

Don't Believe Everything You Read on the Internet

The Case for Ethical Web Writing

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Abstract

Many companies rely on unethical web writing practices, such as spreading false information or using misleading SEO techniques, to improve their visibility on the web. However, with modern updates to search engine algorithms such as those recently made by Google, these unethical practices may actually be less productive compared to ethical strategies. I explore the incentives that lead to unethical practices and outline alternative practices that are both ethical and effective.

Bio

Erin Price is head of the English department for Curie Learning, LLC, a K–12 education company, where she develops curriculum for advanced English courses. She has a bachelor's degree in English with a minor in editing from Brigham Young University and a master's in publishing from George Washington University. Erin previously worked as a senior web writer and editor for web marketing companies, magazines, and

journals. Her experiences as a writer and editor have led to her passion for ethics in writing and publishing.

Don't Believe Everything You Read on the Internet: The Case for Ethical Web Writing

There are more than a billion websites on the internet with new websites created every day.¹ The internet is most people's go-to for instant answers. Clearly, web writers have a tremendous influence over the public. Unfortunately, web writers often harm the public rather than help—sometimes accidentally, sometimes intentionally. This is due to web publishing companies that value publishing quickly and getting noticed over following ethical guidelines.

My first job as a copywriter alerted me to the web publishing world's depressing lack of ethics. Fresh out of college, I started my first copywriting job for an online marketing company. I didn't know what practices were typical and was kept shielded from many of the company's inner workings; however, every day unearthed new revelations about the company's dubious web writing practices.

While this company tried to avoid practices that were illegal, ethics were disregarded in favor of quick profits. For example, on what appeared to be neutral review websites (which were actually created by the company), we web writers were instructed to give our own company's products glowing reviews, while rating all other products as neutral. We were also tasked with writing articles under pseudonyms accompanied by attractive photos. Admittedly, these practices did lead to some financial success, but customer retention was poor, as our company did little to inspire trust. Surely, there must be a better way, I thought. Couldn't we be honest with people and still attract and retain customers?

Unfortunately, my experience is not uncommon. The "web" is accurately named, as searching for accurate information there often feels like getting snared in a spider's web of endless twists and tangles. In my experience, many companies and writers contribute to this maze of confusion, valuing profits over ethical writing practices.

However, it is possible to attract and retain customers on the web while maintaining ethical guidelines. Now that issues about web writing ethics, such as fake news, are well-known and oft-discussed topics, I

believe that many readers are becoming increasingly aware of unethical web writing practices. Many readers are skeptical about what they find on the web and are searching for internet sources they can trust. Although unethical companies can still turn a quick profit on occasion, from my observation, ethical web publishing companies have a better chance of retaining loyal customers than companies that don't value ethics. Ethics are beneficial for both the readers and the company, as research shows that "increased customer satisfaction and loyalty have a positive influence on long-term financial performance."² It's a well-known marketing principle that establishing trust is a crucial component in encouraging brand loyalty. Furthermore, search engine algorithms are increasingly prioritizing factors that indicate reader trust, such as how long the reader stays on the page;⁸ thus, reader loyalty can boost search engine rankings and thereby help companies attract and retain more readers.

Providing an ethical and trustworthy foundation can help attract a core group of loyal readers to websites. A Pew Research Center study pointed out that a small core of "power users" return to the same news site more than ten times a month and spend more than an hour on their preferred site. Some news sites had a high number of power users; for example, power users made up 18% of users on CNN.com.⁴ By prioritizing web writing ethics, websites can attract and retain these "power users" who trust their site and keep returning to it for information.

How can we be ethical and yet remain competitive in the digital space when so many companies and web writers don't seem to think ethics matter? I hope to answer this question by examining the various ethical issues web publishers face, using my own experiences and research as a guide. I then offer practical tips on how web publishers can follow ethical practices while still attracting and retaining readers. In doing so, I acknowledge that more research on ethical web writing is needed.

Web Writing and the Spread of False Information

It's easy for websites to play the game of "telephone," where information gets published on one website, then slightly changed on another website, then slightly changed on yet another website, until truth becomes fiction.

One cause of the internet telephone game is that much of web writing is done by writers paid to write as quickly as possible. I know this from my experience as a web copywriter. In the second web marketing company I worked for, I often wrote for industries I was unfamiliar with, industries as varied as dentistry and computer chip manufacturing. We worked with tight deadlines, so often, the only research we had time for was to read the top few hits from a Google search. Thus, we were using many of the same ideas from these top-ranked sites. We had to trust that this information was accurate, but if it wasn't, false information could easily be perpetuated as we posted similar ideas on another site. Likely, other web writers found our information and rewrote it for their sites, and the same ideas continued to get circulated. With the constant rewriting occurring, facts could get changed slightly until they eventually became lost in translation.

