

# Steve Krug



# DON'T MAKE ME THINK

*Revisited*

and Mobile

Human Sense Approach to Web Usability

## **Don't Make Me Think, Revisited**

### **A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability**

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CHAPTER

# 1

# Don't make me think!

KRUG'S FIRST LAW OF USABILITY

*Michael, why are the drapes open?*

—KAY CORLEONE IN *THE GODFATHER, PART II*

**P**eople often ask me:

“What’s the most important thing I should do if I want to make sure my site or app 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 “Be consistent.”

It’s...

## “Don’t make me think!”

For as long I can remember, I’ve been telling people that this is my first law of usability.

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

For instance, 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.

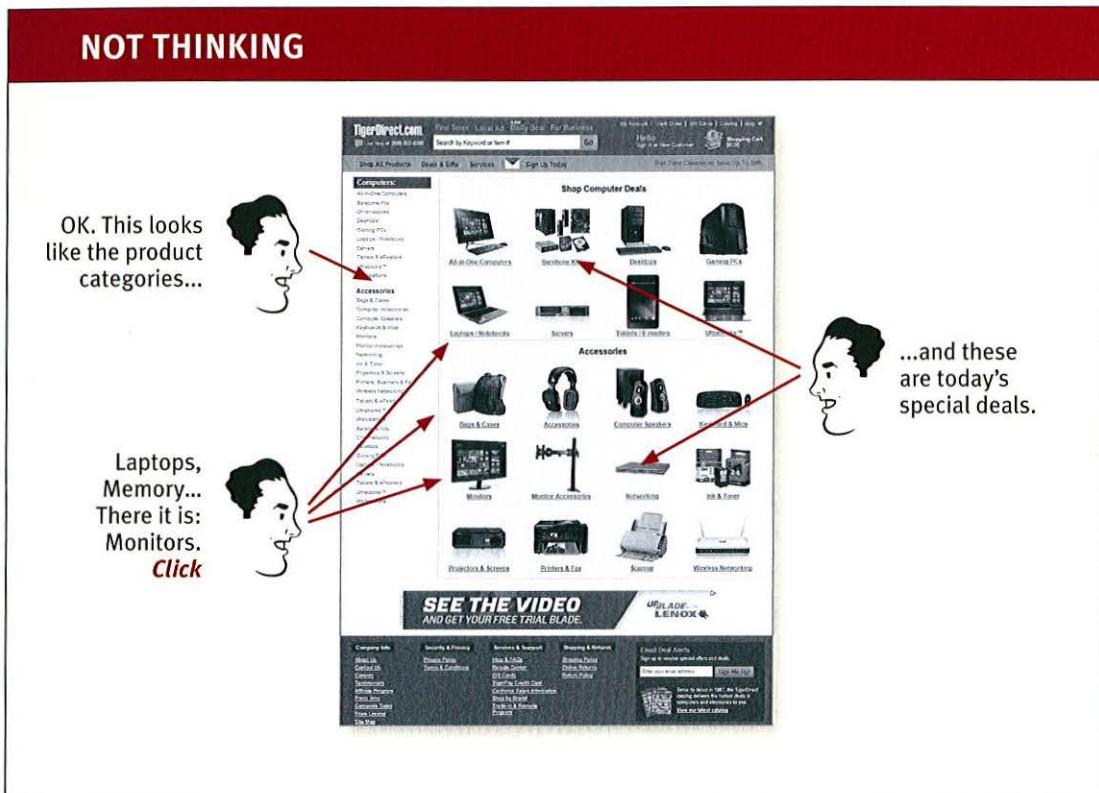
Just how self-evident are we talking about?

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 Home page and say, “Oh, it’s a \_\_\_\_.” (With any luck, she’ll say, “Oh, it’s a \_\_\_\_\_. Great!” But that’s another subject.)

## CHAPTER 1

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."



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?



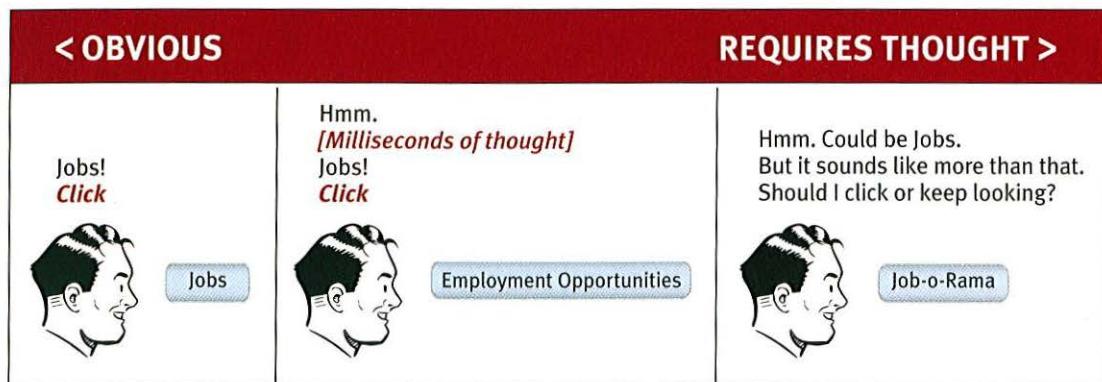
When you're creating a site, your job is to get rid of the question marks.



