



## **The Internet Digest**

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Special Report:

### **Web Design Guidelines for a User-Friendly Website**

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# Introduction

While specific instructions on how to design your web pages are out of the scope of this ebook, I will go ahead and give you some tips to take into account when you (or the web designer you choose) decide to start designing your website. If you want a specific, hands-on, step by step guide on how to design a website I recommend that you purchase [Web Design Mastery](#) , by Shelley Lowery.

## Why simple design wins

With the increased affordability of web space and bandwidth and the growing use of high speed modems, it has become common to overuse fancy implementation technologies like Flash, audio and video.

What differentiates good web designers from bad ones is the restraint in embracing every new technology that comes along. Good designers focus first on functionality (making sure that the web page achieves the objectives for which it was created) while bad designers rush to make gratuitous use of elements like graphics, flash animations and javascript, just "because they can" or because "it looks cool".

I recommend a minimalist approach to web design. Minimalism is functionality and aesthetics working together. In web design, minimalism involves removing all unnecessary frills, focusing on the user, and creating an interface that is at the same time pleasant to the eye, easy to navigate, intuitive, and effective in helping the user achieve his goals quickly and effortlessly.

Today, approximately ten years after the Internet started its exponential growth, and in spite all the technological developments, users still want:

- a) quality **content**
- b) ease of **navigation**, and
- c) **speed**.

All your web design efforts should strive to give your users what they want.

When designing your website, take into account the following guidelines:

- **Code your pages efficiently**

The use of cascading style sheets is highly recommended. Cascading style sheets concentrate the style definitions in one external file that can be linked from each web page. This reduces the amount of code in each page, and, as a consequence,

the pages will be smaller, will load faster, and will be easier to maintain. Furthermore, it will be a breeze to quickly implement style changes throughout your site. More on cascading style sheets later.

- **Use graphics only when absolutely necessary**

Graphics should add value to what is being presented, instead of being just decoration. Also, graphics should be optimized and be as lean as possible. Using relevant graphics, and using them sparingly, will eliminate clutter on a page, will make the content easier to understand, and will allow for quick page downloads, giving users what they want, faster.

- **Use color sensibly**

Good web designers use color to separate the page into different categories, and to emphasize what is important. For example, each section of a navigation menu can be given a different color to indicate that the tasks are related. Also, the use of bright colors for buttons that we want users to click is a good way to emphasize the importance of that task. If everything on a page has color, nothing will be emphasized and the page will look cluttered.

- **Use ample white space**

Reading from a computer screen is difficult, so you must strive to make it as easy as possible for your visitors. You can improve on-screen readability by separating the different sections of the page with plenty of white space. That will make your visitors more comfortable, and stay on your site longer.

- **Use legible fonts**

Don't use tiny fonts. Use use a screen-friendly font, like verdana, in a big enough size to be read effortlessly. Also, the number of font types per page should be limited to two or three: one for the headlines, one for the copy and possibly a third one for the navigation buttons.

- **Make your web pages search engine friendly**

Search engines love pages with a lot of text. Search engines don't like pages with a lot of graphics and little text, since it is text what helps them determine the topic and relevance of a page. They also have trouble with pages that use Flash and Javascript. If you want your pages indexed quickly and have a better chance of doing well with the search engines, reduce the use of Flash, Javascript and images and using plenty of text.

## **Cascading Style Sheets Basics**

If you have experimented with HTML or popular editors like FrontPage to build a website, and didn't use cascading style sheets, you probably have come across most of the problems that cascading style sheets were created to solve.

For example, if you don't use cascading style sheets, you will have to define the different web page attributes in each and every page you build, in order to preserve your site's look and feel. This means that every time you create a new page, you will have to specify the background color, the font type and size, the color of your links, the type, size and color of your headings, the width and borders of your tables, etc.

As a consequence, your pages will be larger and load more slowly. However, the biggest problem will come when you decide to make a change in the look and feel of your site (for example: to change the color of your links). You will have to open each and every page you've ever built and manually change the link colors. You can avoid all that with cascading style sheets.

### **What are cascading style sheets?**

A cascading style sheet is a separate file that contains all the style rules that tell a browser how to display a web page.

You can use a style sheet to define the attributes that are common to all pages, for example, the background, the link colors, the font type and size, the width and borders of your tables, the size and color of your headings, etc. You can also use them to create specific attributes (called "classes") that you can refer to from any of your web pages at any moment.

### **How do I use a style sheet?**

A style sheet is saved as a separate document (you can create it using a popular text editor, like Notepad, and saving the file with a .css extension). If you want a web page to follow the rules outlined in a style sheet, the web page must be linked to the style sheet. When a browser requests a web page, the web page will link to the style sheet, which will in turn instruct the browser to display the web page using the correct style attributes.

