Good content for the web

publishing text online • considering the reading experience

We're all individuals with our own tastes and preferences but when it comes to what we expect from a website, it all comes down to pretty much the same thing: good content. A website with a bare and minimal design might not deliver much eye candy but if the content is top quality, we will enjoy the reading and viewing and come back for more. To get this right as web publishers, we should look first to produce good text and accompanying media and then how to present it well on the page.

Why good content matters

When we ask ourselves about how much patience we have when browsing the web ~ most of us will admit being quite impatient most of the time. Our brain seems wired to skip and jump, latching onto the visual clues on the page. If the page requires too much mental effort, we'll likely go elsewhere.

As content producers and publishers, we have to consider the factors affecting the site visitor's experience when viewing our publications. These include the device/browser used, the connection and the access and presentation of content within the overall site. At the core of it is the text in all its forms: the main article with its sub-/headings, lists, quotes and paragraphs as well as the microcopy, i.e. the phrasing of menu links and prompts.

as site visitors:what we want

- near-instant results on any searchwhat happens: we perform a web search, click on the most suitable-sounding link and expect to find what we searched for= if not – skim page or leave
- quick & easy access to what we are looking forwhat happens: on page load, we hastily skim the content, searching for the quickest way to our point of interest.= if none found – abandon site
- scannable text / easy skim readingwhat happens: we read headlines, parts of the first paragraph, scroll and continue skimming.= if not clear – go elsewhere
- accurate and up-to-date contentwhat happens: we seem to find what we were looking for and will be expecting recent publishing dates.= if too old – consider something else/newer
- clear referencing of informationwhat happens: we arrive via a search on the page, check for details on author/creator and date for authenticity.= if not found – return to initial search

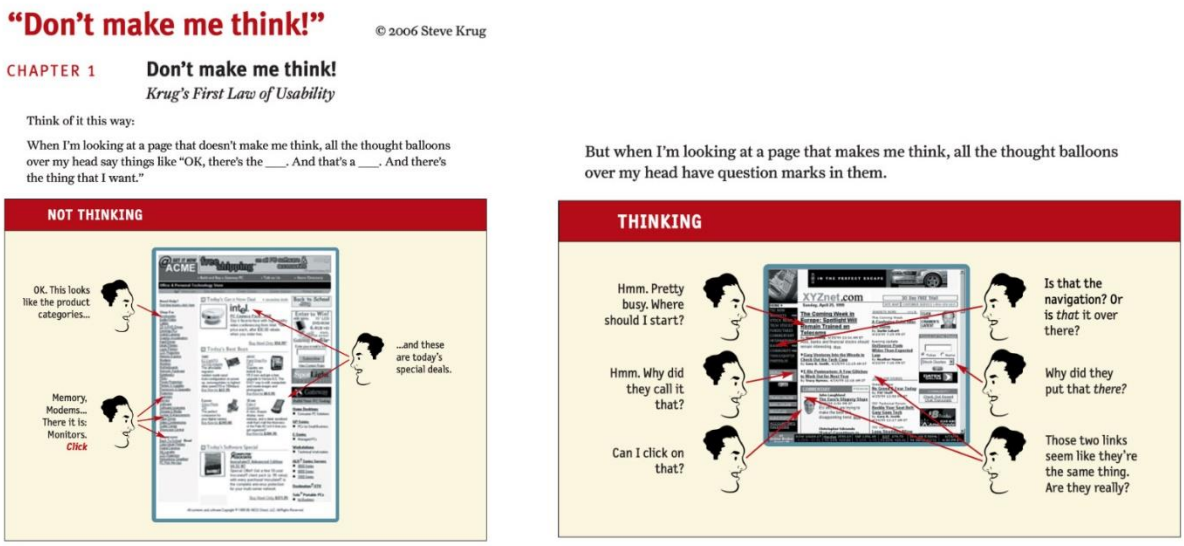
Instead of taking our time, we tend to access web content in a rush. Always skimming the overall page and looking for the next hook to lead us to the sought-for information. Good content, when presented well, will answer our questions, allow us to get to the goods quickly and easily which in turn will result in a good user experience.

