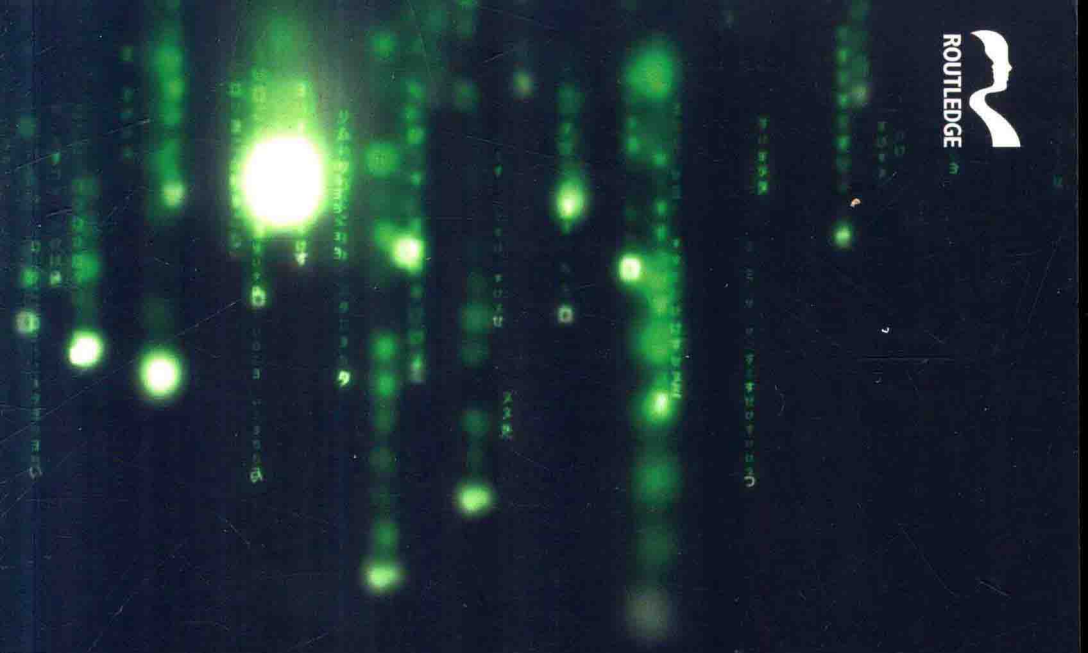

WRITING FOR THE WEB

COMPOSING, CODING, AND CONSTRUCTING WEB SITES

J.D. APPLEN

ROUTLEDGE

Writing for the Web

Composing, Coding, and Constructing Web sites

J.D. Applen

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Writing for the Web

Writing for the Web unites theory, technology, and practice to explore writing and hypertext for Web site creation. It integrates such key topics as XHTML/CSS coding, writing (prose) for the Web, the rhetorical needs of the audience, theories of hypertext, usability and architecture, and the basics of Web site design and technology. Presenting information in digestible parts, this text enables students to write and construct realistic and manageable Web sites with a strong theoretical understanding of how online texts communicate to audiences.

Key features of the book include:

- Screenshots of contemporary Web sites that will allow students to understand how writing for and linking to other layers of a Web site should work.
- Flow charts that describe how Web site architecture and navigation works.
- Parsing exercises in which students break down information into subsets to demonstrate how Web site architecture can be usable and scalable.
- Detailed step-by-step descriptions of how to use basic technologies such as file transfer protocols (FTP).
- Hands-on projects for students to engage in that allow them to connect the various components in the text.
- A companion website with downloadable code and additional pedagogical features: www.routledge.com/cw/applen

Writing for the Web prepares students to work in professional roles, as it facilitates understanding of architecture and arrangement of written content of an organization's texts.

J.D. Applen is an associate professor of English at the University of Central Florida. He is interested in writing and rhetoric, technical communication, the literature of science and technology, and the rhetoric of hypertext, digital archives, science, and the environment.

