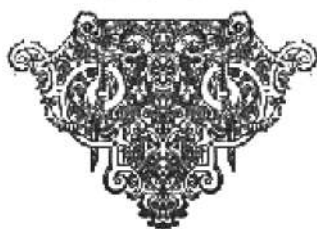Home
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# Basic Web Design Principles

Designing an effective web site requires more than just gathering relevant information and posting it on the web. Like a good paper or research presentation, a quality web project demands as much attention to the selection, organization, and presentation of material as to the underlying research itself. You should strive, above all, to be both clear and engaging in every aspect of site design. Without the first, you will quickly lose your audience. Without the second, you'll never catch their attention in the first place.

Here are some concrete suggestions for making your site a winner:

### BEFORE YOU BEGIN:

- Consider your audience and your goals. You should have a clear sense of who will be using your site (mostly college undergraduates) and what kind of experience you are hoping to provide. What exactly are you trying to accomplish here? Why is this important?
- Plan your site on paper first. You can draw a "family tree" of pages with arrows indicating links. Or you can make a hierarchical outline. Either way, it is essential to organize your information and lay out the architecture of your site before attempting to implement your vision.

### SITE LAYOUT:

- Strive for consistency. You want your project to have an identity, so all the pages in your project should have a common feel: there should be consistency among backgrounds, color schemes, navigational tools, and tone of voice. This is especially important if you are dividing up your site's pages among several team members. Otherwise, your project will seem like two or three separate projects lumped together, rather than a single, unified whole.
- Provide a rich set of links within your site. Ideally, there should be multiple ways for your user to navigate your pages. You should consider including a prominent 'home' link or icon on each page, a menu or table of contents, and highlighted links within textual material to related information elsewhere on the site. Feel free, of course, also to provide links to other pages within ECE or elsewhere on the web.
- Don't hide important information. Users don't like to click too many times to find the information they

want -- if information is particularly important, make it accessible up front. On any given page, remember that as with a newspaper, the top left corner is the most prominent. See the <u>National Geographic Website</u> for a good example.

## THE WEB MEDIUM:

- Provide opportunities for interaction. How is your site any different from a traditional print document? How can you involve the reader in ways that non-digitized texts usually cannot? Interactivity can be a compelling, innovative means of engaging your reader and creating experiences that cannot be replicated in other media. Good examples are the <u>"Make Your Way as an 18th-Century Woman" site</u> on ECE and the site for the <u>Louvre Museum in Paris</u>
- Avoid text-only pages. Ideally, a user should never encounter an entire screen full of uninterrupted text in browsing your site. Again, take advantage of the web medium!
- Don't sacrifice elegance for pizzazz. Just because you can make images fly across the screen does not mean you necessarily should. Every design element of your site (colors, images, animation) ought to correspond thematically with the content and goals of your project. See the <u>Enigma site</u> for a representative example.
- Provide a link for every URL you mention in your site. If your bibliography or notes include a citation for another website, list the URL in full, but make it 'clickable' as well so that the user can go directly to the site in question.

## THE FRONT DOOR:

- Give your site a descriptive title. Your title should convey the content of your site in a concise but engaging manner. Remember, the title is how your site will be identified on the ECE home pages. Ideally, it should pique the curiosity of users and prompt them to explore your project pages.
- Include a brief introduction. This should be part of your site's home page, and should explain the scope and purpose of the site. Once users have noticed your title and followed a link to your site, they will expect quickly to find a further elaboration of your title, a brief paragraph or two describing what the site is all about and what makes it interesting. You've caught the user's eye with your title; the introduction is your chance to heighten their interest and persuade them to actually stick around and explore.

- Make your site's home page as useful a starting point as possible. The viewer should be able to see at a glance what your site is about, how it is laid out, and what kinds of resources and features it includes. Ideally, all of this information (along with your site title and introduction) should be visible on a single fast-loading screen that requires a minimum of scrolling.

### ACCESSIBILITY:

- Make sure your text is legible. Check the size, color, and font of all text within your site to confirm that it can be easily read. Be especially careful of dark or fancy backgrounds that make text hard to read.
- Make sure your site is platform independent. Your site should be viewable on both Mac and Windows machines using either of the most commonly available browsers, Netscape and Explorer.
- Consider the needs of your viewers. Think about the bandwidth your site will require. Keep in mind that not all users will have the luxury of an ethernet connection. Minimize the memory requirements of your site by compressing images and other large files. And make sure all your images have ALT-TEXT behind them. This makes the site accessible both to low-vision users and users with slow modems who have turned the images off.

### THE END GAME:

- Thoroughly test your site. Ask a friend to sit down and explore your site. Ask them to think out loud, and watch them navigate the site. Do they get lost? Do they have trouble finding links? Do they have trouble understanding your labels? Do they understand your prose? Ideally, you should elicit and incorporate feedback about your site in the course of developing it as well as when its nearing completion. Be sure to test your site both of the most commonly used browsers, Netscape and Internet Explorer.
- Proofread carefully! ECE is a public resource sponsored by the University of Michigan and all of its pages should maintain a high level of professionalism. Check carefully for spelling and grammatical errors before posting your written materials to the web.

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### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

- <u>KNC Guide to Evaluating Websites</u> - a helpful collection of additional design resources developed especially for this project
- <u>Yale Style Manual</u> - a definitive, comprehensive reference guide to web style
- <u>Web Design Principles</u> - a very helpful short overview of essential points to keep in mind in designing a site (CSU Sacramento)
- <u>Bitwalla's Web Design Principles</u> - nine key principles in a nutshell from a company specializing in web design
- <u>Web Design with Style, Ease, and CSS</u> - a helpful primer on webpage design considerations emphasizing CSS, layouts, and typography
- <u>Angelfire's HTML Library</u> - provides several template-like layout suggestions for websites

<u>Go on to Working with Images</u>

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