### **Summary: the advantages of style sheets**

Style sheets ensure visual continuity throughout a site. By referring to the same style

sheet, all pages in a site can display the same stylistic qualities.

Style sheets simplify your site's maintenance. By concentrating your style definition in one external file, any change you implement in your style sheet will instantly apply to all the web pages linked to it.

By pulling the style definitions out of your pages, you will make them smaller and faster to download. This will allow you to make more efficient use of your web server space and your data transfer allowance.

For more in-depth informaton about cascade style sheets, you can read this tutorial:

<http://www.theinternetdigest.net/articles/css-tutorial.html>

## **Branding Your Website**

Your website should help you reinforce your brand, using both visual cues and adequate content. Your website branding should be an extension of the way you market off-line. Branding isn't just about your logo, although a logo is an important visual element to help people remember your brand. Brand is the way people perceive your company and the image you want to project: friendly or formal, serious or upbeat, conservative or trendy, etc.. A brand represents a predictable pattern of qualities and behavior that gives users a strong sense of security. Branding consistency very much applies to websites. Following are some basic guidelines to brand your website:

- **Include your logo in all pages**

Seeing your logo in a familiar spot in all your pages gives visitors the reassurance that they are still in your site. The most common location for the logo is the top left corner of each page. Your logo can also be a useful navigation aid, and should be clickable and hyperlinked to your homepage (the only exception is the logo in the homepage itself).

- **Complement your logo with a tagline**

A tagline is a short, catchy sentence that summarizes your business purpose. More often than not, we stumble upon websites that don't have a tagline, or, if they do, they don't tell us anything meaningful about the site's business. For example, two years ago, the homepage for Ford offered the following tagline: "*Striving to make the world a better place*". That is a lousy tagline for a car company. It could be a fine tagline for an institution like the Red Cross or Habitat for Humanity, but not for a company that makes cars. Fortunately, today, Ford's homepage offers a better

tagline: *"100 Years of Automotive Achievement"*. Another example of a great tagline is *"WalMart: always low prices"*: what a great way to summarize their whole business strategy in just three words!

- **Create a favicon**

A favicon is a small graphic element that appears to the left of the URL in the address bar. For example, a red "Y" to the left of [www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com) in the address bar when you go to Yahoo! is Yahoo!'s favicon.

To create a favicon, you can use a graphics program called Icon Forge (you can download a free trial version in CNET):

<http://download.com.com/3000-2195-10128559.html>

You can either create a favicon from scratch, or import a 16x16 '.gif' or '.jpg' file and save it as a '.ico' file.

You will then have to save your icon with the default name of 'favicon.ico', and upload it to the root directory of your website (where your index page is). Finally, after that, you must associate your icon to each of your web pages. You do that by including the following HTML code immediately after the <HEAD> tag of your pages:

```
<link REL="SHORTCUT ICON" HREF="http://www.yourwebsite.com/favicon.ico">
```

To try it out once you do that, type your domain in the address bar and then add your page to your favorites. You should be able to see the favicon next to your bookmarked page title. Also, the next time you type your URL in the address bar, you will also see your favicon to the left of the URL.

- **Have a consistent look and feel**

Use a consistent color scheme and layout throughout your site. It is very important that the color scheme you use for your website be similar to the one used in your off-line communication pieces. The use of the right colors is very important, since colors have connotations and moods associated to them. For example, red can sometimes project warmth although it usually comes across as too aggressive. Dark blues, especially when combined with yellow or gold can project richness and exclusivity, while greens and yellows suggest nature.

- **Have an About Us section**

The Internet has been heralded as "the great equalizer": on a browser window, any

company, no matter how small, can look as good as a large company with a long history of quality and service. This situation also presents an important challenge for small businesses: Since branding is trust, how can I convince my potential customers that I am not an unethical, fly-by-night operation? The best way to do that, other than by your performance itself, is through a properly structured "About Us" page.