Fortunately, my company required all writing to pass a thorough editing process. If my facts seemed inaccurate or my writing was too similar to another website, my writing wouldn't be accepted—but not all web writing goes through such a strict review process. I never intentionally plagiarized or wrote false information, but I can see why it would be easy for a web writer to do so.

Sometimes the spread of false information is far from accidental and perpetuated by writers who want to create controversy or get noticed. This situation happened recently to a political candidate. One man posted something salacious about her on his Facebook page, which was liked by a modest number of the man's friends. However, the post was quickly picked up by others and posted or rewritten to other sites, which then spread to other sites, until the false rumors had spread throughout the internet. The motivation for spreading the falsehoods appears to be more that the post was "edgy" or fit within a certain political viewpoint, rather than that it was true. Nevertheless, because it appeared on multiple sites, some people assumed it must be a fact.⁵ Situations like these can mislead the public and cause unnecessary harm.

How can publishers and businesses contribute to stopping these dangerous trends?

As publishers, we want to write interesting and informative content that catches the eyes of web searchers. However, as we do so, we should

follow the practices that good journalists do. We should pause and verify our information; we should check it in books, government or academic websites, or other official sources, preferably sources written by established authors or organizations with the primary goal to inform, not to hit number one on a search engine. When we research on the internet, we should take what we find with a grain of salt and always be on the lookout for opinions and biases. We should avoid plagiarism and appropriately credit other sources for their ideas—not only to avoid facing legal action, but because, according to the Office of Research Integrity, “a responsible writer has an ethical responsibility to readers and to the author/s from whom s/he is borrowing, to always respect and acknowledge their intellectual content.”⁶ Web publishers’ efforts to use ethical journalism practices will help them attract and retain readers who are becoming increasingly skeptical of misleading web writing. Some readers may not care about these extra steps in the writing process, but if we writers and publishers don’t care about uncovering and revealing the truth, then who will?

Establishing authority as an expert in the subject should also be an important goal of content websites. Companies want to be seen as an authority in their subjects, but readers may not know what qualifies as authority. Would someone turn to a well-researched, well-written website that’s difficult to find on the internet rather than a blog article by an unknown author that they found as the top hit on a search engine? In many readers’ minds, merely having a high ranking in a search algorithm is sufficient to grant authority. Recently, a classroom of young students refused to believe my answer that Alaska was the largest state geographically until I verified it on Google. “Google it! Google it!” they shouted at me. Google brought up a site that corroborated my answer, but why did the students trust this mysterious writer more than they trusted me, the teacher standing in front of them?

The misunderstanding of authority is a widespread problem; according to [Forbes.com](https://www.forbes.com), “The modern confluence of a breakdown in trust in our institutions, coupled with the collapse of the gatekeeper model has meant that society has suddenly been thrust into an informational void without the proper training in how to rigorously evaluate the information in front of them.”⁷ The internet is a no man’s

land; there is no authority figure telling us what's true and what's not. Fact-checking websites try their best to dispel internet rumors, but they can only do so much. Judging a web article's authority is now left in the hands of readers—for better or for worse, but often for worse.

While training society on how to choose reliable sources is certainly important, I argue that web writers and publishers, too, hold a responsibility in preventing this whirlwind of misinformation and establishing themselves as trustworthy gatekeepers. Web writers wield the power of the written word. Billions of internet readers put their trust in them. That's why it's their responsibility to gather trusted sources, to verify information, to create clear and well-researched pieces—in short, to be an authoritative source, whether readers care or not. This extra work might not necessarily get a website to the top spot in a Google search, at least not right away, but it is ultimately worth it, especially when it comes to customer loyalty and retention. Remember the “power users” trusted news outlets attract?⁴ Based on what I've observed about customer loyalty, I believe that many readers will appreciate the extra work web writers went through to get their facts right, and a trustworthy website will earn these readers' long-term trust. Even if some readers don't value accuracy, it's important to tell the truth in a world where truth telling is becoming obsolete.

From Clickbait to Going Viral: Web Writing and SEO

Beyond repeating falsehoods, web writing can also be unethical due to the ever-present quest to get noticed by search engines.

To attract more customers, websites want to have the best possible page ranking on search engines for relevant keywords. When determining top results for these keywords, search engines consider which pages are most relevant to the particular keyword, as well as which websites are most valuable for readers.

