**1. VISIBILITY**

*"The system should always keep users informed about what is going on, through appropriate feedback within reasonable time."* ***– Jakob Nielsen***

In order for a site to be successful, it needs to keep the user informed of where there are at all times. A majority of websites have a ton of content and need multiple pages of information, which a user can easily get lost in. The site needs to keep track of the user’s whereabouts so they can focus on what they are looking for. It also needs to present its information in an organized way to ease the user’s workload in finding relevant information.

PAGE INDICATION

-Pages are correctly labeled with which area on the site the user is in, there are correct page indications that are obvious to the user. The site will also underline the major sections of the site the user is in.

WHY GEORGIA STATE?

-The why Georgia State page in the undergraduate admissions section poorly makes use of color coding different sections of the page. First of all, the main color-coded boxes that separated the different categories are not interactive. Their bright contrasting colors lure the user to click on them only to fond them almost completely useless. Instead the user must click on a miniature navigation bar that will separate the different categories into their respective areas. This is counter intuitive since this navigation bar is a plain uniform text color while the boxes in next to the pictures themselves are nothing more than space takers. The space itself is rather randomized. Each picture is has a color-coded category, however they are randomly spread out. Only by clicking on the section in the navigation bar does the space organize into the desired category while the other categories disappear. This process of having the user organize the pictures puts an unnecessary burden on the user when the site could have took advantage of the color coding scheme, rather than putting them in random order for an aesthetic appeal.

**2. MATCH BETWEEN SYSTEM AND REAL WORLD**

*"The system should speak the users' language, with words, phrases and concepts familiar to the user, rather than system-oriented terms. Follow real-world conventions, making information appear in a natural and logical order."* ***– Jakob Nielsen***

An important aspect that all websites need to convey to the user is their use of language. They need to present their product in words that all users can understand. Not everyone is adept at technical speech, so the site must use common language that correctly informs the user of what they see on their website. The site needs to communicate with real world language in order to communicate with the average user.

COMMON LANGUAGE

Most of the language used in the main site sections are common phrases and easy to understand. The site uses phrases such as “What can I study” and “How do I apply?” These phrases go from the users perspective to relate to their situation so they understand what they have to do. Taking this perspective is important in making sure that the user understands where a link will take them and what they will find there.

POINTS OF DISTINCTION

However an example of poor language choice appears in the about page of the site there is a section called points of distinction, which is a very vague phrase and not common language. This vagueness will lead the user to not be sure of where or what the page would lead to. Clicking on the link leads the user to a page of the different field of study colleges at the school. For this, points of distinction is not a common phrase that is used to describe the different fields of study. This unusual use of language will result in the user completely overlooking this section out of confusion and they will not be able to look up whichever field of study they are interested in.

**3. USER CONTROL AND FREEDOM**

*"Users often choose system functions by mistake and will need a clearly marked "emergency exit" to leave the unwanted state without having to go through an extended dialogue. Support undo and redo."* ***– Jakob Nielsen***

Often while navigating a large website, a user can venture a long ways from where they began. They might click on something by mistake along the way, so it’s important for them to have an exit whenever they get lost. The user needs to feel like they are in control of their journey into a website in order for them to feel comfortable and continue to use it.

CLASS REGISTRATION

-Clicking on the class registration in the student section will take the use to a completely different website. As a novice user I was lead on to believe that this would lead to a list of classes. The link actually leads to an entirely different web page that can only be accessed by current students. Seeing this was a mistake I tried to click on the schools logo. Unfortunately, this logo was just for display and had no link. As a last resort, I tried to hit my browsers back button. This however did not take me back to the main site but actually just refreshed the page I was on. Only after this did I realize that the link back to the main site was in a small text paragraph above the student login. This was very easy to overlook, as it was not completely obvious to the user. The emergency exit should be so obvious to the user that it should be one of the first things they see on the page. This exit however was hard to find even in plain site.

LOST IN ATHLETICS

Athletics seems to be a major section on the GSU site since it is on the main navigation bar. Clicking the link will take the user to the university’s own sports site, which seems to branch away from the main website since it seems to have its own brand. This is fine and all but what happens when the user wants to go back to the main website? The logo on the sports site is different from the main logo, however it still says “Georgia State” so a user will be inclined to click it to return home. The link however leads to the home for the athletic site, not the main GSU site. It seems that the site has lead the user to a dead end with no way to return home. Only after thoroughly searching through the site do we find a link back to the main home page. Instead of being on top of the page where the user can instantly see it, the link is at the bottom of the page on the footer. The inconsistency of the home button is further addressed below.

**4. CONSISTENCY AND STANDARDS**

*"Users should not have to wonder whether different words, situations, or actions mean the same thing. Follow platform conventions."* ***– Jakob Nielsen***

A professional site will present itself in a consistent manner that is present throughout its presentation. The words and information are consistent to the user so they know when something is the same and when something is different. The user wants to know that they are on one complete site rather than being lead of to some unknown territory.

