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## Coming Soon to the Small Screen

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*A well-crafted sentence matters more than ever in the digital age.*

—NEW YORK TIMES ONLINE, DRAFT TAGLINE

Are you reading this on a Droid? On an iPhone? On some other diminutive device being introduced even as I write this? Knowing that you might be gives me pause. The smartphone has become a primary reading device.<sup>119</sup> So unless you write nothing but lost-cat posters destined for telephone poles, or other print pieces that no one will ever upload to the web, you have little choice but to join me in grappling with this question: what must writers do differently to accommodate the small screen?

The answer, I believe, is ... nothing.

Of course, mobile technologies require different formatting. We've all struggled to read a page intended for the big screen, pinching it and spreading it and pushing it around on a screen the size of a business card. When we then discover a mobile version of the site, or when an app like Wikipanion reformats it like magic, we love the ease of reading the same content optimized for that itty-bitty screen. A lot can be done with presentation (the way the information looks and acts).<sup>120</sup>

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119. Industry veteran Maxwell Hoffmann tells technical writers, "The most common 'sheet of paper' for a first view of our 'documentation' will soon be that tiny screen held in your hand." See "#ICC12: Resizing Content for the Small Screen: Considerations," *Adobe Tech Comm Suite Evangelist* blog, February 24, 2012, <http://blogs.adobe.com/mbhoffmann/2012/02/24/icc12-resizing-content-for-the-small-screen-considerations>.

120. Marcia Riefer Johnston, "Marketing Pros: Time to Think Small," *Elliott Design* blog, April 11, 2011, <http://elliottdesign.us/blog/marketing-pros-time-to-think-small>.

But I'm not talking about presentation. I'm talking about the text itself. I'm talking about your words, which—willy nilly, sooner or later—will end up in someone's palm.

When it comes to text, today's writers (which is to say, writers for the small screen) must continue to do what writers have always done: cut, add, organize, and experiment. This chapter treats each in turn. But first, let's bust the myth that writers in the small-screen era should keep it short.

### **The Short-Sightedness of *Short***

Lots of people are talking about the need to write less—to *keep it short*—for mobile devices. Today's readers, we're told, suffer from "infobesity"; they "want less and less content."<sup>121</sup> We supposedly live in an "era of brevity," with our brains "rewired" in favor of short text.<sup>122</sup>

The problem is, *short* has no meaning. If I hand you a piece of string and say, "Make it short," where do you cut? You can't know. Who needs to do what with the string? Even when you know the answer, you don't want short. You want just right.

Think of writing as string cutting. Instead of aiming for short, aim for economical: the perfect length. Five words might be too many. Five thousand might be too few. The perfect length, even for the small screen, depends on "the context the reader brings," as technical communicator Tom Johnson points out.<sup>123</sup>

We need to ask the same questions today that writers have always needed to ask:

- Who will do what with the information?
- How much do they already know?
- What will they want to know (whether they know it or not)?

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121. Robert Desprez, "Ruthlessly Edit When Writing for Mobile," *Robert Desprez Communications* blog, November 27, 2011, <http://www.robertdesprez.com/2011/11/27/ruthlessly-edit-when-writing-for-mobile>.

122. Tom Johnson, "Less Text, Please: Contemporary Reading Behaviors and Short Formats," *I'd Rather Be Writing* blog, January 21, 2011, <http://idratherbewriting.com/2011/01/21/contemporary-reading-behaviors-favor-short-formats>.

123. *Ibid.*

Until you do the work of answering these questions, you can't make good decisions about what to include and what to leave out, and any effort to streamline your content “degenerates into making sentences shorter”<sup>124</sup> (emphasis mine). So says JoAnn Hackos, who has spent decades teaching professionals about minimalist writing—writing that delivers no more *and no less* than what's needed.