## Things that make us think

All kinds of things on a Web page can make us stop and think unnecessarily. Take names, 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.



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.<sup>1</sup> My main point is that the tradeoffs should usually be skewed further in the direction of “Obvious” than we think.

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<sup>1</sup> There's almost always a plausible rationale—and a good, if misguided, intention—behind every usability flaw.

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>Hmm. [<i>Milliseconds of thought</i>] I guess that's the link. <b>Click</b></p> 	<p>Hmm. Does that do anything?</p> 

You may be thinking, “Well, it really doesn’t matter that much. If you click or tap it and nothing happens, what’s the big deal?”

The point is that 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, especially if it’s something we do all the time like deciding what to click on.

And as a rule, people don’t *like* to puzzle over how to do things. They enjoy puzzles in their place—when they want to be entertained or diverted or challenged—but not when they’re trying to find out what time their dry cleaner closes. 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 the organization behind it.

## CHAPTER 1

Another example from a common task: booking a flight.

FROM	TO
City or Airport <input type="text"/>	City or Airport <input type="text"/>
Depart Date <input type="text"/>	Return Date <input type="text"/>



Let's see. "City or Airport."  
I'll put in the city names.

FROM	TO
bos <input type="text"/>	City or Airport <input type="text"/>
Boston, MA, US (BOS) <input type="button"/>	Return Date <input type="text"/>



*Types "bos"*  
Oh, good. It knows Boston.  
*Picks Boston from the dropdown*

FROM	TO
BOS <input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Depart Date <input type="text"/>	Return Date <input type="text"/>



But why does it just put BOS  
after I pick Boston?

FROM	TO
BOS <input type="text"/>	ny <input type="text"/>
12/17/2013 <input type="text"/>	12/19/2013 <input type="text"/>



I'm sure it'll know "ny" ...  
*Types "ny" and fills in dates,  
then clicks "Find Flights"*

Please enter a valid 'TO' City or Airport code.

FROM	TO
BOS <input type="text"/>	hy <input type="text"/>
12/17/2013 <input type="text"/>	12/19/2013 <input type="text"/>



Why doesn't it recognize  
New York?

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, with a lot of question marks. And then there's a puzzling error at the end.

Another site just takes what I type and gives me choices that make sense, so it's hard to go wrong.

From	To
bos	<input type="text"/> City or Airport
BOS - Boston Logan International - Boston, MA	
BOS - [Amtrak] South Station, Boston, Massachusetts	
BON - [Amtrak] North Station, Boston, Massachusetts	



*Starts typing "bos" and gets a list of choices*

From	To
BOS - Boston Logan Inter	<input type="text"/> ny
NYC - New York City, NY (Area)	
NYO - Skavsta - Stigtomta, Sweden	
NYU - Bagan - Bagan, Myanmar	



*Starts typing "ny" and gets a list of choices*

From	To
BOS - Boston Logan Inter	NYC - New York City, NY
Depart	Return
Dec 06	Dec 08



Good.

No question marks. No mental chatter. And no errors.

I could list dozens of things that users 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?
- Is that an ad or part of the site?

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

## You can't make everything self-evident

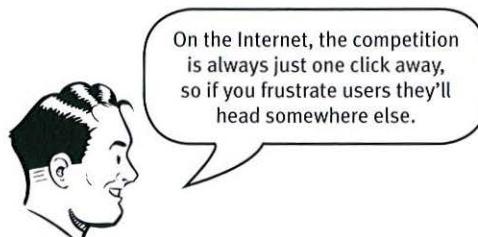
Your goal should be for each page or screen to be self-evident, so that just by looking at it the average user<sup>2</sup> will know what it is and how to use it. In other words, they'll "get it" without having to think about it.

Sometimes, though, particularly if you're doing something original or groundbreaking or something that's inherently 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 (like size, color, and layout), their well-chosen names, and the *small* amounts of carefully crafted text should all work together to create a sense of nearly effortless understanding.

Here's the rule: If you can't make something self-evident, you at least need to make it self-explanatory.

## Why is all of this so important?

Oddly enough, not for the reason people usually cite:



It's true that there's a lot of competition out there. Especially in things like mobile apps, where there are often many readily available (and equally attractive) alternatives, and the cost of changing horses is usually negligible (99 cents or even "Free").

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<sup>2</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.*

But it's not *always* true that people are fickle. For instance:

- They may have no choice but to stick with it, if it's their only option (e.g., a company intranet, or their bank's mobile app, or the only site that sells the rattan they're looking for).
- You'd be surprised at how long some people will tough it out on sites that frustrate them, often blaming themselves and not the site. 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 every page or screen 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 imagine.

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.



