Subheadings – transcript

Part of the ‘Effective Digital Content’ training

Subheadings describe the content in the paragraph or paragraphs directly beneath them.

They are very useful for people who are scanning the page looking for something – perhaps something that you mentioned in your summary as being part of the page.

# Meaningful subheadings

This means your subheadings should always be meaningful – they shouldn’t be made up of filler words and phrases like ‘More information’ or ‘Other courses’.

Instead, you should use a new subheading every 2 or 3 paragraphs, describing the content of those paragraphs. (And remember that a paragraph should often be just 1 or 2 sentences.)

# Trigger words

As users scan the page, they only take in the first few characters in each line. Make this work for you by making sure that’s where your most relevant words are.

# Abbreviate – but not too much

You can also use numerals in headings rather than writing out words, and use ampersands instead of the word ‘and’.

However, do make sure that your abbreviations make sense. We use many acronyms and abbreviations at the University that don’t make sense to many people. Never use an unfamiliar abbreviation in a subheading just to save space.

# Examples

Let’s look at some example subheadings.

The subheadings ‘Check if you’re eligible’, ‘How to format your personal statement’, and ‘How to apply on EUCLID’ all start with fairly generic words – and two of them start in the same way.

Better heading options would be ‘Eligibility – our requirements’, ‘Formatting your personal statement’, and ‘Applying – using our online system’. This last example shows how you can avoid acronyms is subheadings.

# Heading markup

Now a quick note on heading markup.

Most of the text of your page will be paragraph text, and the title of your page should automatically be an H1 heading, so your first subheading should be marked as an H2 style heading. After the H2, your headings must be correctly nested. An H3 heading should be a sub-topic of whatever you’re discussing under the H2, and so on.

If you’re not sure what this means, or how to practically do it, ask whoever runs your Content Management System. If you use EdWeb, for example, get in touch with Website Support.

# Subheading markup is informative, not decorative

Always remember that Subheading markup is informative, not decorative. Don’t use a different heading style because you like the visual effect, or add formatting, such as bold text, to paragraph text instead of properly marking it as a heading.

# Subheadings and screenreaders

That’s because as well as providing visual clues as to the key words in a page, correctly labelled subheadings help people with visual difficulties to navigate the page.

They can use screenreading technology to skip between headlines to find the content they want – effectively scanning the content in the same way as a sighted user would. If you don’t mark up the headings properly, this process doesn’t work.

# Subheadings and search engines

Subheadings also let search engines know what the page is about so they can index your site properly. Properly-marked up headings are indexed as being more relevant to the page content than paragraph text, with your h1 being the most relevant, h2 next most relevant, and so on.