Your "About Us" page must not only introduce your company to your potential customers, but must do so in a way that it explains why they should trust you and your company. Often, this means answering six basic questions:

- **Who is behind your website?** Talk about yourself and include your picture.
- **Is this a real business?** Nothing tells users that you're for real as your physical address. Always include your full contact information in your About Us section.
- **How do you make money?** Your business model has to be evident, or people will ask themselves: "what's the catch?" Explain what your revenue streams are and why you charge what you charge. Always talk "benefits" and "value", not price.
- **How long have you been in business?** People tend to regard longevity and stability as important qualifiers to determine trust. Since most small online businesses tend to be very young, it may be hard to use the longevity card to solicit trust. If that is your case, you can talk about your past experience instead. For most small business owners, their past experience is highly relevant to their current businesses. Use your "About Us" page to talk about it, and how does it relate to and benefit your current business.
- **How can your visitors know that you deliver?** The best way to show your prospective customers what you can do for them is through testimonials from satisfied customers. Ideally, the testimonials should come from companies that accurately reflect your customer's demographics. To be effective, these testimonials must provide some form of contact information of those who offer them (usually, a name and a link to their website will work).
- **Are you related to the business community?** Another way to establish credibility and trust is to belong to community, trade or professional associations. These entities usually authorize their members to use their logos. For example, a repair shop's website can use the seal of the ASE to emphasize that its mechanics are well trained.
- **Can visitors trust you with their private information?** People are very protective of their personal information, especially on-line. You should have

a privacy policy clearly displayed somewhere in your website, and you should link to it from your "About Us" page.

## Website Navigation

### The Shopping Mall Analogy

Your website's navigation elements should basically give your users answers to these three questions:

- Where am I?
- Where have I been? and
- Where can I go?

To better explain how to answer those questions we will draw a parallel between your website's visitors and shopping mall customers.

#### Where am I?

Shopping mall visitors will usually have at their disposal one of those handy displays located next to the mall entrance, where they can view a map that shows the location of all the stores. In that map, they will also find a helpful little arrow next to the words "You Are Here".

Though not as simple and straightforward as the "Your Are Here" symbol, there are several techniques you can use on your website to tell your visitors where they are.

One of them is to have a clear navigation menu in a prominent location, usually the left margin or across the top of your page. The current page should be clearly singled out from the other navigation menu options. This can be accomplished in several ways:

- If you use images for your menu options, you can use a different image for the button indicating the current page.
- If you use an HTML table, you can mark the cell corresponding to the current page by using a different cell background color.
- You can use a different font type or color.
- If you use simple, underlined text links, you can leave the menu option for the current page as non-hyperlinked text (not underlined).

**Tip:** Never hyperlink the current page to itself.

Another very effective way of letting your visitors know where they are is to use a "breadcrumb trail". A breadcrumb trail explicitly shows the path from the homepage to the current page.

A breadcrumb trail looks like this, and is usually found near the top of the page:

[Home](#) > [Articles](#) > [Web Design](#) > Current Article

The words "Home", "Articles" and "Web Design" should be hyperlinked to their corresponding web page. "Current Article" will not be hyperlinked, since it corresponds to the page that is already on the screen.

### **Where Have I Been?**

In a shopping mall you will most likely know where you have been just by looking back. Or, you can look for the "You Are Here" symbol in the mall map and identify the stores you already passed by.

In a web page you can easily tell your visitors where they've been: just give your visited links a different color.

The standard color for visited links is purple (just as the standard color for unvisited links is blue). Although the use of these standard colors is highly recommended, you can use a color other than blue for your unvisited links if it blends better with the look and feel of your site. In that case, it is common practice to use a more subdued tonality of the unvisited links color for visited links (for example, if you use dark green for unvisited links, use light green for visited links).

### **Where Can I Go?**

In a shopping mall you can look for the "You Are Here" legend in the map, and pretty much find your way to any store in the mall.

On your website, the best way to let your visitors know where they can go is to offer a clear navigation menu. Some guidelines you can follow are:

- Group related navigation options in clusters. A good example of this technique can be found in <http://www.microsoft.com>
- Give the most popular destinations the most prominent locations in your navigation menu, or find a way to emphasize them. For example, Yahoo! presents the links to its most popular sections in bold.
- Don't link to all sections of the site from every section. In most cases, it is enough to link only to the most relevant sections, and to include a link to the homepage, where comprehensive navigation choices can be provided.

Finally, some mall shoppers tend to go straight to the information booth to ask for directions, rather than trying to find their way around for themselves. In a website, the

equivalent of the mall information booth is the **search box**. If your site is more than just a simple company brochure, you must enable it with search capabilities, and include a visible search box in your homepage.

## Adding Search Funtionality To Your Site

Having a **search engine** for your site will enable your visitors to quickly and easily find what they are looking for, without having to navigate through a long list of options.

Usability studies show us that more than half of all web users are **search-dominant**, meaning that they will go straight to the search box when they enter your site, rather than try to find information following your navigation links. They are not interested in looking around your site but rather in finding what they want as fast as possible.

There are several services, some of them free, that provide search engines for your site. **Freefind** ( <http://www.freefind.com> ) is free and comes with some important benefits: for example, you can select your desired indexing frequency. I have also heard great things about **Atomz** ( <http://www.atomz.com> ), a fee-based search engine for your site, although I haven't tried it yet.

