



## review

### Bite-Sized Training for Web Writers by Hank Stanley

➤ *Writing for the Web*, live training, 1999, Information Mapping (800-463-6627, fax 781-906-7400, [www.infomap.com](http://www.infomap.com)), \$1,195 per person. Other material: participant guide.

How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time, of course.

That's also the best way to present information, according to the Information Mapping method.

The IM method is actually a basic template for writing and presenting data that can easily be applied to any document. The rules are essentially the same, whether the project is a procedures manual or common business correspondence. Such tailored application to specific needs is the emphasis of the classroom seminars offered by *Information Mapping, Inc.* I attended "Writing for the Web," a two-day seminar for senior writers who were transitioning to online documents accessed by customers from various company websites and electronic libraries.

IM uses the term "blocks" of information, which are segments of data relevant to a particular audience and generally limited to just one idea. A collection of these information blocks about a specific subject is called an information map.

All informational factors are mapped in three phases: analyze (both the audience and content requirements), organize (outlining and sequencing the content), and present (drafting, editing, and linking the content). Each phase is accomplished by using "tools."

#### The Method

The analyze phase determines which of the basic types of information best serve the intended readers. Information types

include the principle, a prescription of an action; the fact, a basic statement assumed to be true; and the concept, a statement showing why something is the way it is. There are also procedures and processes, which tell how to do something and how something works, respectively.

The organize phase determines how the information types are arranged based on human factors research. (Human factors is that nebulous learning-utility field that everyone has heard about but can't seem to remember what it means.) These arrangements include the chunking principle, which is the grouping of information into small, manageable ("bite-sized") segments; the relevance principle of similar important topics; the consistency principle; the hierarchy principle; and others.

The present phase covers the best ways to offer the material to the audience for maximum effectiveness. This includes the use of tables, flow charts, graphics, procedural steps, and so on.

The IM method capitalizes on the way individuals process and understand information most efficiently, that elusive definition of human factors. But rather than making assumptions about the target audience's relative familiarity with, and, therefore, the degree of detail needed from, the subject matter, Information Mapping separates information into small units based on reader-oriented purposes or functions, not topic.

As a result, portions of the information may be planned for non-use. If the material is of sufficient depth but laid out and sequenced for rapid perusal, those who need detail can find it, while those who don't can scan for only the most relevant points. The result is reduced reading time, faster learning, and fewer errors in comprehension.



## The Web Angle

In addition to the IM method, the seminar covers the challenges encountered in writing for the web such as layout for easy navigation and creating web-friendly content. Computer workstations with web access allows students to assess the effectiveness of real-world web sites and explore how they might be improved using the IM method.

The course includes an excellent 230-page loose-leaf participant's guide plus another 50 pages of material that students use to create exercise information maps. The instructor was experienced, competent, and knowledgeable.

### Recommendation

The "Writing for the Web" seminar is valuable for teaching you how to write with coherence, relevance, and clarity. Although the course does not include topics on web design or programming, creating web graphics, or document management, the instruction is worthwhile for the IM method alone. The emphasis on web-based writing procedures makes it superior.

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### Writing for the Web

**Pro:** Sound method  
Good teaching  
Print materials

**Con:** Price

Rating Category	Writing for the Web
Holds participant interest	★★★
Presentations	★★★
Production quality	★★★★1/2
Value of content	★★★★★
Instructional value	★★★★★
Value for the money	★★★
Overall rating	★★★★1/2

Outstanding	★★★★★	Above average	★★★1/2	Poor	★
Very good	★★★★1/2	Average	★★★	NA	Not applicable
Good	★★★	Below Average	★★1/2	NR	Not rated (usually not enough information)