

Field notes • Media

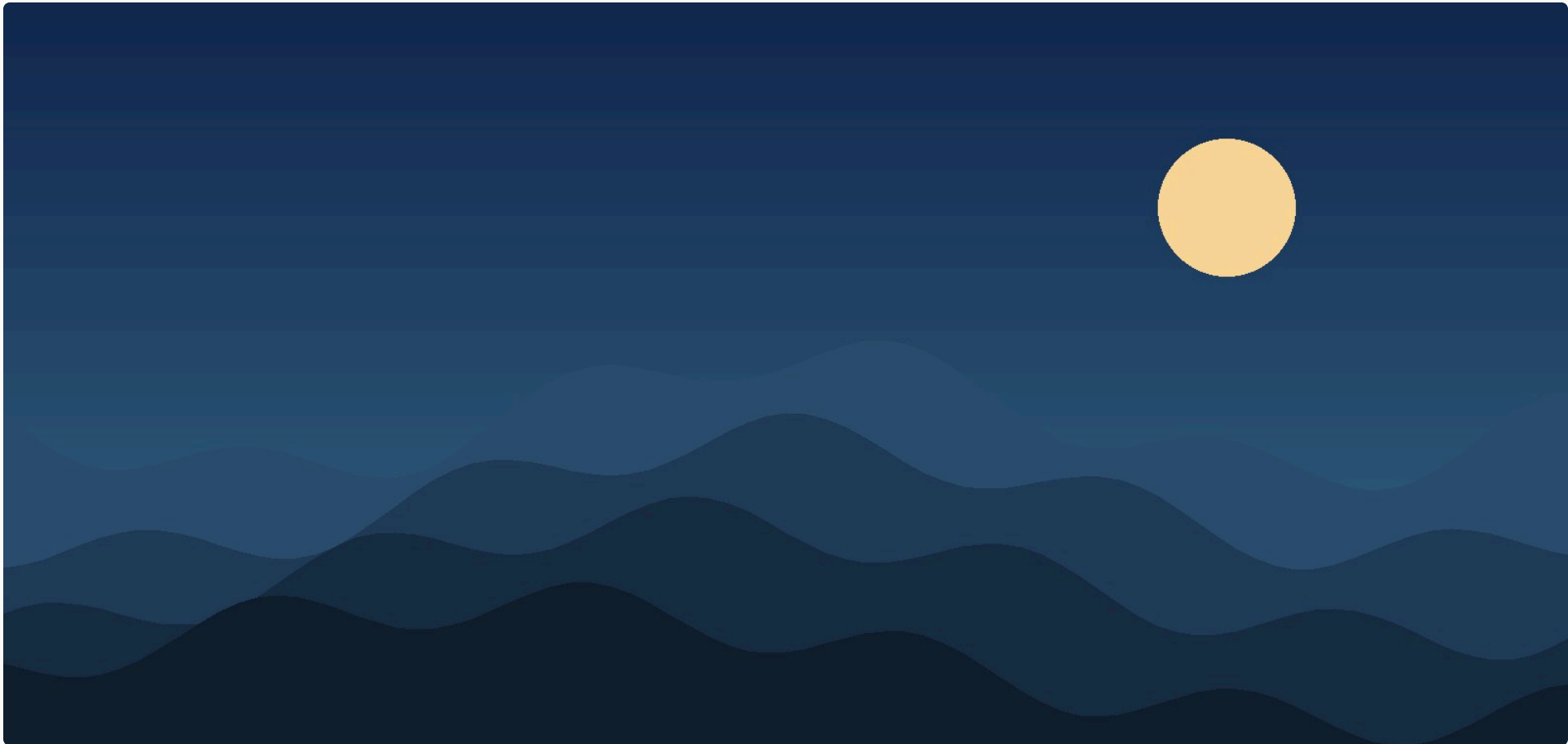
The quiet return of the long read

After a decade of skimming, readers are spending longer on pages that respect them. Publishers are learning what that means for design.

By Hannah Reyes · 14 October 2026 · 9 min read · This is a sample page made for the VectorShot website. The publication and people are fictional.

For most of the last decade, the shape of an article on the web was decided by a stopwatch. Editors watched dashboards tick as readers arrived, scrolled a third of the way down and left. Headlines grew louder, paragraphs shorter, and the space around the words filled with things that blinked.

Something has shifted. On the sites we spoke to for this piece, the share of visits that last longer than five minutes has risen every year since 2022. The change is not dramatic in any single month, but it is steady, and it is showing up in places nobody expected: recipe sites, local news, even product documentation.

