

CHAPTER

# 1

# Don't make me think!

KRUG'S FIRST LAW OF USABILITY

People often ask me:

“What’s the most important thing I should do if I want to make sure my Web site is easy to use?”

The answer is simple. It’s not “Nothing important should ever be more than two clicks away,” or “Speak the user’s language,” or even “Be consistent.”

It’s...

## **“Don’t make me think!”**

I’ve been telling people for years that this is my first law of usability. And the more Web pages I look at, the more convinced I become.

It’s the overriding principle—the ultimate tie breaker when deciding whether something works or doesn’t in a Web design. If you have room in your head for only one usability rule, make this the one.<sup>1</sup>

It means that as far as is humanly possible, when I look at a Web page it should be self-evident. Obvious. Self-explanatory.

I should be able to “get it”—what it is and how to use it—without expending any effort thinking about it.

Just how self-evident are we talking about?

Well, self-evident enough, for instance, that your next door neighbor, who has no interest in the subject of your site and who barely knows how to use the Back button, could look at your site’s Home page and say, “Oh, it’s a \_\_\_\_.” (With any luck, she’ll say, “Oh, it’s a \_\_\_\_ *Neat*.” But that’s another subject.)

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<sup>1</sup> *Actually, there is a close contender: “Get rid of half the words on each page, then get rid of half of what’s left.” But that one gets its own chapter later.*

Think of it this way:

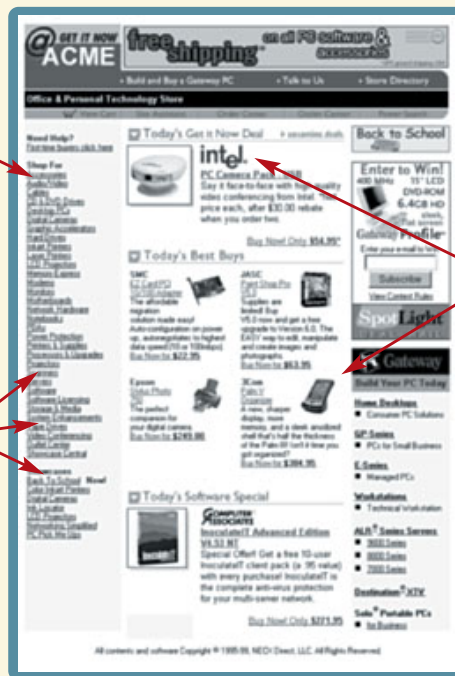
When I'm looking at a page that doesn't make me think, all the thought balloons over my head say things like "OK, there's the \_\_\_\_\_. And that's a \_\_\_\_\_. And there's the thing that I want."

## NOT THINKING

OK. This looks like the product categories...



Memory,  
Modems...  
There it is:  
Monitors.  
*Click*



...and these are today's special deals.



But when I'm looking at a page that makes me think, all the thought balloons over my head have question marks in them.

THINKING

Hmm. Pretty busy. Where should I start?

Hmm. Why did they call it that?

Can I click on that?

Is that the navigation? Or is *that* it over there?

Why did they put that *there*?

Those two links seem like they're the same thing. Are they really?

When you're creating a site, your job is to get rid of the question marks.

## Things that make us think

All kinds of things on a Web page can make us stop and think unnecessarily. Take names of things, for example. Typical culprits are cute or clever names, marketing-induced names, company-specific names, and unfamiliar technical names.




For instance, suppose a friend tells me that XYZ Corp is looking to hire someone with my exact qualifications, so I head off to their Web site. As I scan the page for something to click, the name they've chosen for their job listings section makes a difference.

< OBVIOUS		REQUIRES THOUGHT >
<p>Jobs! <i>Click</i></p>  <p>Jobs</p>	<p>Hmm. <i>[Milliseconds of thought]</i> Jobs. <i>Click</i></p>  <p>Employment Opportunities</p>	<p>Hmm. Could be Jobs. But it sounds like more than that. Should I click or keep looking?</p>  <p>Job-o-Rama</p>

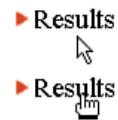
Note that these things are always on a continuum somewhere between “Obvious to everybody” and “Truly obscure,” and there are always tradeoffs involved.

For instance, “Jobs” may sound too undignified for XYZ Corp, or they may be locked into “Job-o-Rama” because of some complicated internal politics, or because that’s what it’s always been called in their company newsletter. My main point is that the tradeoffs should usually be skewed further in the direction of “Obvious” than we care to think.

Another needless source of question marks over people’s heads is links and buttons that aren’t obviously clickable. As a user, I should never have to devote a millisecond of thought to whether things are clickable—or not.

