

Why is writing for e-learning different? (Apr 06)

By Harry Calhoun

As more and more organizations venture into e-learning for its convenience and effectiveness, they employ writers to help them with their e-learning efforts. But from a writer's perspective, what does e-learning look like? How does writing for e-learning differ from writing for any other medium, and what techniques or training does the e-learning writer need?

According to experienced e-learning authorities Anil Mammen senior instructional design consultant for Tata Interactive Systems (TIS), a highly respected global e-learning provider based in Mumbai, India, and Saul Carliner, an internationally known expert on e-learning, information design, and technical communication from Montreal's Concordia University, and others, there are specific tips that can help writers to more effectively write for e-learning. Using these techniques helps writers write succinctly, find and address their audience and write specifically for the unique medium of e-learning.

Like any educational effort, e-learning should be a carefully planned and constructed effort to fully succeed in meeting the needs of adult learners. With e-learning, all the aspects of traditional classroom learning — the instructor, the lesson plan, the textbooks and the rest — must be incorporated into the course. The writing in an e-learning course, like the rest of the course, needs to stand on its own without an instructor. Instead of being used to support the instructor's lesson, the writing is the star of the show. It must be engaging and clear, almost a combination of the best of technical and marketing writing to interest the e-learner in the material and impart information. The bottom line for writing in e-learning is that the learning objectives are met and the learner can do or understand something new.

But how are writers to find the basis for developing those skills? Although the standbys of, "Use proper grammar," "Vary sentence length," "Use active voice whenever possible" and "Write clear, concise sentences," come to mind, the problem is that they are arguably useful for any form of prose, whether fiction or nonfiction, technical writing or marketing or children's literature.

Solid broad writing advice is good for all novice writers, and it doesn't hurt the pros to be reminded, either. But what we are looking for are techniques and tips that will help e-learning writers to better ply their craft — advice based on the medium of e-learning and with learning design in mind.

How writing for e-learning is different from other types of writing (for Web sites, training material or textbooks)

Web site copy is meant for scanning, Mammen says, while training materials are primarily intended as background material to be used by trainers, and textbooks are used by learners as a reference to refresh their memory about what was taught in the classroom.

"But e-learning, most times, is meant to teach without the help of an instructor or reference guides," he says, listing the objectives of writing for an e-learning program as being to:

- Help the learner "internalize" the content
- Make the learner pause and think about the concepts and principles illustrated there
- Make the learner experience the situations presented in the program
- Provide the learner opportunities to solve problems and interact with ideas.

Despite the distinctions that Mammen makes, Carliner sees similarities in the different kinds of writing. “They all need to be clear,” he says, “and users need to be able to understand any of these on the first reading. That said, there are three fundamental differences that distinguish writing for e-learning.”

Writing for the screen is different from writing for the page. As Carliner puts it, “On the page, words have the primary means of communicating. Online, pictures should do that job. Computer screens are based on computer technology, and televised content is ‘stories’ told through pictures, and supported by words, as most screenwriting courses teach.” Typically, people writing online do so as more of a conversation than traditional prose, more akin to spoken grammar than to written grammar. So, short paragraphs and one-word sentences that would rarely be acceptable in print are totally acceptable — even encouraged — online.

The author must gain and maintain the interest of the learner — and constantly do so throughout a program. This second fundamental difference is unique to e-learning — there’s an element of “edutainment.” For example, Carliner says that he recently saw a course about food safety in which bacteria emerged from the screen. “The content was totally appropriate to the course, he says, also noting that “it wouldn’t be possible to simulate airborne bacteria in a textbook, and it probably wouldn’t work on a topic page in help.”

E-learning offers writers a much wider variety of forms or genres to work with than most types of writing. Although e-learning typically conjures up images of the tutorial, it actually encompasses a variety of forms intended for both formal and informal learning. For example, e-learning might include tutorials, demos, games, Web lectures and a number of other forms. “Figuring out when each form is most effective and linking the different pieces together into a cohesive program is one of my favorite parts of designing and developing e-learning,” Carliner says.

Characteristics of good writing for e-learning

Both Carliner and Mammen, and most writers, agree that the basic principles of writing — accuracy, clarity and conciseness — hold true for e-learning. But because e-learning is a solitary, often self-guided journey, there are other considerations. “Content that is accurate from a technical standpoint is often not understandable or meaningful to the intended reader,” Carliner says. This is because online reading patterns tend to be slower and less accurate than in print, and readers online are more likely to skim than read. So writers must provide an “easy read” for the learner — one that is understandable on the first read-through to avoid losing the reader.

Mammen agrees that it’s not enough to be technically correct. Holding the reader’s interest, he says, “depends on your ability to create the right mix of drama and suspense, even when you’re dealing with as dry a topic as HR policies.” Drama in e-learning? Why not — marketing and fiction writers alike have long used hooks and plot to build the reader’s interest. You are, after all, telling a story.