as content publishers:what we can do

- publish regularly and only high quality contentongoing production of new content + keep content and setup updated + use effective SEO techniques to boost findability! produce/publish good content regularly
- accessible menu and search functionsuccinct phrasing + clear signposting + effective layout/hierarchy of all content! focus on clear IA and inclusive design
- good web copy and typesettingwell-written text + fitting choice of typeface/s + clear hierarchy via sub-/headings + good use of white space! write for people, present clearly
- set effective update cycle for new contentput together an achievable publishing schedule for updates to site + ensure clear dating of new content! publish/update site regularly
- include expected details and referencesensure site inc. all content are clearly credited + include dates and details for authenticity! include credit and context

We can do a lot to make sure that our site does deliver well. This starts with the content itself, the core importance being on the text. Only with good content in hand can we consider the other aspects, like the ease of access and presentation on the webpage. Quality content can have its impact when we format and present it well.

In his book Don't make me think!, Steve Krug concludes clearly how a poorly planned and implemented design will affect site visitors' attention and results in more time and mental energy spent. When we publish online, our focus has to be ease of access to the sought-for content.



We are then confronted with the actual scenario - how we might design with thorough planning and best of intentions, only to find that our site visitors are not at all doing what we expected. Therefore, we have to consider carefully our own online behaviour, and more importantly, that of our site visitors.

Don't make me think!, originally published in 1999, now in its 4th edition, has long been and is still considered a must-read for anyone working on the web. Whether you're publishing or designing the websites, this little book will make you aware of what's matters most: good and easy-to-access content.
highly recommended reading!

How to create good content

Produce, revise, iterate

Our content production should follow the overall planning and stay true to the goal of the site. This means finding the right tone for text, producing fitting supplementary content and creating an effective design for type and layout.

As soon as practically feasible, consider reaching out to people from within your target group, ask them to view and read your content and request their input and feedback. Publishing online means you are starting a conversation ~ the earlier you get people involved, the better the end result will be.

Overall, good content is...

- appropriate
- useful
- user-centred
- clear
- consistent
- concise
- supported

Inverted pyramid

- Good practice for web writing
- Place information in order of importance
- Start with a conclusion of the main facts
- Other facts are included in descending order of importance

IMAGE © ONS - /STYLE.ONS.GOV.UK/ - STRUCTURING CONTENT

Useful tools

- Hemingway App
- Grammarly
- Ginger Grammar Check
- Readability test tool

Reading & references

- Don't make me think, Steve Krug
- GovUK Style guide
- BBC News style guide
- Guardian and Observer style guide
- Reuter Handbook of Journalism
- writing good copy for the web (collected links)

Effective web copy

The following is merely scratching the surface, of course. Becoming a professional writer requires much practice and goes much, much deeper than these brief lists of pointers. The aim of this page is to offer advice to novice writers, highlight important aspects in writing and publishing text online, prevent common mistakes and share some tips of what works.

the text:write for people

finding the right tone of voice

Reading online is often part of a connection, a conversation between the producer/creator and the intended audience. To be successful, it's important that we write for our target group to stir their interest and foster engagement.

- does the site's mission require a formal approach?
- would the message of the site be well expressed in a more colloquial language?
- what language will fit the underlying goal?

Tip for most written pieces published online:
the first paragraph establishes the tone of voice and introduces / summarises the text in hand, giving it its context. This benefits both the site visitor as well as the search engines and is considered best practice.

effective headlines & sub-/headings

From the days of the arrival the printed word, headlines are written to draw people in. The headings and subheadings online serve the additional purpose of adding hierarchy to the page and making skim reading easy. Time is well spent on refining the exact wording or making a specific addition to the text in form of sub/headings (if not already in place).

- clear and succinct phrasing is bestaim for clear and easy-to-read wording; this will make text both easy to skim read and accessible as well as being effective for SEO.
- keep to a low word countno more than 4-5 words, but never more than 7-8; headlines should be quick to read and act as signposts throughout the page.
- be expressiveuse calls to action, a question or prompt to peak your site visitor's interest; make people curious and keen to find out more.
- be consistent & clearheadings should stand on their own and remain meaningful and consistent in tone; phrasing to be in keeping with the overall language used, including context-specific words.

Nice-to-read sentences

A general rule of thumb is to write text that can be read and superficially understood by a 7-10 year old. This might sound wrong, and does not apply to all written text online, of course, but it works very well. By keeping sentences short, reading is easier and quicker, resulting in more time spent on the site. Text becomes accessible to a wider audience.