CHAPTER

# 2

# How we *really* use the Web

SCANNING, SATISFICING, AND MUDDLING THROUGH

*Why are things always in the last place you look for them?  
Because you stop looking when you find them!*

—CHILDREN'S RIDDLE

# I

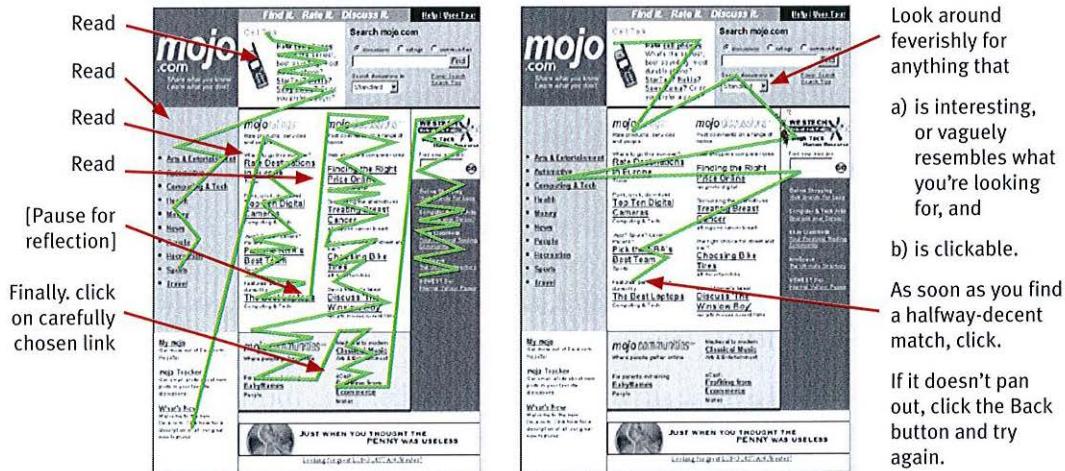
In all the time I've spent watching people use the Web, the thing that has struck me most is the difference between how we think people use Web sites and how they actually use them.

When we're creating sites, we act as though people are going to pore over each page, reading all of our carefully crafted text, figuring out how we've organized things, and weighing their options before deciding which link to click.

What they actually do most of the time (if we're lucky) is *glance* at each new page, scan *some* of the text, and click on the first link that catches their interest or vaguely resembles the thing they're looking for. There are almost always large parts of the page that they don't even look at.

We're thinking "great literature" (or at least "product brochure"), while the user's reality is much closer to "billboard going by at 60 miles an hour."

## WHAT WE DESIGN FOR...      THE REALITY...



As you might imagine, it's a little more complicated than this, and it depends on the kind of page, what the user is trying to do, how much of a hurry she's in, and so on. But this simplistic view is much closer to reality than most of us imagine.

It makes sense that we picture a more rational, attentive user when we're designing pages. It's only natural to assume that everyone uses the Web the same way we do, and—like everyone else—we tend to think that our own behavior is much more orderly and sensible than it really is.

If you want to design effective Web pages, though, you have to learn to live with three facts about real-world Web use.

#### FACT OF LIFE #1:

## We don't read pages. We scan them.

One of the very few well-documented facts about Web use is that people tend to spend very little time *reading* most Web pages. Instead, we scan (or skim) them, looking for words or phrases that catch our eye.

The exception, of course, is pages that contain documents like news stories, reports, or product descriptions, where people will revert to reading—but even then, they're often alternating between reading and scanning.

Why do we scan?

- **We're usually on a mission.** Most Web use involves trying to get something done, and usually done quickly. As a result, Web users tend to act like sharks: They have to keep moving, or they'll die. We just don't have the time to read any more than necessary.
- **We know we don't need to read everything.** On most pages, we're really only interested in a fraction of what's on the page. We're just looking for the bits that match our interests or the task at hand, and the rest of it is irrelevant. Scanning is how we find the relevant bits.
- **We're good at it.** It's a basic skill: When you learn to read, you also learn to scan. We've been scanning newspapers, magazines, and books—or if you're under 25, probably reddit, Tumblr, or Facebook—all our lives to find the parts we're interested in, and we know that it works.

The net effect is a lot like Gary Larson's classic Far Side cartoon about the difference between what we say to dogs and what they hear. In the cartoon, the dog (named Ginger) appears to be listening intently as her owner gives her a serious talking-to about staying out of the garbage. But from the dog's point of view, all he's saying is "blah blah GINGER blah blah blah GINGER blah blah blah."

What we see when we look at a page depends on what we have in mind, and it's usually just a fraction of what's there.

## WHAT DESIGNERS BUILD...

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## WHAT USERS SEE...

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- Exclusive travel deals for biztravel.com members



I want to buy a ticket.

**biztravel.com®**

**Track My Miles**

- Tracking of your points and miles



How do I check my frequent flyer miles?

Like Ginger, we tend to focus on words and phrases that seem to match (a) the task at hand or (b) our current or ongoing personal interests. And of course, (c) the trigger words that are hardwired into our nervous systems, like "Free," "Sale," and "Sex," and our own name.

**FACT OF LIFE #2:**

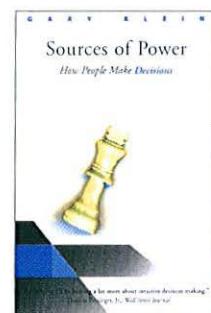
## We don't make optimal choices. We satisfice.