While search engines like Google don't reveal their exact formulas, we have a good idea about the factors they keep in mind to determine page rankings. [Moz.com](https://moz.com) outlines some of Google's main categories as:

- ✦ Valuable: quality content, reader retention
- ✦ UX: accessible page layout, fast rendering
- ✦ Keyword Targeted: relevant keywords present in key places on the website
- ✦ Crawler Accessible: unique content, static URL
- ✦ Shareable: includes social media sharing options
- ✦ Multi-Device Ready: renders to different devices
- ✦ Authorship, Metadata: includes effective meta description, content is associated with author/publisher³

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the practice of getting a website to fit the above categories in order to rank higher on a search engine. There are both ethical and unethical ways of doing this, and search engines are getting better at valuing the ethical ways, yet unethical SEO practices still abound.

In my experience as a web writer, I've observed many unethical web writing practices. For example, some companies try to game the system by overusing keywords (known as "keyword stuffing") in hopes of improving their ranking, making the content practically unreadable (just imagine seeing the words "cheap moving company in New Jersey" in every sentence on the page). Google employees soon became aware of this misleading SEO practice, which is why their rankings now care more about value than excessive keyword use.

Yet another skeptical practice is when companies create their own backlinks. The more other sites that link to a site, the higher that site's ranking on a search engine—thus, some companies create their own hastily produced websites with the primary goal of linking back to the sites for which they want to improve the rankings. The content on these low-quality websites is unlikely to hold much value and is often inaccurate or incomplete. A similar practice, as I experienced in my first copywriting job, is when companies create seemingly neutral review websites with the purpose of giving their own products top reviews, or even fake news websites that pose as official sites. Search engines may not be able to verify these sites' accuracy and may grant them high rankings merely because they are popular or fit certain keyword inquiries; nevertheless, search engine algorithms are increasing their

ability to detect untrustworthy sites, or at least recognizing sites that don't provide much value to readers.

Speaking of value, some companies also deceive customers in terms of the value of their content. For example, websites will try to attract customers by using clickbait titles like "10 Incredible Vacation Spots You Won't Believe. The 8th One Blew Me Away!," but the actual content doesn't live up to expectations. This may work to attract readers, but notice that the top category Google looks for is "valuable."³ If the content is actually useful, relevant, and well written, readers won't click away. If readers stay on the page for a long period of time, search engines know this is a more valuable website.⁸ In other words, clicking on the link isn't everything; readers must stay and read.

The amount of words itself can be an SEO strategy. The longer the content, the longer a reader stays on the page. A longer piece also gives the writer more of a chance to incorporate keywords and ads. This isn't necessarily deceptive, but there's the risk of adding fluff or even falsehoods merely to bulk up the article. Thus, publishers should aim to publish longer articles if possible, but not merely for the sake of publishing long articles—the content itself should provide value.⁸

Now that Google and other search engines are changing their formulas to prioritize value over unethical SEO practices, using unethical practices may actually lower search engine rankings.⁸ As algorithms improve, articles that incorporate unethical SEO will continually be caught and deprioritized. In addition, keeping up with the latest SEO trends causes companies to invest significant work, money, and resources to optimize their websites, only to have search engines change their formula again; companies can save time and resources by prioritizing valuable content rather than stressing over the latest SEO updates.

SEO doesn't need to be deceptive to be effective. There are plenty of SEO strategies that are both helpful and ethical, including ensuring a page loads quickly and can render on mobile and other devices, adding social media sharing options, including accurate metadata with relevant keywords, and incorporating keywords in the website copy.³ Companies needn't get too caught up in all the nuances of SEO, though, because the best thing they can do to improve search engine ranking is prioritize content value. Other aspects of search engine optimization (SEO)

have their place, but writing trustworthy articles that people stay with and keep returning to is, in my estimation, the most important factor in search engine success; after all, quality content is crucial for a good SEO ranking. According to Moz, search engines look for content that is uniquely valuable, meaning it is authentic, avoids self-promotion, and is “described by 80%+ of visitors as useful, high quality, & unique.”³ Furthermore, according to Search Engine Journal, “high-quality content is about creating pages that increase time on page, lower bounce rate, and provide helpful content for the user.”⁸ When websites produce well-researched, well-written web copy that answers readers’ questions or fills a unique content need, they’re more likely to gain readers’ trust. More readers will come to the website and stay there for longer periods of time, which will naturally improve SEO: when search engines detect fewer readers exiting the page and more readers spending a longer time on the page, they will increase the website’s ranking.⁸

Even if a particular article on the website doesn’t reach the top of a web search, web publishers should prize the website’s overall value most of all. The more valuable articles they produce, the more people turn to the website and the longer people stay on the website, potentially boosting the overall SEO ranking. I hypothesize that focusing on content value is better for improving a website’s SEO than it would be to obtain a high ranking for one particular keyword.

