

Webspeak: Hypertext challenges

by [Mark U. Edwards](#) in the [August 29, 2001](#) issue

People don't read on the Web—they scan. Researchers Jakob Nielsen and John Morkes found that 79 percent of their test users always scanned Web pages and only 16 percent read them word-by-word (www.useit.com/alertbox/9710a.html).

But the Web challenge to “normal reading” goes deeper. Readers on the Web break the linear logic of narrative by clicking underlined or highlighted words and phrases that whisk them away to new topics, digressions, asides and elaborations. This Web “hypertext” allows a reader, or rather a “scanner,” to shape her own narrative line—and in the process often lose the kind of narrative coherency intended in a conventional linear printed text.

What might all this portend for the Good News? Consider first that Christianity has dealt with new media before. Christianity and the codex—the bound book—came of age together. But for Christianity's first 16 centuries, most believers were illiterate. They heard the words of the sermon or the sacrament of penance. They saw altar paintings, the “sermons in stone” of the cathedral friezes, the elevated host during the mass, and the Corpus Christi performance of sacred skits. They experienced the rhythm of the liturgical year that took them through the events of Jesus' life. If a sense was privileged it was probably the eyes, and the experience of the gospel depended heavily on narrative snippets (visual, aural and liturgical), often presented in isolation and in uncertain order.

The Reformation, in contrast, privileged the ears. *Fides ex auditu*, said Luther—faith comes through hearing—and he and his fellow Protestants emphasized the sermon and the congregational hymn. This preference for the ear should not surprise us. Though Luther translated the Bible into German, more than 95 percent of the common people of his day were illiterate. The Protestant emphasis on hearing may have led Protestants to put greater reliance on continuous narrative and motivated them to preach through whole books of the Bible.

It took another 100 years for Pietists to bring literacy and Bible reading to significant numbers of ordinary Christians. Today's high literacy rate and print culture offer

Christians an encounter with the Bible that only the elite experienced during Christianity's first 17 or 18 centuries. Thanks to uniform printed editions, biblical concordances, marginal references and glosses and other study aids, ordinary Christians can both encounter the biblical narrative in its entirety and focus, isolate and jump around to their hearts' content.

Printed text dominated well into the 20th century, but gradually has had to compete with films, television and, most recently, the Web. Film and television have reprivilaged the sense of sight and the role of continuous (and often simplified) narrative. The Web has some of the qualities (and challenges) associated with film and video, but it shares with print an emphasis on text—a text, however, that follows different rules of syntax and presentation.

Nielsen offers the following guidelines for writing effective Web-based text:

- highlighted keywords (hypertext links serve as one form of highlighting; typeface variations and color are others)
- meaningful (rather than “clever”) subheadings
- bulleted lists
- one idea per paragraph (users will skip over any additional ideas if they are not caught by the first few words in the paragraph)
- the inverted pyramid style, starting with the conclusion
- half the word count (or less) of conventional writing

Ask yourself what, say, the Gospel of John or Paul's Letter to the Romans might look like following Nielsen's guidelines. Can you even picture it?

Fortunately, some Christians are taking the matter seriously. The American Bible Society, for example, supports a Research Center for Scripture and Media (www.researchcenter.org), “an on-line think tank where experts from many fields develop new knowledge for translating and communicating faithfully the Bible into new media.”

We'll explore ramifications of this Web challenge in future columns, but for now consider the resources of tradition. Has the Apostle's Creed functioned, or could it

function, like the lead paragraph in the inverted pyramid style of writing, where the summary conclusions come first? Do marginalia, cross-references and concordances offer models, or at least starting points, for thinking about the hypertext of the Web? What becomes of narrative, and narrative theology, in an age in which traditional, linear narrative competes with nonsequential hypertext? Do the cycles of the liturgical year, the lectionary, and iconic presentations of gospel vignettes offer worthwhile insights or fruitful analogies? Will the new media provide as great a change as did the rise of print? Can we learn from that earlier transition?

We confess that the Holy Spirit will find a way to spread the Word in whatever medium lies to hand; it would be nice to hope, however, that we could to some degree act as the Spirit's instruments.