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Preface

This book describes, demonstrates how to apply, and integrates the writing, organizing, and technical skills one needs to produce informative Web sites. To this end, we need to assume the following roles:

- **A competent media theorist**—One who recognizes in what manner a hypertext document both communicates and shapes our understanding of the information it presents to us. This requires a critical knowledge of the communication practices that have been in play in our civilization over the last twenty-five hundred years and how they compare to the skill of writing.
- **A competent technician**—One who knows how HTML and CSS work to create electronic documents and who can construct Web sites from scratch with them. All competent writers can extend the reach of what they write by knowing how to apply these technologies. It is important not to be intimidated by these technologies because they are really not that difficult to learn; good writers can become skilled coders and do not always need to depend on other "technicians" or HTML/CSS editors.
- **A competent rhetorician**—One who can identify the rhetorical effects of all texts and how these effects can inform a writer or Web site architect's decisions about her own work and allow her to become a discerning consumer of other information found on the World Wide Web. A working knowledge of rhetoric supports all of the other skills described in this book.
- **A competent writer**—One who understands what clear and effective writing is and how it can be applied to documents found on the World Wide Web. Being able to encode someone else's writing and other texts using HTML and CSS for a Web site is one thing, but being able to write well, which means being able to research and describe your own ideas or document the ideas of others with whom you work, is equally important. Additionally, breaking down this information and then organizing it into hyperlinked bodies of text is a role the writer needs to assume.

There are many insightful media theorists, able HTML/CSS technicians, insightful rhetoricians, and lucid writers, but to be able to completely understand and be an effective producer of online information we have to accept the responsibility of becoming competent in all these areas.

We often hear the word "literacy" used to describe certain competencies we need to function in today's economy. According to the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), "information literacy" means knowing how to select and use appropriate databases, implement a search strategy, and evaluate different viewpoints—skills that educated citizens need to be successful. Information literacy can describe the practice of reading a passage in a book and culling the meaning from it, which is the more traditional understanding of what it means to be literate. Acquiring these skills is not always easy, but is immensely rewarding.

Sometimes information literacy is thought of as being in the same vein as information technology skills—they are not identical, but there is some overlap between them. Being "computer literate" means that we know how hardware and software work in today's communication technologies, but "fluency with technology" has to do with our using technology to find information and use it appropriately (ACRL). Certainly, we do need some technical skills with computers to begin finding information before we can begin to evaluate it.

"Digital literacy" is another term that is being used by professionals these days. It conflates some of the elements of the concepts described above, but also extends them. A good working definition of digital literacy has been proposed by Rachel Spilka:

> Theory and practice that focus on use of digital technology, including the ability to read, write, and communicate using digital technology, the ability to think critically about digital technology, and consideration of social, cultural, political, and educational values associated with those activities.
>
> Spilka (8)

To become digitally literate, we are asked to be writers and communicators who can use digital technologies and be able to "think critically" about them across a broad range of concerns. Understanding the "social, cultural, political, and educational values" requires that we examine how communication technologies present and shape information. It is not about the content digital technologies deliver, but about how the machines themselves actually affect and perhaps alter our understanding of the content. To do this, we need to understand the history of communication technology and how it has been theorized so we can become more critically engaged as we work to produce and present information.

There are many complex Web sites in operation today that are beautiful, competently constructed, and invite their audiences to interact with the

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material on them in ingenious ways, but these Web sites are built by large teams of professionals—computer scientists, information technologists, technical communicators, and graphic artists—and these Web sites are developed over months and years. To be able to teach any one student to be able to build such Web sites would be unrealistic, and there is not a single book that could teach this. However, the basis or *sine qua non* for these Web sites is HTML and CSS, and learning these technologies compels us to understand the essential styling, layout, and organizing strategies of all Web sites.

If you know how HTML works with CSS, you are in effect an electronic layout specialist and are carrying on the work of the typesetters of the last six centuries. In addition, just performing exercises using HTML tags that allow you to link different parts of a larger online document compels you to internalize the nature of hypertext as it contrasts to more traditional linear texts, thus enhancing the digital literacy skills described above. The rhetorical features of hypertext require that you break information down and connect it in another way because it communicates information differently than traditional print texts. This is empowering, and it would enable a student to prepare for work as a member of a large production team in the field because the student would understand the architecture and arrangement of written content in an organization's texts.