Mammen has three tenets for e-learning writers:

Focus on the learner. Try to understand as much as you can about your primary learners — from their eating habits to the TV programs they watch and the kind of books or magazines they read. Imagine your learner as a character — give the character a name, illustrate him or her if you want and write a paragraph about the learner. Then try to make your learning program a conversation with this character. Don’t take your learner to be stupid and don’t “dumb down” things. Tell learners intelligent stories and engage them letting them solve fictional problems that resemble their work-related problems.

Focus on learning design. Writing for e-learning takes a strong passion not only for writing — but also for teaching. You should know the fundamentals of instructional design before you start writing, and definitely before you begin breaking them! Remember that instructional design is a

problem-solving activity.

The client comes to you with an instructional problem — I want my salespeople to be able to sell this new mobile handset.

You need to find an instructional solution — design a simulation that provides learners with a fictional situation and a fictional customer, and ask them how they would go about selling the new handset.

Finally, you make them learn by letting them attempt to sell the product in the safe, simulated environment of e-learning.

Focus on the product. An e-learning program at the end of the day is an instructional product. So, you need to think visual, think technology, think words, think interactivity, think feedback, think usability, and, most important, think engagement. Can this product hold the interest of my learner? Is it engaging enough? Is it intellectually challenging? Is it fun to go through? Does it neatly accomplish what it set out to do—ensure that learners master the learning objectives?

Short, clear writing might be a characteristic of e-learning writing caused by limited space in e-learning programs. “On one hand,” Carliner says, “that places a certain pressure to write within word limits. But I find that word limits usually lead to tighter, clearer writing because authors need to get to the point quickly and must remove extraneous material.”

Other considerations of e-learning that writers might have to adjust to are writing content for screen-by-screen revelation and eliminating extraneous material. When writers write a help topic, for instance, the content is all in one place. “Spreading the exposition of the material over from four to 10 screens might seem a bit unusual,” Carliner says, “but it’s the pace of e-learning.”

Also important is the idea of “personalized text” — a conversational writing style that relies on first- and second-person language. Dr. Ruth Colvin Clark and Dr. Richard Mayer, authors of e-learning and the Science of Instruction, mention that in five of five studies, students who learned with personalized text performed better on transfer tests than students who learned with formal text. They say that one thing to look for in e-learning is “instructional content presented in conversational language using “you,” “your,” “I,” “our,” and “we.” The authors stress that personalization can be overdone and cautions their readers to not select a tone that is inappropriate for learning or that distracts the reader. (Carliner says that “addressing the audience in the first and second person is somewhat of a cultural issue. In the US, and probably Australia and Canada, this finding would hold. I’m not sure it would hold in Asian and some European cultures, which tend to be more formal than ours.”)

And because all effective learning — regardless of the medium — should focus solely on the learning objectives, any content not identified by an objective should not be included. If learning objectives are done correctly, they state what should be covered and the relationship among the different parts of the content. Writers must honor that relationship among the information, as identified in the needs assessment.

Learning design and writing for e-learning

How should a writer keep the course’s overall learning design in mind while writing for e-learning?

“When I was a tech writer,” Carliner says, “we began projects with loose outlines that were, at best, suggestions of how the content might flow in a manual or help system. Writers felt free to tinker with the outline without much consultation with others.”

Things are a lot different on an e-learning project. These usually begin with more specifically stated learning objectives and, if they’re done well, extensive design plans, which state literally

what should happen on each screen (through storyboards). Sometimes the writer and instructional designer are the same person, and the writer participates in the process of preparing the designers.

But in many other instances, the writer is not involved in the design process and must realize that those designs are sacred. Everything must be written to specifications, and any changes need to be approved. The instructional designer might be able to approve small changes; more extensive approvals could be needed for larger changes.

Similarly, regardless of the role, writers need to keep in mind that the objectives drive everything. The objectives state not only what the course must cover, but also what learners will be able to accomplish if the course is successful.

“As a result,” Carliner says, “the only test questions — and, I feel, exercise questions — that are valid are ones that are derived directly from objectives. This is called criterion-referenced testing, because the objectives are the criteria and the questions are derived directly from the objectives. Properly written objectives suggest their test questions. For example, the test question for the objective “Match the names of the states of the United States with the names of their capitals” suggests a learning objective of “identify the capital of each state in the United States.”

Carliner says questions that do not derive from the objectives are either inappropriate or represent objectives that should have been included but weren't. In the latter case, the list of objectives should be revised to reflect this additional material.

Mammen urges writers to ask themselves questions about their e-learning task and their instructional objectives: As a writer, you need to understand why you are writing a course. What's the purpose? Is it to:

- Make the learners recall information?
- Enable them to question their existing notions on the subject?
- Help them apply the knowledge that they have acquired in the way you want it applied?
- Help them apply the knowledge that they have acquired based on their judgment of what they have learned?
- Persuade them to analyze what they have learned in relation to what they already know?

Mammen says that when thinking about learning objectives and performance outcomes, writers need to ask themselves, “How does this course benefit the learners?” and “What will they be able to do after completing this course?”

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