When we're designing pages, we tend to assume that users will scan the page, consider all of the available options, and choose the best one.

In reality, though, most of the time we *don't* choose the best option—we choose the *first reasonable option*, a strategy known as satisficing.<sup>1</sup> As soon as we find a link that seems like it might lead to what we're looking for, there's a very good chance that we'll click it.

I'd observed this behavior for years, but its significance wasn't really clear to me until I read Gary Klein's book *Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions*.

Klein spent many years studying naturalistic decision making: how people like firefighters, pilots, chessmasters, and nuclear power plant operators make high-stakes decisions in real situations with time pressure, vague goals, limited information, and changing conditions.



Klein's team of observers went into their first study (of field commanders at fire scenes) with the generally accepted model of rational decision making: Faced with a problem, a person gathers information, identifies the possible solutions, and chooses the best one. They started with the hypothesis that because of the high stakes and extreme time pressure, fire captains would be able to compare only two options, an assumption they thought was conservative.

As it turned out, the fire commanders didn't compare *any* options. They took the first reasonable plan that came to mind and did a quick mental test for possible problems. If they didn't find any, they had their plan of action.

<sup>1</sup> Economist Herbert Simon coined the term (a cross between satisfying and sufficing) in Models of Man: Social and Rational (Wiley, 1957).

So why don't Web users look for the best choice?

- **We're usually in a hurry.** And as Klein points out, "Optimizing is hard, and it takes a long time. Satisficing is more efficient."
- **There's not much of a penalty for guessing wrong.** Unlike firefighting, the penalty for guessing wrong on a Web site is usually only a click or two of the Back button, making satisficing an effective strategy. (Back is the most-used button in Web browsers.)
- **Weighing options may not improve our chances.** On poorly designed sites, putting effort into making the best choice doesn't really help. You're usually just as well off going with your first guess and using the Back button if it doesn't work out.
- **Guessing is more fun.** It's less work than weighing options, and if you guess right, it's faster. And it introduces an element of chance—the pleasant possibility of running into something surprising and good.

Of course, this is not to say that users never weigh options before they click. It depends on things like their frame of mind, how pressed they are for time, and how much confidence they have in the site.

#### FACT OF LIFE #3:

## We don't figure out how things work. We muddle through.

One of the things that becomes obvious as soon as you do any usability testing—whether you're testing Web sites, software, or household appliances—is the extent to which people use things all the time without understanding how they work, or with completely wrong-headed ideas about how they work.

Faced with any sort of technology, very few people take the time to read instructions. Instead, we forge ahead and muddle through, making up our own vaguely plausible stories about what we're doing and why it works.

It often reminds me of the scene at the end of *The Prince and the Pauper* where the real prince discovers that the look-alike pauper has been using the Great Seal of England as a nutcracker in his absence. (It makes perfect sense—to him, the seal is just this great big, heavy chunk of metal.)

And the fact is, we get things done that way. I've seen lots of people use software, Web sites, and consumer products effectively in ways that are nothing like what the designers intended.

Take the Web browser, for instance—a crucial part of Internet use. To people who build Web sites, it's an application that you use to view Web pages. But if you ask users what a browser is, a surprisingly large percentage will say something like "It's what I use to search...to find things" or "It's the search engine." Try it yourself: ask some family members what a Web browser is. You may be surprised.

Many people use the Web extensively without knowing that they're using a browser. What they know is you type something in a box and stuff appears.<sup>2</sup> But it doesn't matter to them: They're muddling through and using the thing successfully.

And muddling through is not limited to beginners. Even technically savvy users often have surprising gaps in their understanding of how things work. (I wouldn't be surprised if even Mark Zuckerberg and Sergey Brin have some bits of technology in their lives that they use by muddling through.)

Why does this happen?

- **It's not important to us.** For most of us, it doesn't matter to us whether we understand how things work, as long as we can use them. It's not for lack of intelligence, but for lack of caring. It's just not important to us.<sup>3</sup>
- **If we find something that works, we stick to it.** Once we find something that works—no matter how badly—we tend not to look for a better way. We'll use a better way if we stumble across one, but we seldom look for one.



*The Prince and the Pauper* (Classics Illustrated)

<sup>2</sup> Usually a box with the word "Google" next to it. A lot of people think Google is the Internet.

<sup>3</sup> Web developers often have a particularly hard time understanding—or even believing—that people might feel this way, since they themselves are usually keenly interested in how things work.

It's always interesting to watch designers and developers observe their first usability test. The first time they see a user click on something completely inappropriate, they're surprised. (For instance, when the user ignores a nice big fat "Software" button in the navigation bar, saying something like, "Well, I'm looking for software, so I guess I'd click here on 'Cheap Stuff' because cheap is always good.") The user may even find what he's looking for eventually, but by then the people watching don't know whether to be happy or not.

The second time it happens, they're yelling "Just click on 'Software'!" The third time, you can see them thinking: "Why are we even bothering?"

And it's a good question: If people manage to muddle through so much, does it really matter whether they "get it"? The answer is that it matters a great deal because while muddling through may work sometimes, it tends to be inefficient and error-prone.