- start with contextgenerally, the first paragraph is the most likely to be read in full; expectation is an introduction or summary which clearly states the context of the subsequent content.
- write in an active stylewhichever tone of voice your site will use, write your text with the aim of talking to your target group, to establish a connection.
- cut unnecessary wordsgenerally, the fewer words you can use to express your point, the better. Aim for clarity rather than needless elaboration.
- favour short sentences over longkeep phrasing clear and succinct. Split long sentences to make your text easier to read and understand.
- use paragraphs to structure textclear paragraphs which are succinct and not too long will aid legibility and create a more pleasant reading experience.
- use lists if fittinglists are great alternatives to content when fitting context, easy to overview and read ~ allowing quick access to info and creating a slight change in the rhythm of reading.

- proof read. proof read again. + once more.one of the most damaging aspects to the quality of your content are errors - spelling, grammar and punctuation mistakes. And it is not easy to proof read your own writing - best to find some helpers for extra eyes on your text. High quality content does mean error-free text.

the presentation:design for type & layout

formatting text

Oliver Reichenstein, ia.net, famously wrote in 2006 that Web Design is 95% Typography. The article caused much stir in the webdesign community. Many were fuming to have their craft and skill seemingly reduced to merely typesetting for the web. But the fact remains that web content to the most part is text ~ therefore its effective, user-friendly and accessible presentation online is of the utmost importance.

Typesetting and layout will greatly contribute to the reading experience. Formatting text well will make it accessible, easy to skim and read. Poor formatting, such as text set to the same size, lacking spacing, will appear like a wall of letters. This will be much harder and more laborious to read for all, causing major issues for others, those with dyslexia, for example. Adding appropriate paragraphs with clear margins and using headings and media will give the content structure and hierarchy and will result in a better reading experience for all.

What to do.

- **Do** ensure legibility of all text.The most important aspect of typesetting is legibility for all. This means ignoring subjective preferences and setting typesize to a comfortably large size and ensuring that the contrast between text and background colour is sufficient.
- **Do** use sub-/headings to add hierarchy.Most text, especially if long-form, will benefit from featuring a clear hierarchy to encourage skim reading and offer meaningful markers throughout the page. These can be set as in-page links as fitting.
- **Do** use paragraph and lists to add structure.Text formatting should complement the content and use good spacing for a clear layout of text. Using varied options, e.g. quotes set as pullquotes within the page, will result in an engaging layout and a better reading experience.
- **Do** experiment with layout.Layout and text formatting should be creative and engaging the site visitor in keeping with the site's mission. This can be done by adding different format options, intersecting text with appropriate media (images/video) and allowing plenty of white space between elements.

- **Do** ensure consistency.Consistency of both text (phrasing/tone) and design (format/layout) across all page will be essential for good accessibility, good user experience as well as branding/promotion.

What not to do.

- **Do not** set single-sentence paragraphs.For a good reading experience, it is important to consider the flow of text, rather than aim to 'chunk' text into small portions. Studies show that paragraphs which contain only a single sentence slow down reading and result in a choppy and more tiring experience.
- **Do not** set text to all uppercase.Words set in all capitals are more difficult to read as their 'shape' is no longer as unique as the standard setting. We tend to recognise words quicker than we read them when they are set this way. All uppercase will slow down reading, making it less accessible as well - and is often seen as 'too loud'.
- **Do not** underline text that is not a link.It is a common assumption that underlined text online is understood as a link. Adding a line below text, like a heading, is not the same as adding the underline to text, e.g. within a paragraph. Be aware of common patterns and work with them.
- **Do not** centre-align paragraphs.This might look aesthetically pleasing to the eye on first glance. However, reading more than 2-3 lines of centre-aligned text will demand a lot more concentration and mental energy. It causes the reader to have look for the start of the line each time as the lines do not start at the same horizontal point.
  Left aligned text is much easier to read as our eyes will just go on autopilot to find the start of the new line as it will be near the previous line's starting point.
- **Do not** succumb to poor type choices.Be very careful with script fonts, fonts which aim to imitate handwriting and fonts with a primarily italic or ornamental style. You might like them, find them easy to read - but not everyone will. If your script font is merely to highlight small text elements, then this can work. But avoid setting the main copy to anything fancy and stick to a clearly legible font instead.

Reading experiences

The habits, preferences, site and apps/devices people use for online reading are constantly evolving. There is much to interfere with our reading. Typesetting and layout alone can slow us down. Ads intersected with content. Internal or promotional links. Pop-ups. And more.

