# Mindful, Millennial Writing is Not Too Big a Leap

Nora Firestone

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These days it’s smart to assume that almost anything you write for your business will end up online. Pair that assumption with an awareness of the various opportunities to optimize Web pages, articles, press releases and other online and offline content for search-engine indexing and human appeal alike, and you’ll be speaking this new(ish) universal language with ease.

## SEO Overview

The many elements of search-engine optimization, or SEO, are like spokes of a wheel, and the standards of best practices change like terrain. But the basic principles remain relatively consistent and reliable:

Foundationally SEO is about the dynamics of relationships between an online entity, search-engine bots and people in search of information. Among humans, effective, productive relationships are rooted in trust and relevant connections. Those connections can be made at any number of points of engagement, from emotional to philosophical to logistical or intellectual. Search-engine performance mimics real life surprisingly well. Search bots are like scouts that cull information from the other parties and, with that data, aim to make sensible, useful, trustworthy introductions among them. This happens by way of continuous Web-page indexing and search-specific response. If these bots were human, Malcolm Gladwell might classify them as “Connectors.”

In both live and virtual endeavors, cultivating good relationships involves time, attention and effective communication. Online, your primary tool for ongoing communication is written content, both on-page and behind-page, because it’s what captures the attention of the search bots ready to connect your pages to people and, if done well, can compel those people to act (make a purchase, contact you, read more, etc.), share your content with others and return for more. When people act, share and return, site activity increases and search bots take note that the introductions are going well. All of this helps to further SEO.

## Keywords, tags, metadata and common sense

Some content speaks primarily to search bots and some aims more for human appeal, but much of it serves both purposes. Heed the following points for a well-rounded page:

* Always be authentic and aim to offer your visitors or readers the best possible experience. Placing more importance on search bots than on people can undermine your SEO efforts.
* Generally, keywords/terms are the first line of communication, the primary connecting thread, in online searches. Search bots look for them in places that you can control as a content creator and manager, including a Web page’s URL, HTML title tag, meta description, alternative (alt) text, and on-page headings, paragraphs and anchor text.

**Your page’s URL** might look something like this: <http://www.stepbysteppresentations.com/writing-web-pages-and-documents-for-SEO.html> Notice that in my example, the path “writing-web-pages-and-documents-for-SEO” is itself optimized, with keywords/terms that people might use in a search for this information. The exact verbiage I chose was based not on hours of keyword research and analysis, but on a bit of common sense from the perspective of a human who searches for things on the Internet and has a decent understanding of how search-engine bots work.

**The title tags** will appear—often with your website’s title/name, which may be generated automatically—in browser tabs, above snippets in search-engine results pages (SERPs) and when bookmarked and shared with others online. Keep the page title concise, about 36 - 60 characters total (including spaces and the automatic insertion of your website title), and use highly relevant page-specific keywords/terms.

**The meta description** will become the default snippet in SERPs when a more relevant snippet is not created by bots pulling keyword-specific excerpts from on-page content. Once deemed relevant by search bots, it’ll be your appeal to humans, so aim to describe and entice. Approximately the first 25 – 30 words (or up to about 250 characters, including spaces) will appear in SERPs. Be concise, authentic, on-point and compelling: What will people find, and why should they choose you?

**Use alternative (alt) text** to describe your images and videos, which are otherwise limited in searchable content. Alt text also enables computer screen readers to aid visually impaired people in getting the most from your content.

**Use heading format/tags (H1 – H6)** to identify headings and subheadings for search bots and people. These signify text with a high level of importance. To humans they appear visually more prominent on-page, and behind-page they are tagged to call attention to their importance for search bots. Use headings and subheadings to lead into or summarize the content beneath them, as newspaper headings do. Write to help search bots determine what people will find on the page, as well as to quickly connect with readers on your chosen points of engagement. I consider Norfolk, Va.,-based Ciniva Web Agency’s website a great model for the engaging use of Web page headings; they’re keyword-conscious and informative yet full of personality.

**Paragraphs and elsewhere:** Create what I call “keyword-conscious” (rather than keyword-rich) content wherever the structure is sentence-like. The goal of “rich” can lead to what’s known as stuffing, which can signal the intent to game the system. Likening keywords to compliments may help keep you on track: You want to be relevant, specific, helpful and appropriately generous with them, but not too liberal and never disingenuous. Use an appropriate, natural integration of keywords/terms and common synonyms within a conversational style. Links to other Web pages and files should be associated with relevant, descriptive and keyword-conscious anchor text. Vary the anchor text if a single link is used multiple times on a page.

In addition to the specifics noted above, always use proper grammar, punctuation, spelling and capitalization.

For articles, consider whether or not to add the date of publication up front. For instance, articles about history or those which impart classic wisdom wouldn’t necessarily benefit by having a date prominently associated with them, but readers of articles about industry-related topics in flux will want to know immediately how up-to-date and newly relevant the information is.

Some site owners should also consider establishing Google authorship and the use of article and author tags.

## Offline documents can, and should, also be optimized

Most of this information can also be applied to the creation and saving of offline documents. Microsoft Word and Adobe PDF enable on-page heading formatting, alt text and behind-page titles and metadata that, if present, can offer additional opportunities for SEO when uploaded online. Be mindful when naming documents, images and other content to save to your computer, as this data will often also transfer with uploads to the Web. A brief, descriptive, keyword-conscious name will be more relevant than an alpha-numeric string in searches.

We’ll explore these points and others in more depth throughout the year. Meanwhile, keep this article handy as a quick-reference guide if it helps. Feel free to email me with your questions about writing for business and DIY website design; I’ll do my best to address them in my articles or column.

*Nora Firestone is a professional writer, reporter and website designer who also provides services and instruction in writing for business, media relations and do-it-yourself website design and management to business owners, authors, marketing representatives and others. Contact Nora at (757) 705-7174 or via* [*www.stepbysteppresentations.com*](http://www.stepbysteppresentations.com) *Find free articles and tutorials on the website!*

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