

Writing for Screen Readers

By Wayne Schiess | Texas Law | Legalwriting.net

Today, many judges, lawyers, supervisors, and clients will read your writing on a screen instead of on paper. According to Robert Dubose in his book *Legal Writing for the Rewired Brain*, readers behave differently when reading on the screen as compared to reading on paper. Good legal writers know the tendencies of screen readers and write accordingly. Here, I introduce some screen-reader traits and offer some suggestions.

Here are some tendencies we are coming to understand about screen readers:

- Screen readers get impatient, says Dubose, and tend to spend less time on a screen document than they would on a printed document.
- Screen readers skim a lot, he says, perhaps even more than when reading a printed document.
- Screen readers show a top-left preference: they focus more on text at the screen's top and left and less on text at the bottom and right. Dubose calls it the F-pattern because the screen reader's eyes move in a pattern that resembles an uppercase F.

Given these tendencies, what should you do when writing for screen readers? The advice is not surprising and, frankly, would benefit print readers, too.

Be brief. Accommodate screen readers' short attentions with a brief document. Let me clarify: what I advocate here is really concision. Brief simply means shorter, and anything can be made shorter by cutting content. Concise means as short as possible while preserving content. Sure, some content deserves cutting. But don't cut crucial content. Instead, preserve necessary content while using as few words as possible. Be concise.

Provide summaries. At the top of the document, as early as the rules and conventions allow, summarize your main points or give the answer with reasons or state your request and support it—whatever the document calls for. In short, provide a substantive summary. I recommend a "substantive" summary rather than a mere roadmap ("Part A presents X; part B discusses Y.") because the impatient screen reader wants the goods, not

just a description of where the goods can be found. But a roadmap is better than nothing. A substantive summary that doubles as a roadmap is even better. Do it by presenting the substantive points in the order they'll appear in the document's body.

You can also include a mini-summary for every major section of the document and even a single-sentence summary for every paragraph, or what we call a "topic sentence."

Use headings and subheadings. Accommodate heavy skimming by making your documents easy to skim. Headings facilitate skimming. Use short, single-word topic headings for the main sections of a document: Facts, Argument, Discussion, Analysis, and so on. Use short, sentence-type, explanatory headings for subheadings and point headings.

By rule or convention, some legal documents already require explanatory headings, like the assertive point headings in a motion or brief, though you shouldn't let them get too long. But other documents can benefit from the skim-ability of explanatory headings: email, letters, CLE articles, newsletters, and more.

Left-align headings and make them stand out. Given the top-left preference and the tendency to skim, aligning headings and subheadings on the left margin helps screen readers. Headings on the left margin are easy to skim. Centered headings are harder to skim. Centering your main section headings is harmless, but even they can be placed on the left margin. Never center explanatory headings.

To differentiate heading levels, apply a consistent numbering system, use contrasting typefaces (larger size, bold, italics), or indent each lower heading level one additional tab length. If you want to indent your headings, follow these tips:

- Use the indentation function—different from a mere tab and also called "hanging indent"—so each line of text aligns with first line, like these bullets.
- Don't over-indent; if you indent four or more tab lengths, you'll destroy the left alignment that eases skimming.

Ultimately, think about how you read on the screen. Write and lay out your text in a way you'd like to read.