< OBVIOUSLY CLICKABLE		REQUIRES THOUGHT >
<p><i>Click</i></p>  <p>Results</p>	<p>Hmm.  <i>[Milliseconds of thought]</i>            I guess that's a button.  <i>Click</i></p>  <p>Results</p>	<p>Hmm.            Is that a button?</p>  <p>▶ Results</p>

You may be thinking, “Well, it doesn’t take much effort to figure out whether something’s clickable. If you point the cursor at it, it’ll change from an arrow to a pointing hand. What’s the big deal?”

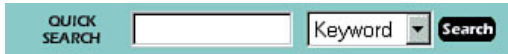


The point is, when we’re using the Web every question mark adds to our cognitive workload, distracting our attention from the task at hand. The distractions may be slight but they add up, and sometimes it doesn’t take much to throw us.

And as a rule, people don’t *like* to puzzle over how to do things. The fact that the people who built the site didn’t care enough to make things obvious—and easy—can erode our confidence in the site and its publishers.

Another example: On most bookstore sites, before I search for a book I first have to think about *how* I want to search.<sup>2</sup>

## MOST BOOKSTORE SITES




Let's see. "Quick Search."  
That must be the same as  
"Search," right?




Do I have to click on that drop-down  
menu thing?

All I know about the book is that it's  
by Tom Clancy. Is Clancy a keyword?

(What *is* a keyword, anyway?)




I guess I have to use the menu.

**Clicks on the arrow**




"Title. Author. Keyword."

OK. I want "Author."

**Clicks "Author"**




**Types "Tom Clancy"**

**Clicks "Search"**

Granted, most of this "mental chatter" takes place in a fraction of a second, but you can see that it's a pretty noisy process. Even something as apparently innocent as jazzing up a well-known name (from "Search" to "Quick Search") can generate another question mark.

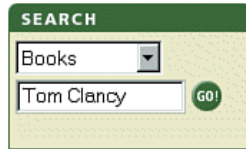
<sup>2</sup> This was still true when I checked about a year ago. Only now, in 2005, have most of them finally improved.

Amazon.com, on the other hand, doesn't even mention the Author-Title-Keyword distinction. They just look at what you type and do whatever makes the most sense.

## AMAZON.COM



OK. "Search books for \_\_\_\_."



**Types "Tom Clancy"**  
**Clicks "Go"**

After all, why should I have to think about *how* I want to search? And even worse, why should I have to think about how the site's search engine wants me to phrase the question, as though it were some ornery troll guarding a bridge? ("You forgot to say 'May I?'")

I could list dozens of other things that visitors to a site shouldn't spend their time thinking about, like:

- > Where am I?
- > Where should I begin?
- > Where did they put \_\_\_\_?
- > What are the most important things on this page?
- > Why did they call it *that*?

But the last thing you need is another checklist to add to your stack of Web design checklists. The most important thing you can do is to just understand the basic principle of eliminating question marks. If you do, you'll begin to notice all the things that make *you* think while you're using the Web, and eventually you'll learn to recognize and avoid them in the pages you're building.



## You can't make everything self-evident

Your goal should be for each page to be self-evident, so that just by looking at it the average user<sup>3</sup> will know what it is and how to use it.

Sometimes, though, particularly if you're doing something original or groundbreaking or something very complicated, you have to settle for *self-explanatory*. On a self-explanatory page, it takes a *little* thought to “get it”—but only a little. The appearance of things, their well-chosen names, the layout of the page, and the *small* amounts of carefully crafted text should all work together to create near-instantaneous recognition.

If you can't make a page self-evident, you at least need to make it self-explanatory.

## Why is this so important?

Oddly enough, not for the reason you usually hear cited:



On the Internet, the competition is always just one click away, so if you frustrate users they'll head somewhere else.

This is *sometimes* true, but you'd be surprised at how long some people will tough it out at sites that frustrate them. Many people who encounter problems with a site tend to blame themselves and not the site.

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<sup>3</sup> *The actual Average User is kept in a hermetically sealed vault at the International Bureau of Standards in Geneva. We'll get around to talking about the best way to think about the “average user” eventually.*

The fact is, your site may not have been that easy to find in the first place and visitors may not know of an alternative. The prospect of starting over isn't always that attractive.

And there's also the "I've waited ten minutes for this bus already, so I may as well hang in a little longer" phenomenon. Besides, who's to say that the competition will be any less frustrating?

## So why, then?

Making pages self-evident is like having good lighting in a store: it just makes everything *seem* better. Using a site that doesn't make us think about unimportant things feels effortless, whereas puzzling over things that don't matter to us tends to sap our energy and enthusiasm—and time.

But as you'll see in the next chapter when we examine how we *really* use the Web, the main reason why it's important not to make me think is that most people are going to spend far less time looking at the pages we design than we'd like to think.

As a result, if Web pages are going to be effective, they have to work most of their magic at a glance. And the best way to do this is to create pages that are self-evident, or at least self-explanatory.