On the other hand, if users "get it":

- There's a much better chance that they'll find what they're looking for, which is good for them and for you.
- There's a better chance that they'll understand the full range of what your site has to offer—not just the parts that they stumble across.
- You have a better chance of steering them to the parts of your site that you want them to see.
- They'll feel smarter and more in control when they're using your site, which will bring them back. You can get away with a site that people muddle through only until someone builds one down the street that makes them feel smart.

## If life gives you lemons...

By now you may be thinking (given this less than rosy picture of your audience and how they use the Web), "Why don't I just get a job at the local 7-Eleven? At least there my efforts *might* be appreciated."

So, what's a girl to do?

I think the answer is simple: If your audience is going to act like you're designing billboards, then design great billboards.

# 3

# Billboard Design 101

DESIGNING FOR SCANNING, NOT READING

*If you / Don't know / Whose signs / These are You  
can't have / Driven very far / Burma-Shave!*

—SEQUENCE OF ROADSIDE BILLBOARDS PROMOTING  
SHAVING CREAM, CIRCA 1935

# F

aced with the fact that your users are whizzing by, there are some important things you can do to make sure they see and understand as much of what they need to know—and of what you *want* them to know—as possible:

- Take advantage of conventions
- Create effective visual hierarchies
- Break pages up into clearly defined areas
- Make it obvious what's clickable
- Eliminate distractions
- Format content to support scanning

## Conventions are your friends

One of the best ways to make almost anything easier to grasp in a hurry is to follow the existing conventions—the widely used or standardized design patterns. For example:

- **Stop signs.** Given how crucial it is that drivers see and recognize them at a glance, at a distance, in all kinds of weather and lighting conditions, it's a really good thing that all stop signs look the same. (Some of the specifics may vary from country to country, but overall they're remarkably consistent around the world.)

The convention includes a distinctive shape, the word for “Stop,” a highly visible color that contrasts with most natural surroundings, and standardized size, height, and location.

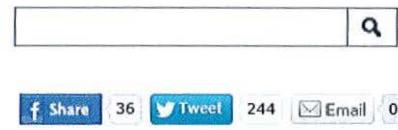


- **Controls in cars.** Imagine trying to drive a rental car if the gas pedal wasn't always to the right of the brake pedal, or the horn wasn't always on the steering wheel.

In the past twenty years, many conventions for Web pages have evolved. As users, we've come to have a lot of expectations about

- **Where things will be located on a page.** For example, users expect the logo identifying the site to be in the top-left corner (at least in countries where reading is left-to-right) and the primary navigation to be across the top or down the left side.
- **How things work.** For example, almost all sites that sell products use the metaphor of a shopping cart and a very similar series of forms for specifying things like your method of payment, your shipping address, and so on.
- **How things look.** Many elements have a standardized appearance, like the icon that tells you it's a link to a video, the search icon, and the social networking sharing options.

Conventions have also evolved for different *kinds* of sites—commerce, colleges, blogs, restaurants, movies, and many more—since all the sites in each category have to solve the same set of problems.



SomeSlightlyIrregular.com



cityislandmovie.com

These conventions didn't just come out of thin air: They all started life as somebody's bright idea. If an idea works well enough, other sites imitate it and eventually enough people have seen it in enough places that it needs no explanation.

When applied well, Web conventions make life easier for users because they don't have to constantly figure out what things are and how they're supposed to work as they go from site to site.

One problem with conventions, though: Designers are often reluctant to take advantage of them.

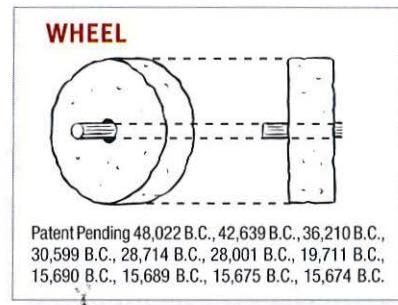
Faced with the prospect of following a convention, there's a great temptation for designers to try reinventing the wheel instead, largely because they feel (not incorrectly) that they've been hired to do something new and different, not the same old thing. Not to mention the fact that praise from peers, awards, and high-profile job offers are rarely based on criteria like "best use of conventions."

Occasionally, time spent reinventing the wheel results in a revolutionary new rolling device. But usually it just amounts to time spent reinventing the wheel.

If you're going to innovate, you have to understand the value of what you're replacing (or as Dylan put it, "To live outside the law, you must be honest"), and it's easy to underestimate just how much value conventions provide. The classic example is custom scrollbars. Whenever a designer decides to create scrollbars from scratch—usually to make them prettier—the results almost always make it obvious that the designer never thought about how many hundreds or thousands of hours of fine tuning went into the evolution of the standard operating system scrollbars.



Want proof that conventions help? See how much you know about this page—even if you can't understand a word of it—just because it follows some conventions.



If you're not going to use an existing Web convention, you need to be sure that what you're replacing it with either (a) is so clear and self-explanatory that there's no learning curve—so it's as good as the convention, or (b) adds so much value that it's worth a small learning curve.

My recommendation: Innovate when you *know* you have a better idea, but take advantage of conventions when you don't.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not in any way trying to discourage creativity. I love innovative and original Web design.