Here's how Hackos sums up the difference between *short* and *minimal*:

While reducing the volume and cutting the word count is certainly a desired outcome, it isn't the center of the minimalist agenda. Minimalist advocates understand that people do not want to read and actually do not read anything that does not appear to lead to fulfilling their immediate goals... The minimalist agenda focuses on usefulness and usability... [and requires companies to do] the harder and more time-consuming work of learning about customers.<sup>125</sup>

Writing that degenerates into a quest for shortness risks leaving readers puzzling over what Hackos calls “cryptic terminology” and “unnecessary brevity.”<sup>126</sup>

Even Ernest Hemingway, famous for stories we call short, warns against seeking brevity for its own sake. His iceberg theory of writing makes clear that leaving things out requires discernment:

If a writer... knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows... The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing.<sup>127</sup>

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124. JoAnn T. Hackos, “What Makes Minimalism So Popular Today?” *CIDM Center for Information-Development Management News*, January 2008, <http://www.infomanagementcenter.com/newsletter/200801/feature.htm>.

125. *Ibid.*

126. JoAnn T. Hackos, “An Application of the Principles of Minimalism to the Design of Human-Computer Interfaces,” *Common Ground* (1999), 9:17–22. Reprinted by the Center for Information-Development Management, accessed March 1, 2012, <http://www.comtech-serv.com/pdfs/Minimalism%20Human-Computer%20Interfaces.pdf>.

127. Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner, 1932),

Legendary ad writer David Ogilvy goes so far as to claim that “long copy sells more than short.”<sup>128</sup>

So when your inner guru (or your boss) chants, “Keep it short”—for mobile readers or anyone else—fire back (not necessarily out loud), “I’ll make it as short as possible and as long as necessary.”

### Tips for Cutting

When you cut, do so more aggressively and empathetically than ever. As web-usability researcher Jakob Nielsen says, “Mobile use implies less patience for filler copy.”<sup>129</sup> Do you tolerate filler copy in your writing? Tolerate no longer! Put on your drill-instructor hat, and pull up your text on a smartphone. Stare down every word. Do you contribute to the lineup, soldier? No? Then out you go!

Writer Maxwell Hoffmann attests to the value of reviewing his work on a smartphone. When he did this with a white paper that he had written several years before, he found parts of his text nearly unreadable. He reports, “My thumb nearly fell off scrolling through just three bulleted items... I didn’t have the patience for my own thoughts presented in the confines of a handheld smartphone.”<sup>130</sup>

Instructive confession!

Want to recalibrate your definition of *concise*? Here’s a suggestion. Make yourself a small-screen template in any word processor, or simply do some of your writing directly on a smartphone or on the back of a business card. That will get you thinking small.

This exercise may sound like unnecessary bother, but it helps you tighten your writing—for screens of any size. When I asked Hoffmann what percentage of his edits for the small screen also improve the reading experience on the big screen, he said, “One hundred

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153–154; First Scribner e-book edition 2002, <http://books.google.com/books?id=Wn69QsdwDIQC&printsec=frontcover&dq=death+in+the+afternoon>.

128. David Ogilvy, *Ogilvy on Advertising* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 84.

129. Jakob Nielsen, “Mobile Content: If in Doubt, Leave It Out,” *Nielsen Norman Group*, October 10, 2011, <http://www.nngroup.com/articles/condense-mobile-content>.

130. Hoffmann, “#ICC12: Resizing Content for the Small Screen: Considerations.”

percent.”<sup>131</sup> Readers *never* needed all those words. In this sense, author Luke Wroblewski’s web-design mantra—“mobile first”—makes sense for writing too.<sup>132</sup>

This 2-by-3-inch text box in my word processor approximates the size of a smartphone display. Typing into this box when I’m sitting at a big screen reminds me that readers might see only a handful of my words at a time. I recommend doing this exercise at least once, or else writing a few pages’ worth directly on a smartphone. You’ll return to the big screen thinking small. Oops—  
running out of space!

*A small-screen template.*

Ultimately, though, as Ann Rockley (widely regarded as the “mother of content management”) says, writers—along with illustrators and strategists and communicators of all disciplines—must consider “content first, *not* mobile first, eBook first, or any other ‘first.’”<sup>133</sup> We write not for any one technology but for *any* technology.

The mandate to write tight transcends technology—and change itself.

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131. Maxwell Hoffmann, “Resizing Content for the Small Screen: Considerations for Single-Source Authoring for Tablet and Mobile Delivery” (lecture, #ICC12 Intelligent Content Conference, Palm Springs, CA, February 24, 2012).