THE EVER CHANGING HOME BUTTON

-Once a user leaves the home page, a button for the home page appears on the navigation bar. However this button is unnoticeable and easy to miss. This is due to the fact that each subsequent site has a logo of the university next to the name of that section of the site. Usually when the user sees something like this they will click it to return to the home screen. However when the user clicks on the logo they go nowhere since the link on that logo goes to the particular page the user is on. (see picture: For example, the logo is shown next to the page title ‘Research’. However the logo is not its own clickable link and is actually part of the link for the Research page). The problem here is that when a user first uses this site, they encounter a logo on the home page that leads them to the home page. When they see that same logo on different sections of the site, they are going to click on that logo and overlook the easy to miss home button that appears on the navigation bar.

THE INCONSISTENT NAVIGATION BAR

The navigation bar will change depending on where the user is in the site. When the user away from the main home page, the home button will appear on the navigation bar instead of being linked through the site logo. When the user reaches the academics page, a button for enrollment services will join the other buttons on the navigation bar. A good navigation bar should be consistent throughout a website so as to not add an extra stress onto the user when they are looking for a certain button that appears on the bar in one page and is gone in another.

SAME CONTENT DIFFERENT NAMES

-The site actually has duplicates of the same page under a different name. The undergraduates page has a section called ‘What can I study?’ This page contains information about the different degrees and majors that the college provides. There is also a degrees and majors page in the enrollment section of the site. This section however is actually called ‘Degrees and Majors’ and gives the same exact information. The fact that this is the same page under a different name could cause some users to get confused and annoyed at seeing the same information again for the sake of lazy programming.

**5. ERROR PREVENTION**

*"Even better than good error messages is a careful design which prevents a problem from occurring in the first place. Either eliminate error-prone conditions or check for them and present users with a confirmation option before they commit to the action."* ***– Jakob Nielsen***

A user needs to be well informed when they have made a mistake. An even better site will go out of its way to prevent a mistake from ever even happening. It will guide the user step by step whenever the user needs to provide some form of input. When the user does make a mistake, they will be clearly informed of what they did wrong and what they need to do in order to fix their mistake.

APPLICATION FORM GUIDANCE

-When filling out the college application form, the system will indicate to the user when their information is right or wrong. For example, if the email provided in incomplete, the text box will turn red and will tell the user that they need to input a valid email address. Once an area is correctly filled, it will turn green to indicate that the information provided is acceptable.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU GOT BACK?

Once the user leaves the page but then decides to hit the back button to return to the application page, they will find that most of the information they filled out will still be there. With the exception of the user’s password, everything that the user had inputted into the text boxes will appear. However upon doing so, the correctly filled text boxes will be black and will not appear to be green to indicate correct information. This may confuse the user into thinking that the information they had previously put in may have been changed or is incorrect.

**6. RECOGNITION RATHER THAN RECALL**

*"Minimize the user's memory load by making objects, actions, and options visible. The user should not have to remember information from one part of the dialogue to another. Instructions for use of the system should be visible or easily retrievable whenever appropriate."* ***– Jakob Nielsen***

We expect a handle when we see a door. It is a construct ubiquitous among entrances to rooms that we have come to take for granted. With the help of intuitive interfaces on everyday objects and devices, we are capable of navigating our world without unnecesary effort and unpleasant interruptions. Similarly, our experiences on a website are determined largely by how organized and labeled a website’s contents are. Intuitive elements such as color coding, link placement, consistency can greatly streamline the user experience.

Inconsistency in Visual Layout

Among the links on the central navigation bar, there are only two that don’t lead to stand-alone websites. While this isn’t a problem in itself, some of the off-site pages aesthetically look similar to the home page while others look unexpectedly different. That being said, the discrepancy forces users to switch gears in adjusting to the different websites as they navigate the website. The Georgia State University logo is on the top left for most, if not all the pages of the website. However, sometimes it takes the user back to the “main” homepage, gsu.edu, and other times it leads the user to the home page specific to the standalone website of the user.

Lack of Differentiation in Link Clusters

Given the immense volume of white text links that appear upon hovering over a nag bar link, the bold white headers combined with the spacing are helpful in helping the user focus on the specific pages of their interest. The user might further benefit from color coding among the sections as well.

Lack of Breadcrumbs

The Georgia State University website lacks breadcrumbs. Particularly for a website of this scale, it is paramount that the user has a sense of location. Breadcrumbs allow users to conveniently recognize how deep they are into the hierarchy of the website. The links that they provide also allow them to return to a specific level at any point in time. The lack of breadcrumbs combined with the inconsistencies in visual layout makes navigating this website an offhand gamble in attaining needed information.