In today’s world of untrustworthy web content, people are naturally skeptical; in my experience, when readers see writing as shallow or intended to sell them something rather than to inform or help them, they quickly leave the page and don’t return, which decreases the website’s SEO rankings. As search engines continue to update their algorithms toward prioritizing reader retention, trying to keep up with the latest questionable SEO trends can lead to search engines punishing a website and downgrading its content.⁸ In my estimation, it’s safer to focus on quality content, which will always lead to higher SEO rankings through better reader retention rates. Setting SEO rankings aside, publishing valuable content is the right ethical decision as we work to regain honesty and truth in the digital space.

What Can Companies Do to Improve Their Web Writing Ethics?

How can web writers and publishing companies put these principles into practice? First, there are a few unethical web writing practices that should be avoided at all costs due to their foundation of dishonesty and deception.

- ✦ Creating websites that mimic official sites: web publishers should avoid creating fake sites that have official-sounding names and designs, tricking readers into thinking they are a reliable news source.
- ✦ Hiding intent to sell: websites should not appear neutral and unbiased when they are intended to sell something. Websites should be clear about any biases toward their own products and services.
- ✦ Using false names or identities for authors: true author identity should be revealed unless a valid reason is given for using a pseudonym.
- ✦ Publishing writing that's intended to create an emotional reaction: web writers' first goal should be to inform, not induce panic.
- ✦ Twisting research studies to fit claims: many web articles place undue emphasis on small studies or leave out any biases or weaknesses in the research process. Be clear about a study's flaws, or better yet, avoid flawed studies. Focus on established research and give credit where credit is due.
- ✦ Unethical websites may attract readers, but they won't gain readers' long-term trust.

It's possible to avoid these practices and still attain high search engine rankings. Here are a few practical suggestions to make a website as ethical as possible, while still attracting customers.

- ✦ Collaborating as a team, outline the company's ethical writing and editing standards, and ensure that all writers and editors follow these standards. Topics for your ethics guide may include incorporating research, citing sources, and avoiding plagiarism.

- ✦ Invest in content strategy. Determine which articles and topics will most resonate with the audience and when is the best time to post them. Don't limit the website to written articles—incorporate video, podcasts, and other media. This will help attract customers and prevent writers from resorting to unethical practices.
- ✦ Ask experts to write articles and include the author name and bio with the article. This assures readers they can trust the author.
- ✦ Give authors adequate time to write quality articles that will engage readers. Don't impose unrealistic deadlines just to be the first to rank for a certain keyword.
- ✦ Prioritize research. Don't believe something just because it's been written on multiple sites, and don't be tempted to post something just because it's catchy. Verify information with trustworthy sources.
- ✦ Have an editor review all articles. An editor can ensure the writing reaches professional standards. Using tools that detect web plagiarism, he or she should also verify that no web content was plagiarized or is similar to another source.
- ✦ Avoid clickbait titles. Make sure the title accurately reflects the content.
- ✦ If incorporating keywords, the keyword should be found only about every 100 words or so. It should flow with the copy and shouldn't sound like it was “stuffed” there. Make sure to include the keyword in the title and metadata as well. (Another tip to save time and money: rather than aiming to rank for the most popular keywords, research keywords you can achieve a ranking for within a realistic budget and time frame.)
- ✦ Rather than creating websites with backlinks, offer to write articles for other high-ranking websites. Similarly, have products reviewed on third-party review websites rather than creating the company's own review websites.

Some may say that it's not possible to achieve both ethical web writing and high page rankings, but many profitable and trustworthy

institutions have already proven otherwise. Moreover, as search engines improve their ability to detect deceptive practices, high-quality sources will increasingly be prioritized.⁸ Following ethical guidelines will improve the value of the content, which will naturally improve page ranking by, for example, increasing the number of page views and time spent on the page. Although prioritizing ethics may not bring rapid results, I predict that ethical publishing companies will ultimately gain more loyal customers, leading to long-term stability for their business.

I acknowledge that some of my conclusions are based on my personal experience and observations, and more research is needed in this area. I call on researchers to examine the effect of ethical web writing on readership and customer loyalty.

In an internet world where clickbait and going viral seem to matter so much, ethical web writing matters even more. Unethical web writing is now a well-known issue, and disillusioned readers yearn for accurate information coming from organizations that earn their trust and respect. Be the company that stands out by offering content your readers can trust, and the results will come back to you in terms of company reputation, reader retention, and customer satisfaction.

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