some tips to help you establish your voice and tone:

- **Look at your brand personality.** Review materials you've already created to find examples that match your organization's brand identity. Or pull excerpts from other organizations that model the voice you want.
- **Consider your audience.** Remember that in some cases, you're writing for people who are going through a difficult time. You may want to take a more formal approach for content aimed at clinicians and a less formal one for health consumers. Or a chatty tone on social media and a more serious tone on your website. Above all, be true to your brand. If people have always viewed you as a professional, authoritative clinical leader, it may seem insincere or forced if you suddenly sound laid-back.
- **Choose your adjectives.** If you don't have an established voice or tone, try this exercise: Identify a list of adjectives that describe your organization and how you want people to perceive it. You also can write down adjectives you don't want associated with your organization. For example, you may want people to see you as authoritative but not as aloof.
- **Create guidelines.** Guidelines help writers, so choose and document your point of view. Add them to your writing style guide so they're easy to find. Share the voice and tone guidelines with everyone who develops copy for your website or other digital marketing efforts.

Develop and share examples

After you've defined your voice and tone, create examples for your writers to reference. Use the examples to clarify what to do and what not to do. For instance, if ABC Hospital has determined its copy should be conversational, patient-friendly, and hopeful, it might clarify that guidance with these examples:

	Conversational	Patient-Friendly	Hopeful
Does Mean	Use everyday language written at an 8th grade level for an audience that doesn't have a background in healthcare.	Write in second person: use you, your, yours. Be empathetic to the patient's sensitivities.	Be positive and optimistic about services and treatment options. Choose positive words over negative words.
Doesn't Mean	Unprofessional language. Avoid slang and clichés and grammatical errors.	Don't be patronizing.	Don't guarantee health outcomes.

Write Like This	Not Like This
"You'll appreciate the accurate, detailed results from our digital mammograms. They give you greater peace of mind about your breast health."	"Digital mammography has an intrinsically wider dynamic range and displays all breast structures, from parenchyma to skin. Because there is a lower level of intrinsic noise, a lower dose of X-ray may be used than is currently used in conventional testing with no loss in accuracy."
"At every stage of life, get expert treatment close to home for all your primary and specialty care needs from ABC Hospital."	"ABC Hospital's many locations provide myriad services and professionals to meet a variety of healthcare needs."

Accessibility in web content

Web accessibility means providing equal access to your web properties for all individuals, including those with disabilities. More specifically, it means that you've built and maintained these online tools so people with disabilities can perceive, understand, navigate, and interact with them.

Making your site inclusive is the right thing to do for your patients, prospective patients, employees, and community. It also can help your organization:

- Increase the number of prospective and current patients who can understand your site.
- Improve usability and patient experience for all visitors.
- Improve SEO.
- Prevent potential risks of legal liability, bad press, and loss of government funding, including Medicare/Medicaid payments.

Accessibility standards

If you follow the guidelines we've laid out in this eBook, your content should be in good shape for accessibility. Here are some of the specific items to keep an eye on when you review your content for accessibility standards:

- Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) state that content should be written as clearly and simply as possible. To meet the highest standards of conformance, content should register at a ninth-grade reading level or below.
- Avoid relying on sensory words — especially words that describe how we see something — to describe where content is located or how it functions.[31] (For example, instead of "Find forms in the list of links to the right," say "Find forms under the heading "Patient Forms."")
- Don't embed text in images, and don't use graphics alone to display information. Always include text-based alternatives. The only exception for embedded text in images is logos.
- Explain abbreviations or technical terms on first reference.
- Follow **U.S. Department of Health & Human Services guidelines** for making PDFs and other files accessible.
- Include captions for videos and transcripts for audio files.
- Keep content within a clear and understandable hierarchy, using headings and subheadings to organize content.
- Use descriptive text for links. (Never use "click here.")

Incorporate SEO best practices into your writing

To improve your organic search rankings, start at the source: the content. As Google's algorithms have grown more sophisticated, optimizing content for search engines has become more about creating quality content that real people value.

Google has long insisted that good SEO comes from great content that meets the needs of users. Of course, you must also use effective HTML page titles, meta descriptions, alt text, and SEO-friendly URLs, but in the end, the true driver of your search engine ranking is the quality of your page content.

On average, about 53% of website traffic is organic traffic — that is, visitors who come to your website as a result of unpaid search results.[32] That means you're not just writing for the users who are already on your site. You're also writing for the users who are trying to find you via Google and other search engines.

Improve your ranking in search results

Some of the most important factors Google looks at when ranking webpages include:

- Quality of content
- Localization, or how relevant your content is to local searches
- Links to and from the webpage
- User engagement — are users clicking on the page when it's listed in search results, and once they're on the page, what's their behavior? [33]

To optimize your content for Bing, use exact keywords whenever possible in your domain, page title, and headings. Bing places more emphasis on a domain's age and getting links from specific domain extensions like .gov, .edu, and .org sites. Additionally, Bing ranks sites based on the social media signals (tweets, shares, and likes) it earns.