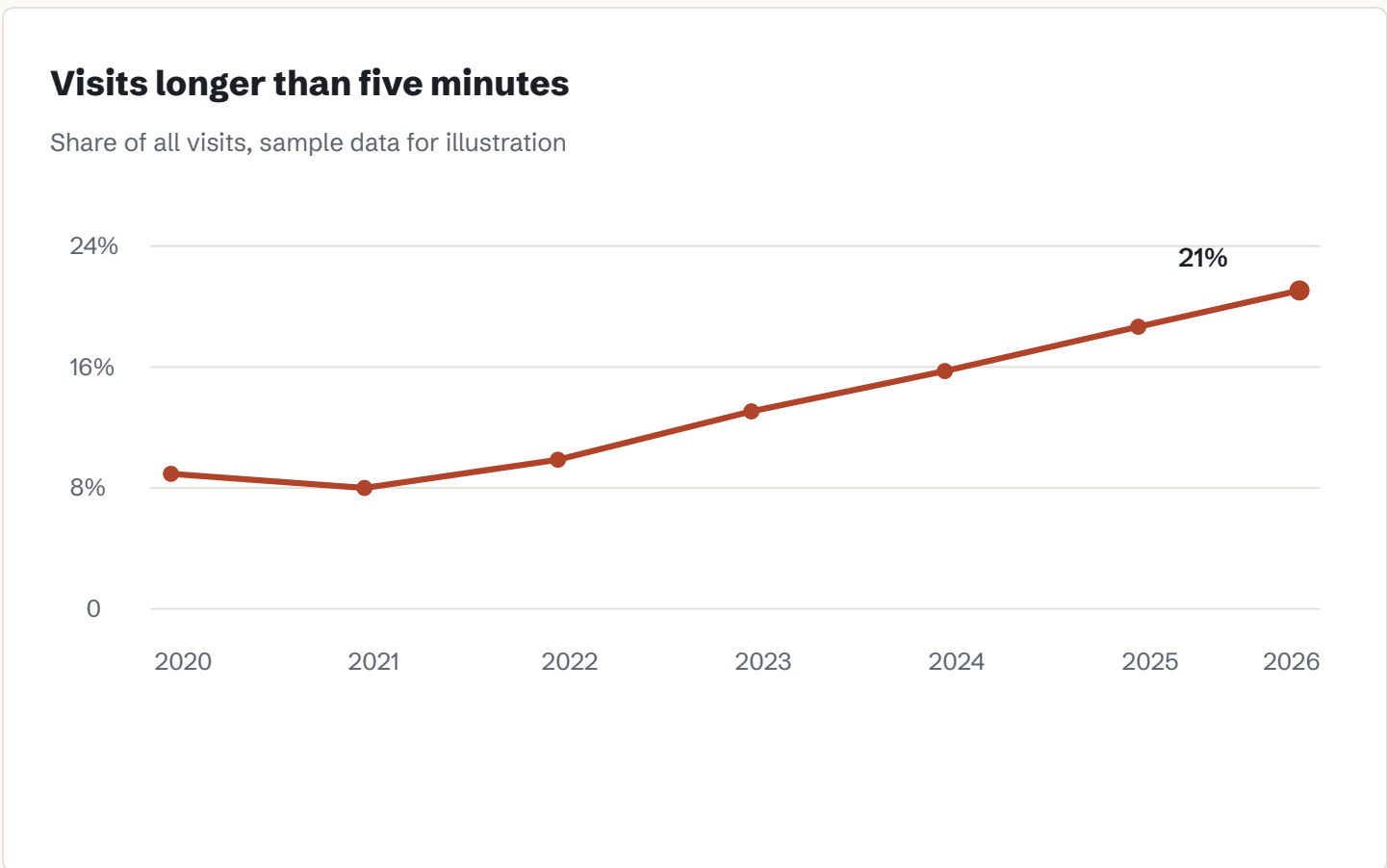


Readers describe the best long pages as calm, like a view with nothing in the way. Illustration for this sample.

The editors who are seeing the change describe it the same way. They did not add anything. They took things away: the autoplay video at the top, the second newsletter prompt, the floating share bar that followed the reader down the page. What was left was type, images that load when you reach them, and charts large enough to read.

“We stopped asking how to keep people on the page and started asking why they would want to stay.”

That question changes small decisions. A chart is redrawn so its labels are real text rather than part of an image, which means they stay sharp when a reader zooms in on a phone. A table is allowed to scroll sideways instead of being squeezed. Footnotes return, because readers who stay to the end tend to want them.



None of this is new. Print designers have worked this way for centuries, and the best web designers never stopped. What is new is that the numbers now agree with them. When a page is easy to read, people read it, and they come back.

There is a practical side to this as well. Readers increasingly save pages to read later, share them as files, or keep them as records. A page built from real text and shapes survives that journey. A page that is mostly pictures of text does not: zoom in on a screenshot of one and the letters break into squares.

For the people building these pages, the lesson is not to chase time on page as a new number to inflate. It is to treat the reader’s attention as something they lend you, and to give it back in good condition.

Small print stays small. Zoom in on this line in the PDF and it should still be perfectly clean, down to the full stop at the end of the sentence.