132. By “mobile first,” Wroblewski means, “Websites and applications should be designed and built for mobile first.” Luke Wroblewski, *Mobile First* (New York: A Book Apart, 2011), 1.

133. Rockley says this repeatedly. See this interview, about fifteen minutes into the recording: “Designing Adaptive Content for a Mobile World,” May 11, 2012, <http://www.contentrules.com/videos/#annrockley>. See also Rockley and Cooper, *Managing Enterprise Content*, 136–139.

## Tips for Adding

Let's say that you now regularly cut every bit of text you can. Don't stop there. Remember the complementary necessity: adding. Small screen, schmall screen. Go after thin copy. As author William Zinsser advised back when typewriters ruled, "strip your writing down" and then "build it back up."<sup>134</sup> Ask yourself, *What else would readers appreciate?* Your readers' fingers are flicking for a reason. They're not chasing after copy that's skimpy. They want copy that answers their questions, copy that's coherent, logical, useful, convincing, relevant, inspiring, edifying, amusing, fresh, clarifying, and sufficiently detailed.

What kind of details could you add? Choose from paragraph-development standbys like these:

- examples
- anecdotes
- definitions
- quotations
- metaphors
- instructions
- descriptions (concrete language: sights, sounds, tastes, smells, sensations)
- answers to the *W-H* questions (who, what, when, where, why, whether, how, how much, how many, how often, what else you got)

Some businesses find their fortunes by providing the right details. Kyle Wiens, cofounder of iFixit—a popular website that provides free repair manuals and advice forums—sums up the payoff this way: "Users will love people who teach them what they want to know."<sup>135</sup> The iFixit website serves up detailed procedures that display beautifully on a screen of any size. The iFixit folks and their engaged customers add,

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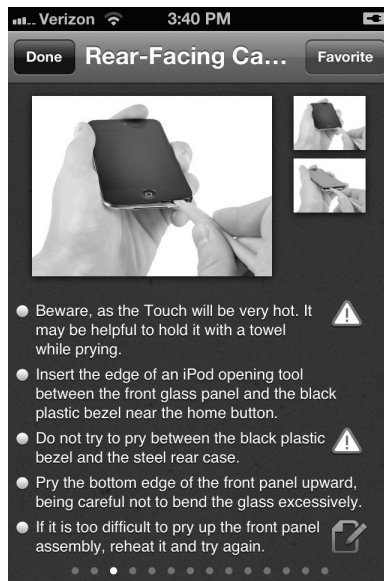
134. Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, 20.

135. Kyle Wiens, "From Web to iPhone to Android to iPad: The iFixit.com Story" (lecture, #ICC12 Intelligent Content Conference, Palm Springs, CA, February 24, 2012).

add, add relevant information, every day, to this large website. As a result, they draw large, loyal audiences who order a lot of parts and tools from them.

How has this worked out? Next to Apple, iFixit sells more Apple parts than anyone in the world.

Era of brevity? The success of information-rich websites like iFixit gives the lie to such labels.



*A repair procedure as viewed in the iFixit app on a smartphone.*

*Cut* and *add* go together like *diet* and *exercise*. Do both, as disciplined writers always have, and watch each flabby sentence and sagging paragraph transform into a specimen. A hunk. A perfect 10. Take the iFixit example. Deliver writing like that, and your readers—the ones who are out there right now looking for exactly what you have to offer—won't be able to pull their eyes away, no matter what size the screen.

### **Tips for Organizing**

We writers for the wee screen need to organize our material more carefully than ever, especially when it comes to what Nielsen calls

“complicated content,” like “nightmarishly long” documents.<sup>136</sup> Nielsen says that complicated content is “roughly twice as hard to understand” on a smartphone (“a peephole”) as on a desktop monitor. Nielsen claims that “a smaller screen hurts comprehension” because people can see less at one time and because they have to move the page around more. He recommends “adding structure and navigation” to “create a tight information space.”

