

# Principles of web design

**Reading Assignment—combination of this summary PDF and online pages.** *These are my notes taken from online materials written by Ben Hunt. While I give you a summary of the material here, he goes into greater depth online. Use these two pages as a guide and follow the red links for the reading.*

**Simplicity in web design:** <http://www.webdesignfromscratch.com/simplicity.cfm>

Simple web design benefits everyone involved. Often, when a design isn't working it is best to first ask what needs to be removed before asking what needs to be added.

Simple design leads to quicker page load times and sites that are easier to navigate and scan, not to mention making life easier for the designer. If your design is clear and straightforward, then it is faster to design and build, and even faster to maintain and redesign later on (another argument for CSS's separation of content from style). All of these can mean a site that is more profitable for the designer (not to mention freeing up time for more creative thinking).

**How to design simply:** This can be harder than it seems. You need confidence, a clear vision and definitely skill, but it gets easier the more you do it. So, how do you work at designing simply?

**Remember your goals:** Keep the users' goals and the goals of the site fresh in your mind. Write them down and revisit them if you're feeling unfocused. If you're feeling tired and like you're wandering in the wrong direction then stop, take a break before coming back to refocus.

**Think-then-do:** Take a look with fresh eyes. Decide what needs to be done, then trust yourself and do it.

**Occam's razor:** This is the idea that "All other things being equal, the simplest solution is the best." By applying this to web design you can search out the most elegant and direct solution to the client's needs.

—Simple, conventional, recognizable layouts that you know work will be more likely to work for your users than complicated, innovative designs.

—A simple message will be understood better than a complicated one

—Interactions with simple, clear steps and few instructions will be completed by more people than a long, wordy alternative

—Clear, uncluttered, recognizable visual design will reduce cognitive friction, reduce mistakes, and help visitors succeed

In many cases, pursuing design simplicity simply saves time and money. Or rather it finds room in a budget for thinking creatively about the real design problems, which is where you can discover the solutions that deliver true competitive advantage.

**Trusting the user:** [http://www.webdesignfromscratch.com/trusting\\_the\\_user.cfm](http://www.webdesignfromscratch.com/trusting_the_user.cfm)

It is important to trust the user when designing a website. We, as designers, can end up with a warped view of our work and need the input of those who actually use the site.

**Don't Decorate, Communicate!** [http://www.webdesignfromscratch.com/dont\\_decorate\\_communicate.cfm](http://www.webdesignfromscratch.com/dont_decorate_communicate.cfm)

When designing a website it's very easy to get caught up in the minutiae. It is extremely important to remember that most users (excluding other designers) are coming to the site for its content and are more interested in finding that and getting on with their lives. How can we help that?

**Remember how brains work:** Our brains are able to quickly search through content that has order and meaning. If you don't offer that to them they easily grow frustrated and give up. If we simply create a clear hierarchy of information (headlines, subheads, body copy) and appropriate visual (type size, color) then they can easily find what they are looking for.

**Remember how eyes move:** In our culture we're trained from a very early age to scan (and read) scanning from left to right and moving from the top of a page to the bottom. Because of that we've all developed an easy rhythm, quickly flowing down a page. When everything is setup as expected, our eyes move right through the content not having to refocus.

Now, I'm not saying that you can't make interesting design. Just keep in mind that anytime you do something outside of the norm (running type around the page edge, flowing type along a shape, using shocking color combinations, flowing copy over a busy photo, utilizing too many typefaces or type sizes) you are making the user work harder. The key is finding the balance, utilizing interesting elements while not making them work too hard. Make it intentional, so that there is a reason when you break up the flow of a page or make them refocus their eyes. Don't go so far as to frustrate.

**Above all, remember you're here to communicate:** Typically, we've not accomplished anything if we end up irritating the users. We need to use good design to create style, pace, flair, excitement, intrigue, emotion while drawing attention to the message. Unfortunately (for designers), most users are not interested in design for design's sake.