This meant that 'reader' apps and services jumped in and offered distraction-free reading. Hugely popular especially with the RSS crowd, they focused entirely on the text

and show their own version of the text, stripped of all irrelevant details. While this did indeed calm down the page and allow space for the text, formatting is often lost to the detriment of legibility.

The Guardiannewspaper article

Let's take a look at this article from the Guardian, published in 2017. The 2 previews below are full-page screenshots of the same article viewed on the site and via the reader. To compare, place your cursor over the preview image and scroll down to view the page in full, or view directly via the links.

original articleas published on theguardian.com

The difficulty is the pandemic shrinkage on-lead students how to really read

When the logic of capitalism means unintelligible information, it is a lot of fun to understanding the times we live in

screenshot via Firefox, taken 24/2/2022

Comparing the 2 version of the same article clearly shows what a difference presentation can make to the reading experience. While legibility is very good on both versions, the bespoke touches in layout and typesetting on the original article delivers a nicer experience. The drop caps offer visual markers. The quotes, pullquotes and images add variation and colour for an engaging presentation.

article, reader viewviewed via pocket.com

The difficulty is the point: teaching high school students how to read Milton

By Jason Boffetta
Associate Professor of Education, Taft University

Jason Boffetta teaching an English class. Photograph: Brian Blanco

Further reading

You Might Also Like

screenshot via Firefox, taken 24/2/2022

NOTE: This is not to say that reader do not have their place. There are many sites which crowd their pages and offer great content in poor design. In those cases, readers are life savers and serve their purpose very well indeed.

Our sites are of course designed not to fall into this category in the first place ~ our aim is to offer the nicest reading experience we can.

Veerle PietersBlog post

As inspiration, here are 2 full-page screenshots (to view in full, hover to scroll) from the blog of Veerle Pieters, a talented and well-known graphic and web designer from Belgium. For our joy and inspiration, she has been running her blog to share her vast experience and expertise for many years. Her site is an excellent example of how design and text can merge together for a nice reading experience.

design articles, main pageview veerle.duoh.com / articles

Click! Book Cover Design

A while ago I was asked by Vitaly Friedman from Smashing Magazine to design the cover of Paul Boag's new book. ...

CONTINUE →

Cover design for Smashing Magazine Print

Back in 2016 Vitaly Friedman asked me to design the cover and layout for a printed version of Smashing Magazine, a ...

CONTINUE →

My Design Process for the Adobe Fonts Project

The past few weeks I've been asked to create a fictional app design in Adobe XD using a set of Adobe fonts of my choice ...

CONTINUE →

How the Design of My New Blog Came to Live

I felt a huge sense of relief when the new version of my blog went live. You'd think after releasing the fourth ...

CONTINUE →

My Design Process for Adobe Hidden Treasures Challenge #1

Somewhere before the Summer of last year I was invited by Adobe to join the 'Adobe Hidden Treasures' design ...

CONTINUE →

Be Cards & Trustmakers Book Cover Design

Just a couple of weeks ago, another book that I designed got printed. The book is called Trustmakers, a business book ...

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GRAPHIC DESIGN ARTICLES

Applying Strokes in Adobe Illustrator

There are many ways in how you can apply a stroke in Adobe Illustrator. The options are really very ...

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The Modern Designer's Unforgettable Font Collection

If the previous font bundle was an adventurous journey I would describe the last bundle deal of this year cultural. ...

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Adobe Illustrator Layers Panel Hidden Tips

The Layers panel is an indispensable feature to keep your artwork organised since it holds the Layers of ...

CONTINUE →

The Adventurous Creative's Typeface Toolkit

Get adventurous, that's the motto of the latest font bundle deal. I was surprised that the last bundle I recommended ...

CONTINUE →

Streamline 4.0 Icons

Many of the projects that I work on there's an important role for the subject of this article. In today's world they ...

CONTINUE →

Graphic Design Link Picks #0144 #0145 #0146 #147 #148 #149

Let's do this! Just like the web design link picks I have one ready for the graphic design followers as well. My guess is that you'll like the ...