Good advice, if not new. Writers have been pursuing these goals—structure, navigation, and tight information spaces (to stretch the terms)—since the days of hieroglyphics. These goals have less to do with technology than with the down-in-the-bones organization of the material. Aside from formatting, any problems with complicated and nightmarishly long content lie in the content itself. The small screen may double the nightmarishness, but it doesn’t create it. Nightmarish in, nightmarish out.

So let’s unconfate technology issues and writing issues. Let’s unhook technology from this part of the discussion and review a few timeless practices for organizing information.

- **Select the right info.** Determine who needs what information; resist any temptation or pressure to burden your material with extras.
- **Chunk it.** Divide the information into logical sections. For more on chunking information—for web pages or anything else—see the seminal book on information architecture by Louis Rosenfeld and Peter Morville: *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web*.<sup>137</sup>
- **Label it.** Assign each section a tight, clear subheading to help people find their way through the information.

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136. Jakob Nielsen, “Mobile Content Is Twice as Difficult,” *Nielsen Norman Group*, February 28, 2011, <http://www.nngroup.com/articles/mobile-content-is-twice-as-difficult>.

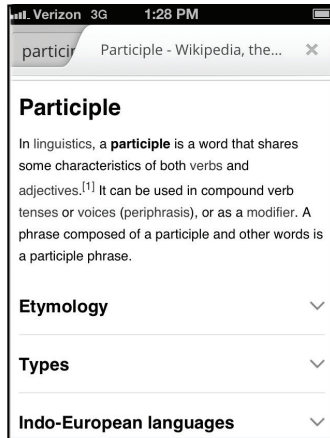
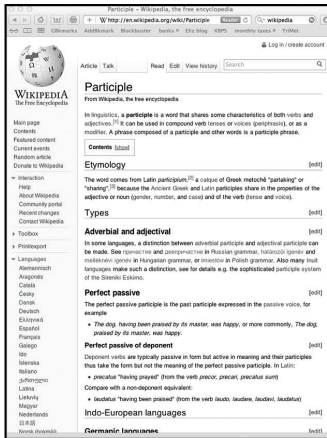
137. Louis Rosenfeld and Peter Morville, *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web* (Sebastopol, CA: O’Reilly, 1998), especially “Organizing Information” (22–46) and “Grouping Content” (147).



- **Arrange it.** Place the sections in a useful order, adding cross-references or links to indicate the most important nonlinear relationships. See my December 4, 2012, blog post, “Organizing Hard So Information Is Why?”

Wikipedia serves as an ideal source of examples. Many Wikipedia pages exhibit informed selecting, logical chunking, clear labeling, and meaningful arranging. How convenient for all of us that these old-as-the-pyramids organizing practices result in pages that adapt beautifully to screens big and small.

Organize your material with care, as this Wikipedia writer did, and no one will ever call your writing nightmarishly long, no matter how long the piece or how small the screen. Organized in, organized out.



On this Wikipedia page,<sup>138</sup> the same subheadings that act as visual skimming aids on a big screen (left)—Etymology, Types, etc.—act, on a smartphone screen (right), as an interactive advance organizer (list of contents). Whether readers navigate this page with their fingertips or with their eyes, they owe their positive experience (if they happen to care about such things as deponent verbs), in large part, to the writer’s organizational skills.

## Tips for Experimenting

All kinds of issues come up as you look at your text on a tiny screen. You have plenty of opportunity to experiment. If your documents, for

<sup>138</sup> “Participle,” *Wikipedia*, last modified June 24, 2012, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/participle>.

example, require annotated illustrations (text callouts) or complex tables, consider converting them to a fixed-layout format, which can work surprisingly well on a small screen. Fixed-layout formats are evolving so fast that I hesitate to say much about them except that they fill a need. They enable the publication of cookbooks, comic books, children's books, and technical manuals, in which images and text (or text and text) must not reflow but stay connected to make sense.

For example, Bruce Ashton, a fellow attendee of the 2012 Intelligent Content Conference, showed me a fixed-layout handbook on his iPhone. He explained his company's luck: the toolbox-size handbooks they'd been printing for thirty years had just the right proportions for smartphones. Converting the handbooks to a fixed-layout format "is not a quick process but it works," Ashton writes.<sup>139</sup> This format enables his company, IPT Publishing & Training Ltd., to deliver complex tables and illustrations legibly on an iPhone. (As of this writing, the fixed-layout format is incompatible with other smartphones.)

