Writing for the Web
How to attract and retain your audience

Quick and easy access to reliable information has become increasingly important. For schools, one of the best methods for sharing current and helpful information for students, parent or community groups is through the effective use of your website. Here are some suggestions on how to not only improve your website, but also how to better attract and keep your online audience.

Start with Action – Whether it is your school's mission statement or tagline, make sure one of the first things your audience sees is what your school mandate is all about, your call to action.

Quality Content – Ensuring that you are providing quality content is by far the most important element in helping your audience see your school website as a valuable tool for relevant, up-to-date information. Develop quality content by asking yourself, who is your audience? What information are they looking for? What purpose does this post serve?

Regular Updates – Make time for regular content updates. In a busy school, this is often a difficult challenge, so engage interested staff members or students (with supervision and review) to help with this task. A successful website is as effective as its content. Someone should be looking at your website every few days and reviewing the content every few weeks to add, delete or update the material.

Organize Information – Online readers are known to scan a web page in search of key words that they believe will then lead them to the information that is of importance to them. Start by being aware of important words pertinent to your audience and arrange key words and information at the top of the page and/or paragraph.

Use Headings and Subheadings – The use of effective headings further helps the reader to quickly identify those keywords and guides them to helpful information. Headings and subheadings are also useful tools that separate areas of information into a visually-easy-to-categorize fashion. Give thought to your headings and be mindful of key words that will draw your audience to that section

Bullets – Bullets are another great way to help organized text, or arrange lists on a specific topic or event.

Write Informally – Your school's website should be easy to understand by various audiences. Avoid the use of acronyms or complicated educational jargon that won't be easily understood. Remember that the text needs to be large enough to read and easy enough to scan quickly, offering up simple and concise information for the reader.

Short and Sweet – Effective websites get points across as quickly and efficiently as possible. George Orwell said "never use a long word where a short one will do." Today's online readers expect shorter sentences, and small concise blocks of information.

Add Graphics – The Internet is an increasingly visual experience. Add images or photos to help communicate your school's story to your audience. The key is to not sacrifice information for images, but rather to have those images work together with what is being said. Also, be sure to review and follow your board's privacy policy provisions before using any photos or images.

Sources: The OPC online Handbook for School Leaders and www.smallbusiness. yahoo.com.