

# Basics of Website Design

There are many things to keep in mind when designing a website. First let's look at a number of them that may be out of your control, but that you need to be aware of:

**Scanning:** When it comes to websites, people notoriously scan the page instead of reading it. They tend to start at the top and scan across looking for hints. They want to see if they are where they intended to be and if they can find what they're looking for. What this means is that people often won't read the full page and make a fully informed decision, instead they will quickly click on the item that looks most like what they're looking for.

[ Information Foraging: Why Google Makes People Leave Your Site Faster <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20030630.html> ]

What does this mean to us? As a designer we need to know what features and content will be most relevant and important to the user and know how to apply visual styles and techniques (i.e. hierarchy, contrast, proximity, flow) to help point the eye towards those elements, skipping over the less important elements.

**Content:** It is tempting to think that website design is just about the visual page. However, websites are all about communication, so content is critical. Understandably the client probably knows more about their industry than you do, but it is important to work with them to optimize the effectiveness of their site. That means understanding how users will interact with a site's content and planning accordingly. Listen to what the client needs to communicate, ask plenty of questions and then prioritize the structure.

**How NonDesigners Use Webpages:** As designers, we tend to look at webpages in a different way than other people. We appreciate the intricacies of the design, the richness, balance and surprises. We enjoy design and we take a long, hard look at all that is on the screen. Real people are more about function. They don't necessarily like looking at the screen, they can be impatient, clicking on the first link that seems to be what they're looking for and they won't wait for pages to finish loading. Basically, they're looking for what they're looking for, and usually that's not beautiful design. We can have a tendency to look at it as a work of art. Because of this we always need to keep our users needs in mind, mindful of their environment and habits, and make browsing successful for them.

**People Can Be Impatient:** The web is very different from other things in our everyday lives. Just the nature of the web, with its interconnected sites, can lead you into uncharted waters with just a single click. This mystery can be very appealing to some people, but can also lead to frustration and impatience with others.

The sheer size of the internet is daunting (what are the odds that you'll find what you're looking for on the first webpage, first website, first five websites?). Also, you never know what lies beyond the link that you're tempted to click on. Is it exactly what you need? Or is it just an advertisement, or worse?

This causes distrust in users, and can lead to impatience. In less than a second users can decide if this is the site they were looking for, and leave if not. They're immediately scanning the page for clues as to where they go next.

**Other Web Browsing Factors:** Simplicity in design can help in each of these instances.

**Cultural Sensitivity:** Users can be from anywhere around the world. It is important to know if you will be communicating with international users and those of different cultures—know your target audience. Keep to your point and use simple language when applicable. You also don't know how a person reached your site, so make sure that it is clear what your site is about and how to navigate around the site.

**Connection speed:** While this is not as big an issue as it once was (with broadband connections becoming commonplace), we are now seeing more cell phone access. It is still best practice to optimize page sizes for quick download: eliminate extraneous images, optimize remaining images, and use cascading style sheets as much as possible (separate content from format).

**Font Choices:** Use appropriate fonts on your pages and don't pick specific fonts that will not likely be installed on the computers of your users. Generally speaking, sans serif fonts are best on the web for large areas of text, while serif fonts can be used for headlines, etc. While it will be tempting to select "that perfect font" and use it on the webpage as a graphic, keep in mind that search engines can not read the graphic.

**Color Selection:** Currently very few computers are limited to the 256 web-safe colors (which vary between PC and Mac platforms). There is a Browser-Safe Web Palette of 216 colors that produce well on both platforms, but this is not a big concern. Most computers can easily view thousands or millions of colors. That said, with more and more cell phone and PDA browsers, there is a new, upcoming concern about their limited color palettes.

If you ignore the older web-safe palette, then you can open up your design to many more colors. However, a well designed website will limit its color palette to a fixed number (typically 3-6) of well coordinated colors.

[ Kuler: a great resource for color inspiration <http://kuler.adobe.com> ]

**Support for HTML/CSS/JavaScript/Flash:** At this point, all current browsers have good support for HTML, CSS, JavaScript and Flash. However, it is important to know your audience, because some people will choose to have JavaScript turned off, or won't have Flash installed (or won't be allowed to install it, as in some corporate settings).

**Accessibility:** A number of simple decisions will make life easier for some of your viewers. Using 'live text' for blocks of text (as apposed to graphics) and utilizing clear, concise ALT tags on images will go a long way. We'll revisit these later in the semester.

**Designing To People's Strengths:** There are a number of things that the brain is good at that we can take advantage of. Without consciously thinking about it, most people immediately match shapes, see patterns, and focus on what is important.

**Matching Shapes:** once used to spot animals when hunting, now it can help a user easily spot the icon that they click on to print a page. It is also the skill that helps some users ignore banner ads on the top of pages. This is done through the use of familiar shapes/signs and the use of tone, color and contrast to help direct the user's eye toward important elements.

**Seeing Patterns:** This helps people locate the navigation on a site based on the repetition, not the actual content of the type. This can be done by grouping like elements, giving them enough tonal or color contrast from elements around them, and effectively utilizing white space.

**Focusing on the important:** this skill, along with ignoring the unimportant, helps us filter out what we aren't looking for and find what we are looking for as we scan a page. Again, we can use whitespace, color and contrast to highlight the more important elements.

**High-speed problem solving:** We can help users quickly find what they are looking for by utilizing clear headings and easily distinguishable hyperlinks.