**Golden Rule of web design:** <http://www.webdesignfromscratch.com/golden-rule.cfm>

Everything that goes into your web site must have a purpose. Every single element and decision must help users achieve their goals and support the site's goals. Attractive designs are, of course, very helpful in reaching this goal. But success is fundamentally driven by good thinking. The better the planning, the better the site.

**Conventions in web design:** <http://www.webdesignfromscratch.com/conventions.cfm>

Design conventions are informal rules that have become established over time. They are so common that most of us don't even think about them, but they cut down on the amount of translation a user has to do. They also make the designer's job easier since we won't have to reinvent solutions to common problems and can instead concentrate on specifics. It is an important skill to utilize these conventions.

These conventions can be colors, shapes, patterns, layouts, or font styles that have taken on an implied meaning, more than they actually say (i.e. blue, underlined type being a hyperlink; beveled edges on rectangular shapes being a clickable button). Conventions work so well because they are shortcuts. Ways to communicate richer meaning without having to spell out the detail. However, don't think that you always have to use a convention, just because it exists. Once again, we need to keep the user's experience in mind at all times and make an informed decision whether each convention will help or hinder their visit.

**Branding for web sites:** <http://www.webdesignfromscratch.com/branding.cfm>

Brand is often thought of as the name, term, sign, symbol or design that identifies the goods or services of a company. However, it extends beyond that and encompasses the personality that you project to your users. Good branding helps shape your users thinking about your position in the market, value, quality, service, and size. Basically it can cover all aspects of a company.

How a user experiences your website can quickly translate into their expectation and opinion of the entire company, product or service. Because of this we need to be straightforward and open.

**Personality:** make sure that you are translating the company's personality into the website. Be consistent, keeping in mind the differences with the web and web users.

[ Stanford Guidelines for Web Credibility (a bit dated, but interesting!) <http://credibility.stanford.edu/guidelines/index.html> ]

**Tone of voice:** Using an active voice, as opposed to passive, calls the user into action.

[ Your Web Site Needs a Clear Call to Action <http://www.schipul.com/en/art/?4> ]

**Heart (soul, guts):** You have to help the client be themselves on their website. Have ownership and show that believe in that they're doing—this will come through as credibility.

[ Case study: Bytecon [http://www.webdesignfromscratch.com/cs\\_bytecon.cfm](http://www.webdesignfromscratch.com/cs_bytecon.cfm) ]

**Focus on the best bits:** You are in control of what the user sees. Follow the old adage and put your client's best foot forward. Show them strengths and what they can do for them.

**Usability:** Help users find what they are looking for and therefore have a good visit to the website.

[ Branding and Usability [http://www.uie.com/articles/branding\\_usability/](http://www.uie.com/articles/branding_usability/) ]

**Visual stuff:** Translate your client's brand guidelines for the web. For instance, a Pantone color that they use for all print materials might not look right on the web. Find an appropriate replacement if they don't have specifications for their website.

[ Case study: Harvey Nichols 2001 [http://www.webdesignfromscratch.com/cs\\_harvey\\_nichols.cfm](http://www.webdesignfromscratch.com/cs_harvey_nichols.cfm) ]

**Design v. Usability:** [http://www.webdesignfromscratch.com/sphere\\_of\\_design.cfm](http://www.webdesignfromscratch.com/sphere_of_design.cfm)

There's an old debate over "design vs. usability". It seems that things are finally coming around to the conclusion that you can have both, but that you need to determine the proper balance on a job-by-job basis. We need to build in usefulness throughout the process and test it as we go. The goal is for our website to be both visually appealing and easy to use.

The Sphere of Design: This is a model that the author uses to help determine the mix of aesthetics and functionality. It helps us visualize where a project stands and note the areas needing improvement. Note that the most functional websites are those that are information-rich and completely obvious to use. These can be attractive, but won't be the most artistic. The most beautiful designs make you stop and look at their intricacies. But by doing that they have, at least momentarily, broken the flow of information and already become less functional. The sweet spot is the proper balance, based on the job-at-hand, between beauty and functionality. The author has many more examples on his page.