We recommend that you follow these guidelines when setting up a search engine on your site:

- Make the search function easily **available from every page** on your site.
- Try to include a **search box** in the page itself, instead of just a text link that takes you to a search page. The search box shape is easily recognizable and users will find it much faster than a text link. If you don't want to use a search box in all your pages, use a search box in your homepage and a link to a search page from your interior pages.
- Place the search box in a consistent an easy to find **location** across your site. Based on the observation of numerous important websites, the preferred location seems to be the **top right corner** of the page.
- Try to make the search box **wide** enough (between 20 and 25 characters) to accommodate longer queries.
- Label the search button next to the search box with the word "**Search**"

Finally, please note that installing search functionality is no excuse for designing poor navigation menus (don't forget the other **half** of your visitors, who are likely to **follow links** rather than search).

**Using Google on your site:** **Google** also has a free feature called Google SiteSearch <http://www.google.com/services/websearch.html> that allows you to use Google's search engine on your site, giving your visitors the option of searching your site or searching the web. It is very easy to install: you just cut and paste an HTML snippet of code and you're set. However, this feature has its drawbacks. The main one is that only pages that are already in Google's database will be displayed in the results, and you can't instruct **Google** to crawl your site at your desired frequency. Instead, you will have to wait until **Google** crawls your site before more of your pages can be added to Google's database. Therefore, **Google** is a good option if most of your pages are already indexed and you don't update your site that often. A good benefit of using Google SiteSearch, though, is that you can make it work in tandem with your AdSense account. What this basically means is that if your visitors use your Google-powered search engine, you will earn revenue every time they click on the "sponsored links" shown in the results pages.

### **Aiding navigation with custom '404 Error' pages**

When visitors to your site misspell your URLs, or follow broken links to your site, their browser will display a '404 Error' page that will tell them that the page they were trying to access does not exist. At this point, they will most likely leave, rather than trying to guess how to get to their intended destination. Fortunately, there is an easy solution to this problem: create a user-friendly custom '404 Error' page.

Your web host should give you the option of uploading a custom '404 Error' page, which will be automatically displayed every time somebody tries to access a non-existent URL within your domain.

You can design your custom error page using the same editor you normally use to create your regular web pages. There are a few things to take into account when designing your error page, to improve your visitors' navigation experience:

- Brand your error page with your logo and the look and feel of your site.
- Provide your visitors with a link to your main page (homepage).
- Include a link to a site map, or display links to the main sections of your site.
- Include a search box for those visitors who don't want to take the time to navigate your site to find the information they need.

Ask your webhost or use your host's control panel to find out the file name they are using for their 404 Error page, and then replace the HTML with the HTML code of the custom error page you designed.

To see an example of a good custom 404 error page that incorporates the guidelines outlined in this article go to Microsoft's 404 error page:

<http://www.microsoft.com/404.html>

## Helping navigation with user friendly confirmation pages

Confirmation pages are generally needed after a user submits an online form or completes a purchase. For those cases, you must design good confirmation pages. Unless you design a good, custom confirmation page, your visitors will be thrown into the generic confirmation page provided by your web host which will most likely confuse your users and make them think that they have left your site.

The confirmation page has several objectives:

1. It must clearly tell your users that their form was completed and sent successfully. For example, if the form is a subscription box for your newsletter or ezine, your confirmation page must say something like this: "Congratulations! You are now subscribed to our newsletter."
2. It must give clear instructions of what your visitor has to do next. To use the same subscription box example, your confirmation page will also say something like this: "You will soon receive an email message asking you to follow a link to activate your subscription. Follow that link to start receiving your ezine immediately".
3. It must provide your visitor with two or three **navigation options** so that he can continue browsing your site (don't just let them go...). Two popular options are: "Return to our main page" and "Browse our archives".

One important consideration is that your confirmation page must have the same look and feel as the rest of your pages, so that your visitors knows that they are still in your site. If you're using forms, you must insert the necessary instructions to your form script, so that the browser will automatically display your confirmation page once the form has been successfully submitted. You usually do this by adding the following code after the <form> tag at the beginning our your form script:

```
<input type="hidden" name="success"
value="http://www.yoursite.com/confirmationpage.html">
```

Note: some cgi programs (form handling programs) use the word "redirect" instead of "success" in their programs. Check with your web host to see which one do they use.

To see an example of a confirmation page, you can go to:

<http://www.theinternetdigest.net/thankyousubscribe.html>

This is the confirmation page I use after a visitor has successfully submitted my newsletter's subscription form.