What search engines value

Search engines love unique, useful content that keeps users on the page and answers their questions. Your page will benefit if you:

- Write unique, descriptive metadata (page titles and page descriptions) for every page
- Include image alt text for accessibility and an SEO boost
- Include engaging multimedia elements such as maps and videos
- Write simple, direct, descriptive URLs
- Never use vague text such as "click here" for your link anchor text
- Regularly publish new content and update existing pages

Avoid certain practices that may affect your page rank. Search engines disapprove of:

- Duplicate content
- Plagiarized content
- "Keyword stuffing," using irrelevant keywords and/or repeating the same words or phrases in an unnatural-sounding way
- Lack of and/or improper page structure
- Thin, non-meaningful content or "coming soon" notices

Choosing the best keywords

Help users (and search engines) find your content by incorporating words your audience uses (keywords) naturally and strategically into your copy and metadata, including the HTML page title, meta description, headings, URL, and link anchor text.

Use online research tools such as Google Trends, Google Ads Keyword Planner, Google Search Console, and Moz Keyword Explorer to learn about search volume or popularity for certain keywords, phrases, and subjects. When choosing keywords, consider:

- Relevance to your topic and organization
- Search volume
- User search intent
- Types of pages the query turns up in search results
- Difficulty of ranking for a term

Localize your content

Help your site appear in local search results by including keywords in your content relevant to your geographic service area. Examples include:

- Cities
- Counties
- States
- Location names, addresses, and phone numbers
- Local landmarks/wayfinding terms
- Other local regions
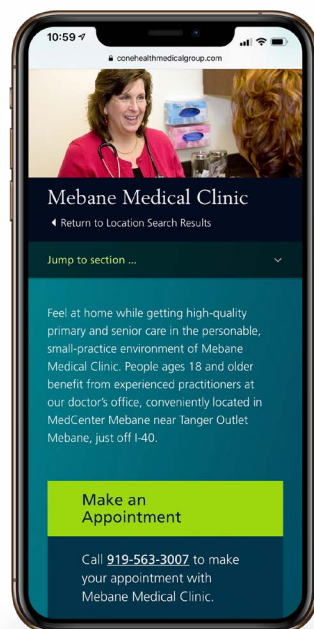
Mebane Medical Clinic[34]

More on metadata

Keep in mind how search engines index your site. They look for specific elements:

- **Page titles.** Don't underestimate the importance of page titles. They show up in browser tabs and in search results pages. When creating a page title, describe the page topic using a unique, concise line of text, typically 50 to 60 characters. Put important keywords at the front of the page title and then include identifying information, such as your organization's name and geographical location.
- **Meta (page) descriptions.** Page descriptions appear below the page title in a search engine results page and help visitors understand what they'll find on your page. Write a description for every page on your site. If you don't, the search engine will create one for you — and you might not like it. Descriptions should be about 155 characters or less, including spaces.
- **Image alt text.** Be sure to include a text description for relevant images on your site. Accurate and descriptive alt text not only provides quality indicators for web crawlers, but also improves accessibility for visitors who rely on screen readers to interact with your site.

Check out our **SEO eBook** designed specifically for healthcare marketers to learn more about why user-friendly content is the best driver of organic search.

Formula

[Action] + [Organization Name] + [City, State] + [Benefit]

Example

Get advanced treatments at Benefit Hospital Cancer Care Center in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where you'll find support from our friendly, trained professionals.

Generating content

Creating and maintaining effective content requires a lot of work. It's not surprising so many organizations struggle with the task.

Fortunately, many options exist. You can write your own content. You can work with professional writers to develop exactly what you need. Or you can license content. The route you take will depend on your team's skills, resources, and budget. Often, the best answer is a mix of all three.

Write your own content

Writing your own content seems like the most logical option. It doesn't immediately require additional funds. And since someone familiar with your organization will write it, they may have a head start understanding your services and culture.

But writing content is much more time-consuming than most people think. Just researching the content can take four to five times longer than actually writing about it. Then there's the time involved in the review and approval process. This can burden your internal resources and often requires hiring dedicated content authors and editors.

If you want to create your own health library content, the investment is even greater. While all hospital and health system sites can benefit from health library content, it really only makes sense to develop your own if you are a research organization or academic facility.

Hire professional writers

Outsourcing content writing to professional writers keeps your internal staff members focused on their day-to-day duties, and it may be more cost-effective than employing a dedicated content writing team. If you contract with professional writers and editors, be sure to select a team with experience writing healthcare copy for the web.

Also, provide them with adequate information about your organization's style, voice, and tone. When outsourcing, look for writers who:

- Have deep experience in healthcare
- Understand the unique requirements of writing for the web
- Know web strategy and the power of a good website structure
- Take the time to learn how your website software functions
- Understand SEO, write helpful metadata, and integrate keywords into page copyWork in a team of web content experts who collaborate to edit and proof for quality.

