



## Web pages are read differently than print

By Molly Morris, memDesigns, September, 2008  
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Long-standing research has shown that when readers scan an English language print page like a flyer or newspaper, they do so in a 'Z' pattern, looking first across the top of the page, then scanning down to the bottom left and again reading across from left to right. Not so with web pages. Research from the Nielsen Norman Group, gurus of web-page usability studies, has determined that when we view web pages we generally do so in an 'F' pattern, scanning across the top of the page, then down the left side and, if we're still interested, going back up to scan across the middle of the page. This finding has significant implications for how you design the content on your web pages.



Example of an eyetracking "heatmap" showing how a webpage is scanned.

To maximize usability and get your message across effectively, here are some guidelines to follow when creating your website.

1. Important information must be contained in your titles and headers, particularly those that do not appear at the top of your page. Instead of "Pooping puffin knocks Tories off message" - a recent headline in a Canadian Press article that's catchy but uninformative - "Harper apologizes for sleezy election ad" would be a better use of web space.
2. Use bullet points, which lend themselves to the 'F' eye-scanning pattern rather than large blocks of text.
3. Highlight keywords or phrases in a different colour. Because so much of the page is scanned rather than read, highlighting, used conservatively rather than liberally (oops - there's my election coverage coming back again), will draw the readers eyes to significant material.
4. Use an inverted pyramid structure for conveying a story. While traditional academic writing is modeled like a pyramid - start with the principle, build the arguments and end with the conclusion - web writing should be done in reverse. State the conclusion first, then list (remember bullet points) the supporting information and provide background information at the end.

The same researchers determined that, on average, readers have time to read at most 28% of a web page's content. And, since reading on screen is still more tiring on the eyes than reading paper, 79% of web users scan, rather than read, content.

So make every word count.