For more on how to design confirmation pages and 404 Error pages I recommend [Defensive Design for the Web: How To Improve Error Messages, Help, Forms, and Other Crisis Points](#) by world class redesign firm 37signals; following the tips in this book can make the difference between having one-time visitors and repeat customers.

## Layout and content presentation

### Making your web pages easy to read

Computer screens are hard on the eyes, and their limited size forces users to scroll. This makes reading online harder, slower and more uncomfortable than reading on print.

Following are a few simple tips that you can follow to make the experience of reading online easier to your visitors:

- **Write less:** Try to use at least 50% of the words you would use in print. Once you finish writing, go back and try to further reduce your word count.
- Use plenty of **contrast:** black type on white background works best, followed by white text on black background.
- Use **headlines** to break the discussion into several paragraphs. Breaking the discussion into small, manageable chunks, each dealing with a sub-topic of your discussion, makes things much easier for readers.
- Online users don't read, they **scan**. Use elements that facilitate scannability: **bolding** key words and phrases, and using bullet points are two examples of this technique.
- Don't make your lines of text too long. If lines of text run from one side of the screen to the other they will be very hard to read.
- Try to convey **one idea per paragraph**, instead of bundling them in long, cumbersome paragraphs.
- Use **hyperlinks** to present complementary information instead of trying to include everything in the body of your article. For example, if you are writing a piece about "search engine submission techniques", you may touch the subject of "keyword optimization" at one given point. If you want to explain what "keyword optimization" means, hyperlink the words to another page where readers can find more about that subject.
- Try to limit your discussion to **one short page**, instead of breaking your article into several pages. Most people won't read through a long article broken into two, three or more pages. If you have to write a long article, provide a printer-friendly

page (we'll talk about them later) so that your readers can print the article and read it off-line.

- Don't use small fixed font sizes. When possible, don't specify a font size at all, so that the default browser size (12pt.) will become active. However, if you want to specify the font size due to styling, do it in **percentage terms**. That way, your users will be able to select their preferred default settings, or use their browser's Text Size menu options to adjust the font size. If you use fixed font sizes (points), they will not be able to do this. If you absolutely want to use fixed font sizes because they better preserve the intended layout of your pages, use sizes of **10pt. or higher**.

## Using Web-Friendly Fonts

Choosing the right typeface for your website copy is important, since it will affect the way your readers perceive your page (serious and formal, or friendly and casual). Aside from this, there are also important usability concerns. For example, some font types are more easily readable than others, and some are more widely available.

You want to choose font types that:

1. fit the **character** of your site,
2. are **easy to read** on a computer screen, and
3. are **widely available** across many browsers and operating systems.

There are basically two types of fonts: **serif** and **sans serif**. **Serif fonts** are those that have fine cross-lines at the extremities of the letter. **Sans serif** ("sans" being the French word for "without") are fonts that don't have serifs. The most common serif font is probably Times New Roman. Arial is an example of a common sans serif font.

Let's go briefly through the most popular font types and evaluate their **availability**, **readability** and **character**:

### **Arial\*:**

- **Availability:** Thoroughly available. It is probably the most common sans serif font. It is the default font for Windows, and it first shipped as a standard font with Windows 3.1.

- Readability On Screen: Not the worse but definitely not the best, especially at small sizes, when it becomes too narrow and the spacing between characters too small.
- Character: Has a streamlined, modern look but can also be plain and boring.

\*For Mac users, the equivalent of Arial is Helvetica.

## **Times New Roman:**

- Availability: Thoroughly available. It is probably the most common serif font. It is the default font for web browsers. It was first shipped as a standard font with Windows 3.1
- Readability On Screen: Acceptable for font sizes of 12pt. and up, but terrible for smaller sizes.
- Character: Serious, formal and old fashioned.

\* For Mac users, the equivalent of Times New Roman is Times.

## **Verdana:**

- Availability: A widely available sans serif font, Verdana was first shipped with Internet Explorer version 3, when the exponential growth of the Internet demanded a new font that was easy to read on the screen.
- Readability On Screen: Exceptional. It's wide body makes it the clearest font for on-screen reading, even at small sizes.
- Character: Modern, friendly and professional.

## **Georgia:**

- Availability: Good. It is a serif font introduced by Microsoft with Internet Explorer version 4, when the need for a serif font which much better readability than Times New Roman became evident.
- Readability On Screen: Very good. It is the best serif font for on-line reading, since it was specifically designed for that purpose.
- Character: Modern, friendly and professional.

Microsoft has also popularized two more fonts: **Comic Sans Serif** and **Trebuchet**.

**Comic Sans Serif** was launched with Internet Explorer version 3 and mimics the hand writing used in comics. It is easy to read and is informal and friendly, but it is not considered appropriate for more serious, professional sites.