NEEDLESS SLIDER ARROWS

Wonderful! Picture sliders are generally effective, attractive ways to drive users into the depths of the site. Clicking the arrows generally changes the picture. Here at GSU, they change the entire page. Upon hovering over the right arrow, the user is taken from the home page to an entirely new page for Admissions and Campus Life. This page isn’t even a part of the Admissions page that the user can access from the nav bar on the top. The slider arrows are misleading and the website would most definitely benefit if they were taken out.

**7. FLEXIBILITY & EFFICIENCY OF USE**

*"Accelerators -- unseen by the novice user -- may often speed up the interaction for the expert user such that the system can cater to both inexperienced and experienced users. Allow users to tailor frequent actions."* ***– Jakob Nielsen***

The curious parent. The prospective freshman. For a website of this scale, it is a complex task to organize its countless pages in an intuitive manner. Nevertheless, the designers of the website must make their best effort to optimize the browsing experience in a way that is compatible with its users regardless of their demographic.

LACKLUSTER USER MOBILITY

While navigating through the website for the most likely purposes of exploring the various colleges and finding information regarding the admissions process and whatnot, the two navigation bars seem pretty reliable in giving users mobility throughout the site. However, the moment the user is led to a “standalone” website through one of the navigation bar links, there is no visually represented way to return to the main gsu.edu page.

SCROLL UP TO SEARCH

The search bar is present on most of the pages throughout the website on the top right. This is a useful function for people who are looking for something specific. However, it can become an ordeal in itself in sifting through entry upon entry of search results and reading through cryptic link descriptions.

**8. AESTHETIC & MINIMALIST DESIGN**

*"Dialogues should not contain information which is irrelevant or rarely needed. Every extra unit of information in a dialogue competes with the relevant units of information and diminishes their relative visibility."* ***– Jakob Nielsen***

KISS. Keep it simple, stupid. A phrase representative of minimalism and a mantra of good design, it can be practically applied to any website. Ensuring important information is visible, organized, and free of being cluttered with the inessential is vital in providing an aesthetically pleasing and comfortable user experience.

SWEEPING VISUAL INCONSISTENCIES

Upon clicking one of the navigation bar links on the home page, chances are users will be redirected to a stand-alone home page. No longer are the links gsu.edu/\_\_\_\_, and no longer are the pages laid out the same. There are shifts in the position of the navigation bars, font, background colors, text color, header-body layouts and the like. In essence, there are moments where one may feel as if he or she stumbled upon a different website entirely. The lack of breadcrumbs only contributes to a vulnerability for the user to feel overwhelmed and loss in seconds. Intentional or not, all of these aspects lead to a disjointed, disruptive experience for the user.

ARBITRARY COLOR

The GSU website overall makes a particular effort in staying true to its red, white, and blue color scheme. Yet upon hovering over an image, the most disorienting shades of color - muted blue, turquoise, purple - cover the image. This adds to an already cluttered general layout, with a flurry of images and text coming at the user on many of the pages intended to wow the user.

DISORIENTING HOME PAGE

The animated woman, placed smack dab in the center as the focus of the home page, sticks out like a rodeo clown in a Zen Monastery in the midst of the flat, simple design. It is disorienting, distracting, and somewhat disturbing. It serves no tangible purpose for the average prospective freshman and parent, yet so much of the page’s estate is dedicated to this distraction.

**9. ERROR RECOVERY**

*"Error messages should be expressed in plain language (no codes), precisely indicate the problem, and constructively suggest a solution."* ***– Jakob Nielsen***

Dead ends are the bane of any webpage user. 404’s can feel like a slap in the face and search queries can be frustrating when they don’t turn up what the user wants. For a website of this scale, it is hard to keep the entirety of the hundreds, if not thousands of pages to watertight from such problems. However, there are many small tools and links a website can implement for users to recover from the event of an error.

GOOGLE BASED SEARCH

The Google-based search is effective in function. Typos are corrected with suggestions, and naturally Googling is a trusted search engine in itself. However, it can be disruptive in the user experience as it displaces the user from the more agreeable layout of the website to a rather bleak Google search results page filled with blue underlined links and cryptic descriptions.

**10. HELP & DOCUMENTATION**

*"Even though it is better if the system can be used without documentation, it may be necessary to provide help and documentation. Any such information should be easy to search, focused on the user's task, list concrete steps to be carried out, and not be too large."* ***– Jakob Nielsen***

Help and documentation are definitely of great benefit to a massive website such as that of Georgia State University, given its breadth and depth of the information it has to offer.

FAQ?

Frankly, there is no apparent FAQ or help section. There does happen to be a sort of basic site map in the footer, but that is the extent of it. This does not bode well for a page of this scale.