One of my favorite examples is Harlem.org. The whole site is built around Art Kane's famous photo of 57 jazz musicians, taken on the steps of a brownstone in Harlem in August 1957. Instead of text links or menus, you use the photo to navigate the site.



Clicking on any area of the photo... identifies the people there and... lets you click on them to see their bios.

Not only is it innovative and fun, but it's easy to understand and use. And the creators were smart enough to understand that the fun might wear off after a while so they also included a more conventional category-based navigation.

A screenshot of a detailed biography page for a musician on the Harlem.org website. The page includes a portrait, the name "Milt Jackson", and a bio: "Milt Jackson was one of the best vibraphone players ever. He was born in 1919 in New Orleans, Louisiana. He began playing the vibraphone at the age of 12. In 1940, he moved to New York City and began performing with various bands, including Duke Ellington's. He became a member of the Count Basie Orchestra in 1945 and remained with them until 1952. After leaving Basie, he formed his own band and recorded several albums. He died in 1988 at the age of 69." Below the bio is a table of contents for the site.

You can also browse the musicians by name, instrument, or jazz style.

The rule of thumb is that you can—and *should*—be as creative and innovative as you want, and add as much aesthetic appeal as you can, *as long as you make sure it's still usable.*

And finally, a word about consistency.

You often hear consistency cited as an absolute good. People win a lot of design arguments just by saying “We can’t do that. It wouldn’t be consistent.”

Consistency *is* always a good thing to strive for within your site or app. If your navigation is always in the same place, for instance, I don’t have to think about it or waste time looking for it. But there will be cases where things will be clearer if you make them *slightly* inconsistent.

Here’s the rule to keep in mind:

#### CLARITY TRUMPS CONSISTENCY

If you can make something *significantly* clearer by making it *slightly* inconsistent, choose in favor of clarity.

## Create effective visual hierarchies

Another important way to make pages easy to grasp in a hurry is to make sure that the appearance of the things on the page—all of the visual cues—accurately portray the relationships between the things on the page: which things are most important, which things are similar, and which things are part of other things. In other words, each page should have a clear visual hierarchy.¶

Pages with a clear visual hierarchy have three traits:

- **The more important something is, the more prominent it is.** The most important elements are either larger, bolder, in a distinctive color, set off by more white space, or nearer the top of the page—or some combination of the above.

**Very important**

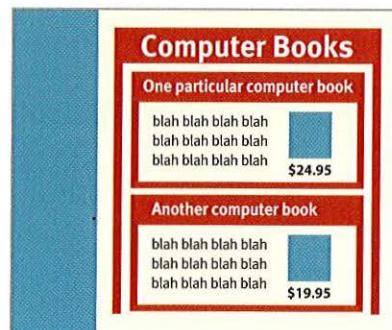
**A little less important**

Nowhere near as important

- **Things that are related logically are related visually.** For instance, you can show that things are similar by grouping them together under a heading, displaying them in the same visual style, or putting them all in a clearly defined area.

Books  
Music  
Movies  
Games

- **Things are “nested” visually to show what’s part of what.** For instance, a site section name (“Computer Books”) would appear above the titles of the individual books, reflecting the fact that the books are part of the section. And each book title in turn would span all the elements that make up the description of that book.



There's nothing new about visual hierarchies. Every newspaper page, for instance, uses prominence, grouping, and nesting to give us useful information about the contents of the page before we read a word. *This* picture goes with *this* story because they're both spanned by this headline. *This* story is the most important because it has the biggest headline and a prominent position on the page.

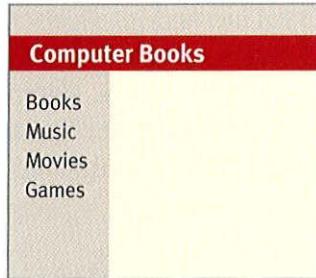


We all parse visual hierarchies every day, but it happens so quickly that the only time we're even vaguely aware that we're doing it is when we *can't* do it—when the visual cues (or absence of them) force us to think.

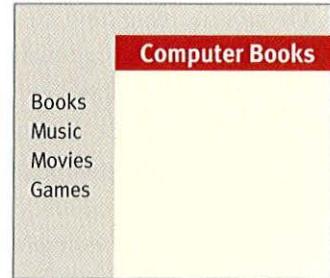
A good visual hierarchy saves us work by preprocessing the page for us, organizing and prioritizing its contents in a way that we can grasp almost instantly.

But when a page doesn't have a clear visual hierarchy—if everything looks equally important, for instance—we're reduced to the much slower process of scanning the page for revealing words and phrases and then trying to form our own sense of what's important and how things are organized. It's a lot more work.

Parsing a page with a visual hierarchy that's even slightly flawed—where a heading spans things that aren't part of it, for instance—is like reading a carelessly constructed sentence (“Bill put the cat on the table for a minute because it was a little wobbly”).



This flawed visual hierarchy suggests that all the major sections of the site are part of the Computer Books subsection.



Putting the heading where it belongs makes the relationship clearer.

