

# On writing: Leslie O'Flahavan gets the point

I definitely wanted to interview Leslie O'Flahavan for this series, and I am so glad she agreed to be featured this month. She's been teaching writing for years and offers an academic perspective that's a bit different from marketing/communications folks.



Leslie O'Flahavan,  
E-Write

Leslie O'Flahavan is a get-to-the point writer and an experienced, versatile writing instructor. As E-WRITE owner since 1996, Leslie has been writing content and teaching customized writing courses for Fortune 500 companies, government agencies, and non-profit organizations. Leslie can help the most stubborn, inexperienced, or word-phobic employees at your organization improve their writing skills, so they can do their jobs better.

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### **1. What role does writing play in your work and how important a skill is it?**

Writing IS my work. Because I am a writer myself and a life-long writing teacher, writing plays the largest role possible in my work. Of course, I may be a bit biased, but I think writing is an essential skill. At work, writing is perhaps THE essential communication skill.

### **2. Does writing well still matter in a digital/text/emoji world?**

Yes, writing well matters even more in our digital/emoji world. Some people have the idea that “no one really writes or reads anymore.” I don’t agree with this at all. If you text, you are writing. If you Instagram a picture of your brunch, and you add some words to the picture, you are writing. It’s elitist to think that only academic tracts or annual reports are “real” writing. Writing happens every time someone keyboards or scrawls some words. Because we’re writing so much now, doing it well matters a lot.

### **3. What’s the best advice you’ve received or would give on how to improve writing skills?**

How you improve your writing skills depends on what you need to write, the skills you’re struggling with as a writer, and which stage in your career you find yourself. In most cases, the best advice I could give is to find a good example or model of what you’re trying to write before you begin. So, if you have to write a proposal, find an example of a proposal that won the funding. Read it analytically to see how the writer constructed it. If you have to write the “About Us” page for your website, find three or four models of excellent About Us pages and one that’s not very good. Before you begin writing, contrast the bad one to the good ones. Analytical reading will help prepare you to repeat the successful writing

strategies you've observed.

**4. What are your top three writing resources or references (digital or paper-based)?**

I like [wiktionary.org](http://wiktionary.org), *Letting Go of the Words* by Ginny Redish, and Grammar Girl's [QuickandDirtyTips.com](http://QuickandDirtyTips.com)

**5. Do you follow a style guide, and if so, which one?**

In my work, I often am asked to follow my client's style guide, which will sometimes be an in-house guide or a published guide such as Chicago Manual of Style, with some company-specific adaptations. I'm always glad to follow a style guide.

**6. What's your top writing/grammar/usage pet peeve?**

As a writing teacher, I try not to be peevish or to cringe very much. After all, I'm supposed to be helping people whose writing is cringe-worthy or whose grammar blunders tweak my peeve nerve. I'm not put off by a genuine writing error. These things happen. In fact, I recently misspelled my own name in an email. What puts me off is when people act like fixing the error isn't important. Or when they treat the plain language movement as a fad. That makes me cranky.

**7. What's your favorite word and what's your least favorite?**

In 2016, my favorite word is *rapport*. And *pimples* has been my least favorite word for decades, since I had them, back in the late 70s.

**I love Leslie's advice on modeling your writing on something that you think is good. Everyone should work on recognizing when something works well and analyzing what makes it so. Check back here on August 25, when I will interview another marketing/communications pro on the importance of writing. And if you need help with your writing, I am happy to lend a pen!**

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# The 5 essential skills for great web writing

## **Web design keeps changing**

The wonderful Leslie O'Flahavan gave a great presentation/workshop last week about new web design trends and how they affect web writing. You can download it here. Some of these trends include infinite scrolling (like on the Time Magazine website, where you can just keep scrolling down through endless articles) and the large-type front page (like this, on this page with A to X Writing Advice). There's also a trend to include pre-made shareable content (usually pre-written tweets).

## **How people access a website has to be considered**

Then there is the need (this is *not* a trend) to have everything visible and rendering appropriately on any device people happen to be using to access your website—desktop, laptop, tablet or smartphone. Type has to be readable. Although these issues are solvable by good design and web architecture, web writers have to consider these when deciding how to present which information.

## **Web writing is not quite the same as writing for print**

Since most every business, nonprofit and news organization is on the web, web/content writing is probably the largest type of writing being done today. Yet, it is not as if you can just take your print materials, digitize them and call it a day.

Clearly, there is a lot to consider when you are writing for the web.

### **What makes for a good web writer?**

Can just anybody write for the web? Not really. I think people can be taught how to write for the web, but not everybody has the ability to be like Leslie and be able to see what is going on in web design, spot trends and realize how these new changes affect web content.

### **The five essential skills of a great web writer:**

**1. The ability to spot the trends.** This also means keeping on top of UX (user experience) and other issues that affect how websites are designed.

**2. Understanding how the new design trends affect what you write.** It's not enough to spot the trends. You need to be able to see how those trends impact what content should be included and how it should be written.

**3. Ability to write in short and long formats.** As Leslie describes in her presentation, there's the snack and then there's the meal. You have to be able to write short, snappy headlines but also be able to write longer, more "meaty" content.

**4. Ability to synthesize information.** You are called on to write short descriptions, whether it be for pre-made tweets or web page headings. In order to do this, you must be able to take a lot of information and condense it. It's helpful if you can explain things simply too.

**5. Visual and design sensibility.** Being able to understand the role that visual and design play in how a website is read and viewed is key, as the ability to work with graphic/web designers to make your content look appealing.

Have you noticed website writing has changed? Have you seen

websites that look great but read poorly? What is your experience with web writing?