Purchase licensed content

Licensing a health library is an efficient way to add information on diseases, conditions, symptoms, and treatments to your site. This content can be costly, but it's effective. If you choose to license content, no matter what the topic, make sure to integrate it into your site to maintain a consistent user experience. You also want to add links to connect service line pages with relevant health library content. Monitor how users engage with your health library content to determine its effectiveness. What are the top-performing articles? What does this tell you about your audience?

Your content is an asset

Content should constantly evolve. Caring for it isn't a one-time event. Too often on healthcare websites, content is an afterthought. When given the attention it deserves, your content can support your organizational goals and effectively engage health consumers across all your online channels.

Get a Content Checkup

Ask the web content experts at **Geonetric** for help planning and making your content strategy deliver results. We offer numerous content services, and our team possesses more than just solid writing and SEO skills.

Having written thousands of pages of healthcare content, we can help structure and develop content that speaks from the patient's perspective while highlighting your differentiators, articulating your commitment to patient care, enhancing patient satisfaction, and making it easy for people to do business with you.

Web Writing Checklist

Make sure your content follows best practices for writing on the web with this infographic. Use this checklist to increase your productivity and feel confident your copy meets high marks for quality.

Keep it simple

- ☐ Get to the point — put the most important information first.
- ☐ Use the words your audience uses.
- ☐ Explain abbreviations and technical terms on first reference.
- ☐ Use an active voice.
- ☐ Write short sentences.

Make it scannable

- ☐ Cover one topic per page.
- ☐ Keep paragraphs short — three sentences or fewer.
- ☐ Use bullet points and numbered lists.
- ☐ Use headings and subheadings to organize content.

Focus on the user

- ☐ Write in second person ("you").
- ☐ Answer users' questions.
- ☐ Highlight benefits, not features.

Include a call to action

- ☐ Keep it clear and concise.
- ☐ Make sure it's relevant to the page and audience.
- ☐ Display it prominently.

Optimize for search

- ☐ Use keywords, including location names, naturally and strategically.
- ☐ Write a unique, descriptive HTML page title.
- ☐ Write a unique, descriptive meta description.
- ☐ Write simple, descriptive URLs.

Make it accessible

- ☐ Write alt text for images.
- ☐ Write keyword- and topic-specific link anchor text.
- ☐ Avoid using only sensory wording to refer to elements on a webpage.
- ☐ Include captions for videos and audio descriptions for visual-only content.
- ☐ Don't embed text in images.
- ☐ Make PDFs and other files accessible.

If you need help developing content that educates your site visitors, helps them complete tasks, and motivates them to take action, be sure to contact Geonetric. Our healthcare content strategists and writers create content that delivers results.

About Geonetric

With thousands of pages of healthcare content under our belts, Geoentric can structure and develop content from the patient's perspective. You'll get user-focused and search-optimized content that highlights your differentiators, articulates your commitment to patient care, enhances patient satisfaction, and makes it easy for site visitors to take the next step.

Our content development services

Web Writing

- Interview subject matter experts to develop original content for your entire site
- Write copy that makes complex medical information easy for consumers to understand
- Align content with brand messaging and voice, tone, and style guidelines
- Craft calls to action that drive conversions
- Optimize content for mobile and search

Writing Style Guides

- Facilitate in-person or remote workshops to define and document voice and tone
- Clarify writing mechanics, preferred spelling, readability targets, and more
- Develop guidelines for text formatting on your website and other digital properties
- Work with stakeholders to identify and document organization-specific terminology, such as location names

Content Governance

- Work collaboratively with content stakeholders to stablish agreed-upon content-related roles, responsibilities, and decision authority
- Outline workflows for creating and updating digital content
- Identify and create tools to support consistency, quality, and efficiency
- Create content governance training plans and materials

Writing Workshops & Coaching

- Learn how to create SEO-friendly content that connects with your target audience
- Get guidance on meeting accessibility standards
- Review real-life examples of healthcare content rewrites
- Get feedback on your content from our experienced healthcare writers

Content Strategy

- Create personas and document patient journeys
- Audit content to uncover strengths and opportunities
- Identify content types and standards
- Organize and label content so users can quickly and easily find what they need
- Develop sitewide navigation and site structure recommendations

Content Marketing Writing

- Generate story ideas to support organizational goals and audience interests
- Develop search-optimized blog posts that align with your personas and marketing funnel
- Write compelling headlines and meta descriptions that attract clicks
- Edit or ghostwrite articles for doctors and advanced practitioners

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About Geonetric

Geonetric helps healthcare brands thrive through effective marketing and distinguished websites. As a marketing agency and software developer with deep technical and creative expertise, Geonetric provides hospitals, health systems, and medical groups with a healthcare-specific content management system, hosting, marketing strategies, and creative services optimized for the unique needs of the healthcare industry.

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