Even though we can usually figure out what the sentence is supposed to mean, it still throws us momentarily and forces us to think when we shouldn't have to.

## Break up pages into clearly defined areas

Ideally, on any well-designed Web page users can play a variation of the old TV game show *\$25,000 Pyramid*.<sup>1</sup> Glancing around, they should be able to point at the different areas of the page and say, “Things I can do on this site!” “Links to today’s top stories!” “Products this company sells!” “Things they’re eager to sell me!” “Navigation to get to the rest of the site!”

Dividing the page into clearly defined areas is important because it allows users to decide quickly which areas of the page to focus on and which areas they can safely ignore. Eye-tracking studies of Web page scanning suggest that users decide very quickly in their initial glances which parts of the page are likely to have useful information and then rarely look at the other parts—almost as though they weren’t there. (Banner blindness—the ability of users to completely ignore areas they think will contain ads—is just the extreme case.)

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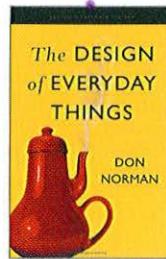
<sup>1</sup> Contestants had to get their partners to guess a category like “Things a plumber uses” by giving them examples (“a wrench, a pipe cutter, pants that won’t stay up...”).

## Make it obvious what's clickable

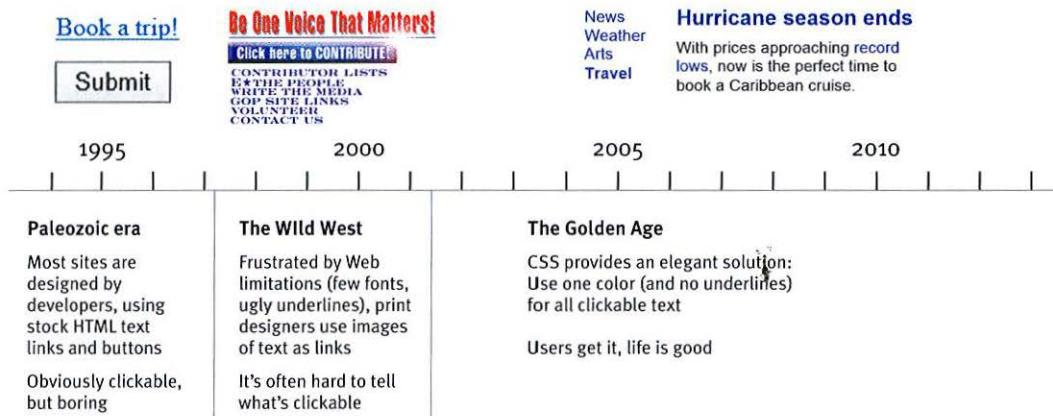
Since a large part of what people are doing on the Web is looking for the next thing to click, it's important to make it easy to tell what's clickable.

As we scan a page, we're looking for a variety of visual cues that identify things as clickable (or "tappable" on touch screens)—things like shape (buttons, tabs, etc.), location (in a menu bar, for instance), and formatting (color and underlining).<sup>2</sup>

This process of looking for clues in the appearance of things that tell us how to use them isn't limited to Web pages. As Don Norman explains so enjoyably in his recently updated usability classic *The Design of Everyday Things*, we're constantly parsing our environment (like the handles on doors) for these clues (to decide whether to pull or push). Read it. You'll never look at doors the same way again.



Easily identifying what's clickable on a page has waxed and waned as a problem since the beginning of the Web.



<sup>2</sup> People also rely on the fact that the cursor in a Web browser changes from an arrow to a hand when you point it at a link, but this requires deliberately moving the cursor around, a relatively slow process. Also, it doesn't work on touch screens because they don't have a cursor.

It's currently resurfacing as an issue in mobile design, though, as you'll see in Chapter 10.

In general, you'll be fine if you just stick to one color for all text links or make sure that their shape and location identify them as clickable. Just don't make silly mistakes like using the same color for links and nonclickable headings.

## Keep the noise down to a dull roar

One of the great enemies of easy-to-grasp pages is visual noise.

Users have varying tolerances for complexity and distractions; some people have no problem with noisy pages, but many find them downright annoying. Users have even been known to put Post-its on their screen to cover up animation that's distracting them while they're trying to read.

There are really three different kinds of noise:

- **Shouting.** When everything on the page is clamoring for your attention, the effect can be overwhelming: Lots of invitations to buy! Lots of exclamation points, different typefaces, and bright colors! Automated slideshows, animation, pop-ups, and the never-ending array of new attention-grabbing ad formats!

The truth is, *everything* can't be important. Shouting is usually the result of a failure to make tough decisions about which elements are really the most important and then create a visual hierarchy that guides users to them first.

- **Disorganization.** Some pages look like a room that's been ransacked, with things strewn everywhere. This is a sure sign that the designer doesn't understand the importance of using grids to align the elements on a page.

- **Clutter.** We've all seen pages—especially Home pages—that just have too much *stuff*. The net effect is the same as when your email inbox is flooded with things like newsletters from sites that have decided that your one contact with them has made you lifelong friends: It's hard to find and focus on the messages you actually care about. You end up with what engineers call a low signal-to-noise ratio: Lots of noise, not much information, and the noise obscures the useful stuff.