HTML and CSS code are presented in this book in a way that people across all disciplines can understand. Every coded example is explained, which enables students to reconfigure the written texts they have produced for the Web environment. Additionally, there are accompanying screenshots of this code so students can know whether or not they are entering and manipulating it correctly. Some of the coding is relatively sophisticated and care has gone into explaining it with an interdisciplinary audience in mind, especially the way CSS is used for IDs, classes, and overall layout.

HTML and CSS, while explained in their separate chapters, are integrated into two final Web site assignments, one with two versions; there is a personal Web site and two informational Web sites, one based on breadcrumbs and one on drop-down menus. All of the technology explained in Chapters 2 and 3 finds its way into these Web sites, which is a departure from many books on HTML and CSS, which break them down into their specific technical features but do not show how to integrate them in a larger Web site project. With an understanding of the technologies in Chapters 2 and 3, students and instructors can manipulate the code for the projects explained in Chapter 6 for their own needs. Most importantly, the HTML and CSS technology in this last chapter supports the transfer of the written word to online environments.

This book was written in an effort to explain how to write, organize, and then use HTML and CSS coding to best present our writing in online environments. To this end, classical and contemporary rhetoric(s) have been explicated in a way that students can understand, taking as examples contemporary situations. These rhetorical tools can be applied to Web sites and

online writing. The history of communication has been carefully described so students can understand just how media has changed the manner in which we think and communicate. This has been presented with the knowledge that students are interested in these matters—matters such as the difference between the oral communication of the ancients and the electronic communication of today—and can benefit from this applied theoretical perspective.

I would like to thank my colleagues in the University of Central Florida's College of Arts and Humanities for awarding me a sabbatical that enabled me to begin this project. Linda Bathgate of Routledge deserves credit for her skill as a Publisher, most notably for her quick and thorough responses to any question I had regarding this manuscript, and I appreciate Julia Sammaritano's contributions as Senior Editorial Assistant. Additionally, I want to acknowledge the support of my colleagues in the literature and technical communication tracks in the Department of English: Pat Angley, Paul Dombrowski, Madelyn Flammia, Dan Jones, Lisa Logan, Rudy McDaniel, and Patrick Murphy. Most of all, I would like to thank my family members for their support and encouragement.

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J.D. Applen is an associate professor of English at the University of Central Florida. He is interested in writing and rhetoric, technical communication, the literature of science and technology, and the rhetoric of hypertext, digital archives, science, and the environment.

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Chapter 1

Old media, new media, and knowledge

Chapter overview

The purpose of this chapter is to raise awareness of how the major communication media that have been in use in the last 2500 years allow us to shape and receive information and knowledge. The spoken word or oral communication of the ancients, the written word of yesterday and today, and the electronic word that we encounter in using contemporary technologies all have distinctive capacities to convey ideas to audiences and affect the speaker's or writer's ability to understand the ideas she or he works to convey. This is important because as writers and information architects we need to be mindful of the idea that the technologies we employ are not neutral.

Speaking, writing, and literacy

The most compelling idea in Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* is that "More than any single convention, writing has transformed human consciousness" (77). "Human consciousness," for humans at least, is just about everything, and when the advent of writing is identified as the most significant catalyst for the development of human consciousness we should stop and reflect on this idea. All the things that we think about and are aware of might be a good way of understanding what constitutes human consciousness.

In today's culture we are told by people who are trying to sell us new technologies that the "information age" is the most important period in the history of humankind, but communication technology was not invented in the 1980s. We need to recognize that writing too is a technology, even though it might be hard to imagine this today, given that pencils and paper seem like primitive artifacts when compared to computers and network technologies. Writing is a technology because it exists outside of our minds; humans needed to invent an alphabet and something to write with and on so they could record and see what they were thinking, and this was an extraordinary achievement. However, what contemporary communication technologies have given us is also remarkable. Anyone in the world can send

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