**Trebuchet** is another sans serif font, similar to Arial but with more character, although it can be difficult to read in small sizes.

Finally, we can mention **Courier New**, a serif font that was widely popular with old, mechanical typewriters, and that is now used only to present simulated computer code (if you need to present snippets of sample HTML code in your web pages, this is the font to use).

Therefore, from a usability perspective, **the clear winner is Verdana**. If you are inclined to use a serif font, **Georgia** is the best option. Arial remains a good option for specific parts of text, like headlines and titles, where a different font must be used and you can use larger sizes.

### **Choosing the right page width**

With so many different screen resolutions available (640x480, 800x600, 1024x768, etc.), browsers (Internet Explorer, Netscape, etc.), and platforms (Windows, Mac, etc.) in use, it is very difficult to design a page that looks good (or at least looks the same) in all configurations.

To design a page that looks good with most configurations, let's start by defining our main objective: **we must never force a user to scroll horizontally**. In other words, our page must always fit within the available screen width. This would suggest that we have to design our page for the lowest common denominator: 640x480. However, less than 1% of Internet users utilize this archaic resolution (which was common when 14" screens were the best you could get).

Therefore, we can rationally make the decision to ignore the 640x480 resolution, and design our page for resolutions of 800x600 and higher. Since 800x600 remains the most popular resolution today (2004), we must optimize our page design for this resolution, meaning that our page should look best at 800x600. Bear in mind that I'm not saying that we must necessarily design an 800 pixel wide page, only that it must *look best* in screens with 800x600 resolutions.

At this point, we're ready for our next decision: should we design a fixed-width page, or should we specify the width of our page in percentage terms?

There are pros and cons for both. The main advantage of a fixed-width page is that the layout will always remain as you intended, even when viewed at higher resolutions. The

main disadvantage is that users with larger screens, set at higher resolutions, will not be able to fully utilize them, and will instead see large, unused blocks of space around your page (certainly, a disappointment to those users who spent a lot of money in a large monitor).

The advantage of establishing our page width in percentage terms, for example 100%, is that the page will adjust itself to the resolution of the screen. This is called a "liquid page design" (although I like to call it a "bubble-gum page design", since the page looks as if it has been stretched horizontally when viewed at higher resolutions than intended). The main benefit of this method is that all the available screen real estate will be utilized. The disadvantage is that the layout of your page will change, and users may find it uncomfortable to read the extremely wide sentences that will result when higher resolutions are used.

If you decide follow our advice to optimize your page for 800x600, and want to follow the fixed-width method, you must take into account that not all the 800 pixels will be available (some of them will be used by the browser to display the scrollbar and other browser elements). To accommodate most browsers and platforms, specify your page width at a maximum of 750 pixels.

If you decide to specify your page at 100% width, you won't have that problem, since it will adjust automatically to the available width. Just make sure that your page looks best at 800x600, and that the layout doesn't change much when you view your page at 1024x768.

## **Make your web pages easy to print**

Since reading from a computer screen is uncomfortable, your users may often want to print the page they're viewing. The problem is that web pages don't usually lend themselves to print.

Unless your web page width is 600 pixels or less, chances are that your page copy will not fit in the printed page, and important information will be cropped-out.

However, as we've pointed out before, limiting your web pages to a width of 600 pixels translates into sub-optimal use of your visitor's screen real estate, since the majority of web users nowadays employ screen resolutions of 800x600 or higher.

A better option is to specify your page width in percentage terms, for example: 100%. This way your web page will adapt to whatever width your printer is set up to, and your copy will not be cropped-out.

However, this solution has two drawbacks:

1. Your page layout may be modified in ways you never intended, as a consequence of lines of text having to wrap up to accommodate your printer's width and margin parameters.
2. Your printed page will still show all those unwanted navigation menus and banner ads.

All of which takes us to our preferred solution: if your web page presents important content that your visitors will most likely want to print, create a link to a printer-friendly version of your page.

A printer-friendly page should follow these simple guidelines:

- The page width should be specified in percentage terms (100% or less), so that it will automatically adjust to your printer's page width and margin parameters.
- It should have a small version of your logo (or the name of your website in plain text) at the top left, hyperlinked to your homepage, so that your visitors have an easy way to go back to your website after printing the article.
- With the exception of your logo, the page should contain only text, which should be left justified, to facilitate reading.
- It should indicate what is the URL of the original version of the page.
- If the page features an article, it should include the author's resource box.

Your original page should contain a link pointing to your printer-friendly page at a visible location. The standard practice is to include a text link next to a simple icon of a printer.