As you encounter challenges in writing for screens of all sizes, do what innovative writers have done since obsidian first scratched sandstone: let the spirit of experimentation lead you.

### **Summary: The More Things Change ...**

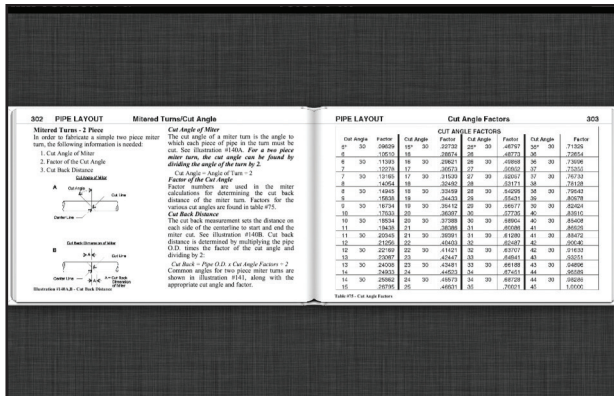
When you write for the small screen—which is to say, when you write—you can't go wrong if you rededicate yourself to the basics: cut, add, organize, and experiment. Ignore the hollow advice to keep it short. Lose the stereotype of mobile users as rushed and desktop users as tolerant of "happy talk."<sup>140</sup> Tune out those who advise you to create separate mobile "lite" versions of your content. Listen to user-experience pro and content strategist Karen McGrane, who says, the "recommendation that mobile sites should cut content and features relegates [mobile-only] users to second-class citizens."<sup>141</sup> Listen to interaction

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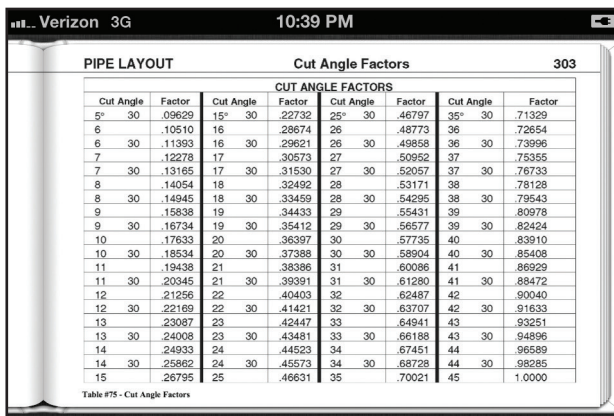
139. Bruce Ashton, e-mail message to the author, March 1, 2012.

140. Stephanie Rieger, "Mobile Users Don't Do That," *Beyond the Mobile Web* blog, February 10, 2012, <http://stephanierieger.com/mobile-users-dont-do-that>.

141. Tanya Combrinck, "Designers Respond to Nielsen on Mobile," *.net* blog, April 12, 2012, <http://www.netmagazine.com/news/designers-respond-nielsen-mobile-121892>.



A zoomed-out two-page spread from a fixed-layout e-book. This example comes from a free excerpt of “IPT’s Pipe Trades Handbook” by Robert A. Lee, downloaded from the iBookstore. Pages reproduced with permission. This screen shot was taken on an iPhone.



A zoomed-in look at the table text, as legible as you please on an iPhone. The usefulness of these well-organized pages calls into question Jakob Nielsen’s claim that the small screen hurts comprehension.

designer Josh Clark, who says, “Stripping out content from a mobile website is like... stripping out chapters from a paperback just because it’s smaller. We use our phones for everything now; there’s no such thing as ‘this is mobile content, and this is not.’”<sup>142</sup>

142. Josh Clark, “Nielsen Is Wrong on Mobile,” .net blog, April 12, 2012, <http://www.netmagazine.com/opinions/nielsen-wrong-mobile>.

## *Word Up!*

You don't need a double standard to write for small screens. Good writing is good writing. Think small, yes. But don't stop short just because the screen does. r y mght s wll jst dlt ll th vwls.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>143</sup>. Or you might as well just delete all the vowels.