CONTINUE →

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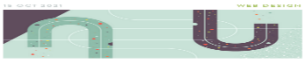
WEB DESIGN ARTICLES

Web Design Link Picks #0144 #0145 #0146 #147 #148 #149



Don't tell me, I know it has been some time since I last created a round-up with some truly wonderful resources. There's a way to get them really

CONTINUE →

Web Design Link Picks #0140 #0141 #0142 #143

Graphic design heroes got their link picks first but no need to worry as today is web designers day. On offer is Jules Forrest that crafts a design

CONTINUE →

Web Design Link Picks #0136 #0137 #0138 #139

Yeah, it's that time again for some lovely resources to learn from. So, you have struggling with CSS Grid, no problem as we have link to ease all

CONTINUE →

Web Design Link Picks #0132 #0133 #0134 #135

The web remains a great source of information and resources to learn from. In this edition I've selected some of its finest. I'll start with something useful if ...

CONTINUE →

Web Design Link Picks #0128 #0129 #0130 #0131

Who's hungry for another round of useful resources? They all cover interesting reading material from the world of web design. We are going to take a look at animating ...

CONTINUE →

Web Design Link Picks #0124 #0125 #0126 #127

Another week in our lockdown world so let's make the most of it by learning some new skills by exploring a selection of interesting resources. There are plenty ...

CONTINUE →

MORE WEB DESIGN ARTICLES

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TUTORIALS

Create a Lighthouse in Adobe Illustrator

Years ago I created a lighthouse as part of an illustrated header for a web site. However, the illustration didn't get

CONTINUE →

Adobe Illustrator Pen Tool Exercises

Adobe Illustrator is a fantastic vector creation tool and you can create a lot of things without ever using the Pen

CONTINUE →

Creating Tropical Leaves Art Brushes in Adobe Illustrator

A while ago I designed a series of Sunday Sol flip-flops. For one of the collections I designed a Hawaii version where I

CONTINUE →

Create a Circle Spirograph in Adobe Illustrator

Complex looking graphics like spirographs look like they're difficult to create, but as I mentioned before, this can be ...

CONTINUE →

Illustrator Pen Tool Exercises

Adobe Illustrator is a fantastic vector creation tool and you can create a lot of things without ever using ...

CONTINUE →

Create a Line Spirograph in Adobe Illustrator

Spirographs look complex, but most of them aren't that hard to create. As promised, here is a follow-up tutorial on how ...

CONTINUE →

MORE TUTORIALS

– RATHER USE EMAIL? –

Never miss out on learning

subscribe and receive my
20 FREE GEOMETRICAL PATTERNS

My weekly newsletter comes with a dose of inspiration, a curated downloadable swatches color palette, quick design tips and the same resources I learn from.

Enter your email address

JOIN & LEARN

Hi I'm Veerle,

I'm a graphic/web designer living in Belgium. My personal journal reflects my journeys through design, the web, and life, and I'm a firm believer in sharing what I know. I love soulful deep house music & riding my bicycle. Vive le velo!

Have a question? Get In Touch

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- Inspiration
- Design Articles
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Craftcms

screenshot via Firefox, taken 22/2/2022

In terms of content structure, this is the 'articles' section page, listing the available articles to view in their set themes. The menu shows short, succinct links - the current link clearly highlighted. The colour coded sections offer an easy way to scan the page for an overview. Articles are displayed as blocks, their text consistent in phrasing as well as layout. Links are clearly labelled, all expected details (date/category) presented.

design article, full viewview How the Design of My New Blog Came to Live

screenshot via Firefox, taken 22/2/2022

This article is an example of a very vibrant and lively layout. It tells the story of the design process behind the latest blog design. Note the variations in layout, alignment and formatting. The clear and consistent use of headings allows a clear overview on scanning the page. Text is written succinctly, formatted into well proportioned paragraphs with an line length optimised for legibility. Feature visuals expand into the margin and are given emphasis.

(check out Veerle's profile on people of the web for more examples of her wonderful work).

story tellingone exemplary

A word on parallax

The popularity of the parallax effect has been a curse to webdesign (in my view anyway). I am referring to the presentation technique which reveals the various layers of content through scrolling and added motion. This method can be engaging and fun, and will definitely work for some projects - it can also quickly become tedious, annoying or downright frustrating. It is also a feature which might cause serious issues for some and therefore pose an accessibility problem. While trends are not always bad ~ this one is to be considered very carefully and only used when fitting context and implemented well.

Parallax, like the use of the hero image, or the 3-4 feature boxes, are popular trends and in themselves not to fault. However, our main concern should be how deliver the best site we can. This means not following trends blindly but aim for the most suitable approach for our content which will suit our target group best.