Although creating printer-friendly versions of your pages will lead to the duplication of some of your content, your visitors' user experience will be significantly enhanced. Furthermore, you don't have to worry about taking up significant web server space and bandwidth, since your printer-friendly pages will have mostly text.

Finally, you don't need to create printer-friendly versions of all your web pages, only of those which your visitors will most likely want to print, for example: articles, how-to tips, confirmation pages, instructions pages, and product specification sheets.

## **Choosing Good Web Page Titles**

Many web designers focus just on the actual look and feel of a page and dismiss seemingly minor details like the page title (page titles can be seen in the blue band on top of your web browser). However, a good title can, in just a few words, tell your visitors what they

can expect by reading your page. Also, search engines use page titles to generate the links displayed after a search.

To emphasize the importance of a good page title, let's suppose that you own a company called The Attic, that specializes in vintage clothing, and that you want search engine users to find it. A page title like "The Attic. Specializing in Vintage Clothing", is OK. Certainly, it is better than just "Welcome to the Attic", which will be meaningless to search engine users searching for "vintage clothing".

However, an even better option would be: "Vintage Clothing by The Attic", since the search words "vintage clothing" are at the beginning and therefore are more visible.

## **Making your pages load fast: optimize your graphics**

Heavy images cost you money and traffic. They cost you money because they require both significant storage space and bandwidth. Since your web host will usually give you a limited amount of storage space and a maximum data transfer allowance, heavy graphics may cause you to exceed those limits.

Also, heavy images can cost you traffic: if your heavy graphics make your pages take more than 10 seconds to load, your visitors will run away faster than you can say "back button".

You must optimize your images for the web. Your images should be in either .gif or .jpg formats (.gif works best for logos and navigation buttons, while .jpg works best for photographs.) The idea is to reduce the size of your graphics so that they take as few bytes as possible while retaining acceptable quality.

This can be done using free on-line image optimization tools. One of the best ones out there is Gifbot, by Netmechanic:

<http://www.netmechanic.com/GIFBot/optimize-graphic.htm>

They have a user-friendly web-based interface that works like this: you upload your picture, they process it, and almost instantaneously they will give you several lighter versions of your graphic for you to choose. Pick the image that takes the fewest bytes while still retaining an acceptable quality level. It is not uncommon to reduce the weight of a picture by up to 70% with no noticeable decrease in quality (especially if the image is in .jpg format.)

Another useful tip is to use thumbnails. Thumbnails are miniature versions of a picture that are hyperlinked to its actual size version. The thumbnail will load fast, and by clicking on it your visitors will be able to see the actual size version.

Also, it is very important to specify the width and the height of your images in your HTML code. Since the text of your page usually loads faster, if you don't specify the width and the height of your images the browser will have to reposition the text once the pictures load, consuming more time. If you take the time to specify the width and height of your images, the browser will lay out the text where it should go from the beginning, even before it loads the images, saving time.

## Flash or HTML

Flash is a powerful web technology that achieves a high level of visual impact from the graphical point of view. Unfortunately, it is widely misused in web design. There are still many problems with Flash, especially related to usability and search engine behavior; you need to understand what those problems are before you decide to use Flash for your site.

As with any business decision, it all boils down to understanding what your target audience wants.

Flash technology presents several problems that go against the way most people use the web. For example:

- **Bandwidth and Load Time Constrains:** Sites designed with Flash take a long time to download and consume vast amounts of bandwidth. Not all users have a broadband connection. Flash forces users with dial-up connections to spend valuable time watching the load bar, instead of getting to the information they want, fast.
- **Usability Constrains:** When you navigate a Flash site designed with a older version, the back button does not work: instead of taking you to the previous screen, it will get you out of the Flash site. Also, the standard colors for visited and unvisited links will not work, and users have no control over the text size they want to use.
- Furthermore, many times **Flash sites go against the interactive nature of the web.** Since Flash technology favors a "presentation style" approach that resembles television, users are many times reduced to mere observers that get bored after a while, no matter how good the graphics look.
- **Search Engine Constrains:** Although large search engines like Google now have some Flash indexing capabilities, these are still very limited. You will definitely have a hard time achieving high rankings with a Flash site. One option around this problem is to design a second, search-engine-friendly HTML version of your site.

This, though, usually represents an unnecessary expense of both time and money, since in most cases the HTML version alone will get the job done.

Although few, there are some instances when Flash technology can actually be helpful:

- When you need to show a **presentation**, for example a demo of your product.
- To develop **interactive games**, like those found on sites for kids like Sesame Street, Nickelodeum, or Yahoo! Games.
- When you want to dress up a **minimalist site**. In this case, a small Flash animation or banner embedded in an HTML document will not consume excessive bandwidth, will load fast, and will enhance the appearance of a bare-bones site.

Although Macromedia (the company that developed Flash) is actively working to improve Flash's usability problems (they even formed a partnership with usability guru Jakob Nielsen in 2002), issues like slow downloads and search engine un-friendliness still remain a problem. Until these issues are addressed and solved, you will be better-off by only using Flash in those rare instances when it actually enhances the value of your content.

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# Resources



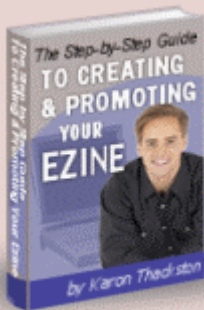
[Web Design Mastery](#): In this thorough 7-Volume course, author Shelley Lowery reveals all of her web site design secrets and takes you step by step through the design process of a professional web site. Everything you need to know to **design** and **market** your website by yourself in one place. Heralded as the "**Bible of Web Design**", this is probably the only web design eBook you'll ever need to buy.

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## More Resources:

### Search Engine Optimization:

[The Nitty Gritty of Search Engine Optimization](#) (by Jill Whalen) This special report in ebook form is probably the most thorough guide on how to write for the search engines. Making sure that your main keywords are well represented in your page copy without sacrificing readability is not always easy, but this special report shows you how to do it.

[Search Engine Visibility](#) (by Shari Thurow) Most web developers/designers build a site first and worry about "searchability" later, which is a costly mistake. This book will teach you how to design a site primarily for your visitors, while making it easy to find in the search engines. Forwarded by Danny Sullivan, from Search Engine Watch.

### Web Design:

[What You Need to Know Before You Hire a Website Designer](#) and the very popular e-book [Start Your Own Home-Based Website Design Business](#), by Mark Frank, website designer and Internet consultant. Both books can be found at [WebsiteDesignBiz.com](http://WebsiteDesignBiz.com)

[Simple Web Sites](#): (by Stefan Mumaw) You've probably heard me mention the virtues of minimalist web design in my articles. In fact, end users are tired of and turned off by overloaded sites that are difficult to navigate and slow to load. This book offers valuable insights on creating simpler web sites, while offering the reader visual inspiration.

[Color Logic for Website Design](#): (by Jill Morton) This book provides a solid foundation in color usage in web site design, saving time, trouble and rework. Enjoy new design potential through the informed use of color in web design.

### Email Marketing:

[Ebook Starter](#): (by Shelley Lowery) Do-It-Yourself ebook design kit. Ebooks are the "perfect" online product, as they provide your customers with instant gratification and can be downloaded right over the Internet. Not only does this package include a complete ebook tutorial, but it also provides you with professionally designed templates that will give your ebooks the look and feel of a real book (including a page turning effect).

### General Internet Marketing:

[Multiple Streams of Internet Income](#): (by Robert Allen) In spite of hints of hype in some of its chapters (after all, the author is a best selling Real Estate guru), this book gives you a broad overview of all the possibilities that Internet marketing can open for you and your business. This is the book that inspired me to launch my newsletter.

[You Name It](#): (by André le Roux) A practical guide to naming products, services, businesses, divisions, domain names, newsletters and just about anything else.

## Copywriting and Content Creation:

[The Step By Step Copywriting Book](#): (by Karon Thackston) This widely acclaimed ebook by shows you how to write effective web copy that both **sells** and **ranks high** with the search engines.

[Net Words](#): (by Nick Usborne) Mr. Usborne is one of the leading advocates of good web copywriting. Net Words builds a compelling case about how of interesting, [highly personal copy](#), always gets far better results than the boring copy usually found in corporate sites, or the overly aggressive text common in most sales sites.

## Web Usability:

[Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity](#): (by Jakob Nielsen) Creating Web sites is easy. Creating sites that truly meet the needs and expectations users is not. Usability guru Jakob Nielsen shares his insightful thoughts on the subject.

[Homepage Usability: 50 Websites Deconstructed](#): (by Jakob Nielsen and Marie Tahir) Specific observations and suggestions about 50 of the top websites in the world, backed with solid quantitative analysis and graphic aids. Focuses on the Home Page.

[Don't Make Me Think](#): (by Steve Krug) Author Steve Krug lightens up the subject of usability with good humor and excellent, to-the-point examples.

["About Us" -- Presenting Information About an Organization on Its Website \(124 pages PDF\)](#) Representing a company or organization on the Internet is one of a website's most important jobs. Explaining the company's purpose and what it stands for provides essential support for any of the site's other goals. This report contains **50 guidelines for improving the design** of "about us" areas of corporate websites, and is richly illustrated with 85 color screenshots from many different websites.