We have to remember that a site is not about fancy effects or clever interaction - especially not if that comes at the cost of legibility or access to the content itself. Our priority has to lie with the effective delivery of content, the easy access and positive experience of our site visitors.

How parallax affects reading.

The worst aspect of the parallax method is that it will slow down and affect the flow of reading by default. Instead of the familiar scrolling of web content, which we all easily and mostly subconsciously do all the time, this approach takes control over the display of content by selectively showing/hiding/revealing content. Not inherently a bad thing but not something that will suit all contexts either.

The use of the parallax has worked very well for product demonstrations, for example, when there are various pieces to the whole; it has worked well when there is a story to tell, when content follows a linear pattern.

It does not work well, however, when the linearity is not already inherent in content and merely forced upon it by means of 'design' for purely superficial and aesthetic reasons. This will result in a choppy and disjointed experience and do little to enhance the user experience.

There are too many bad examples... instead, let me give you an example of when the parallax is used well: for story telling and making the most of the presentation technique for a thoroughly entertaining journey from the early days of animation to now.

enhance your story telling

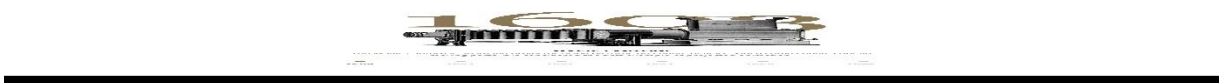
While we will have to view the original page for this example, the static (and incomplete) screenshot alone shows how it is the text, the content itself which guides the design and layout. This is a story - one that has a beginning and an end, various stages inbetween. It is a linear sequence and therefore lends itself to this phased presentation.

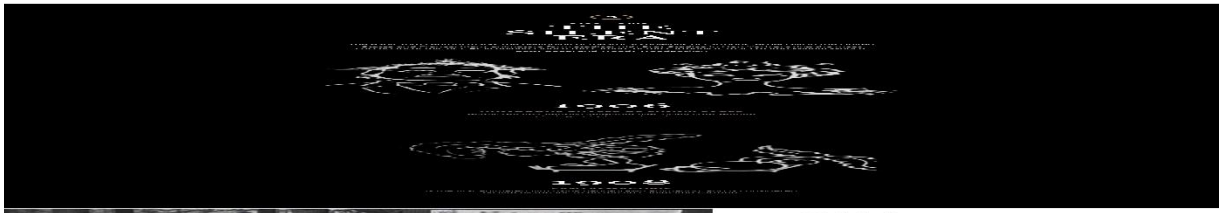
Note that even without the parallax, this page is very well presented. The text is consistent in wording as well as presentation. Type elements have been treated individually and specifically for a nice reading experience. Variation in layout combined with the use of high quality visuals result in a very effective design. And this is when the parallax now adds the visual flair, in keeping with the rhythm and flow of the content.

the history of animationview on webflow.io

ANIMATION

1906

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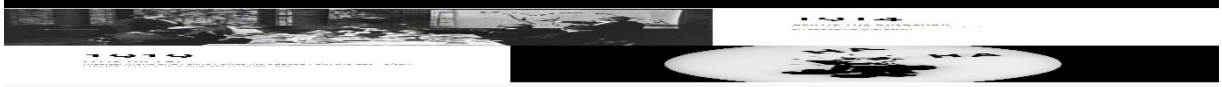

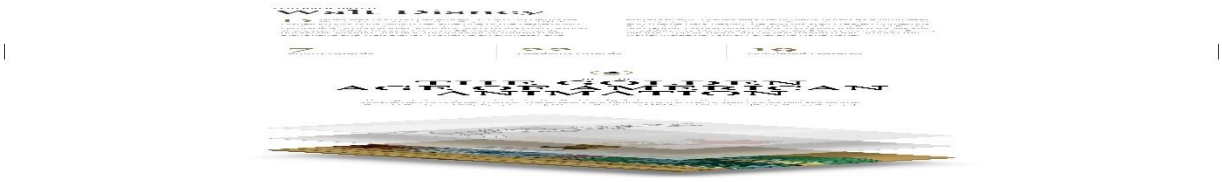

screenshot via Firefox, taken 22/2/2022

For further details on typesetting for the web, read this article on "On setting type for the web".