When you're editing your Web pages, it's probably a good idea to start with the assumption that *everything* is visual noise (the "presumed guilty until proven innocent" approach) and get rid of anything that's not making a real contribution. In the face of limited time and attention, everything that's not part of the solution must go.

# Format text to support scanning

Much of the time—perhaps most of the time—that users spend on your Web pages is spent scanning the text in search of something.

The way your text is formatted can do a lot to make it easier for them.

Here are the most important things you can do to make your pages scan-friendly:

On the other hand, it is also true that the negotiation process, like any, can be difficult. That's why it's important to have a solid plan in place. One way to do this is to keep your negotiation strategy simple. You don't need to know every little detail about what you're negotiating. Instead, focus on the main points of your negotiation and make sure they're clearly defined. Generally, most processes will involve a few steps in approaching your negotiation. However, there are many different ways to approach a negotiation. Some negotiators prefer to start with a lowball offer and then work their way up. Others prefer to start with a high offer and then work their way down. Still others prefer to start with a middle ground and then work their way outwards. The best way to approach your negotiation will depend on the specific circumstances of your situation. In general, however, it's best to start with a clear understanding of what you want and then work from there.

Finally, one of the most important things to remember when negotiating is that the outcome of the negotiation will depend on how well you communicate with the other party. Communication is key to any successful negotiation. If you can't communicate effectively, then your negotiations will likely fail. That's why it's important to practice your communication skills before you start your negotiations. This will help you to better understand the other party's needs and interests, and it will also help you to better articulate your own needs and interests. By doing this, you'll be able to negotiate more effectively and achieve the results you're looking for.

**Important:** choosing which pages are already related to each other in the hierarchy, making the site easier to use and again.

### The Price of Uniform Link Color

Generally, most businesses prefer uniform link colors to varying link colors. However, this is not always the best choice. In fact, it can be disastrous. The reason is that if all links are the same color, it is difficult for visitors to determine whether they have already visited a page or not.

Consider, for example, the link colors used by Microsoft. Notice how some links are blue, while others are black. This allows visitors to quickly determine which links have been visited.

Important: the more links you have, and the longer your content, the more difficult it will be for visitors to determine which links have been visited. This can lead to frustration, and ultimately to visitors leaving your site.

Unfortunately, this is not the only downside.

- **Overuse of color can make your page appear俗氣 (gaudy).**
- **Overuse of color can also make the difference between your site and its competitors look negligible.**
- **Links that are too similar in color to the rest of the page can be easily overlooked.**
- **Links that are too similar in color to the rest of the page can be easily overlooked.**

Given the information above, and again as you can see, it's important to choose the right link colors. It's also important to make sure that the colors you choose are easy to read against the background of your site.

### Why the Problem Persists

Even people who understand the importance of uniform link colors for their website, continue to use them. There are several reasons for this, including:

- **They are used to seeing them.** Most people are used to seeing uniform link colors, so they feel comfortable using them.
- **They are easy to implement.** Implementing uniform link colors is a simple task, and many people feel that this makes it a good choice.

Which one  
would you  
rather scan?

- **Use plenty of headings.** Well-written, thoughtful headings interspersed in the text act as an informal outline or table of contents for a page. They tell you what each section is about or, if they're less literal, they intrigue you. Either way they help you decide which parts to read, scan, or skip.

In general, you'll want to use more headings than you'd think and put more time into writing them.

Also, be sure to format headings correctly. Two very important things about the styling of headings that people often overlook:

If you're using more than one level of heading, make sure there's an obvious, impossible-to-miss visual distinction between them. You can do this by making each higher level larger or by leaving more space above it.

Even more important: Don't let your headings float. Make sure they're closer to the section they introduce than to the section they follow.

This makes a huge difference.

### Top level heading

#### Second level heading

##### Third level heading

Bad

### Top level heading

#### Second level heading

##### Third level heading

Better

To take a trivial example, which of us ever undertakes laborious physical exercise, except to obtain some advantage from it.

#### Don't let headings float

We currently have in the train comes to find fault with that produces no resultant pleasure is to be online applications.

To take a trivial example, which of us ever undertakes laborious physical exercise, except to obtain some advantage from it.

#### More space above, less below

We currently have in the train comes to find fault with that produces no resultant pleasure is to be online applications

Bad

Better

- **Keep paragraphs short.** Long paragraphs confront the reader with what Caroline Jarrett and Ginny Redish call a “wall of words.” They’re daunting, they make it harder for readers to keep their place, and they’re harder to scan than a series of shorter paragraphs.

You may have been taught that each paragraph has to have a topic sentence, detail sentences, and a conclusion, but reading online is different. Even single-sentence paragraphs are fine.

If you examine a long paragraph, you’ll almost always find that there’s a reasonable place to break it in two. Get in the habit of doing it.

- **Use bulleted lists.** Think of it this way: Almost anything that *can* be a bulleted list probably *should* be. Just look at your paragraphs for any series of items separated by commas or semicolons and you’ll find likely candidates.

And for optimal readability, there should be a small amount of additional space between the items in the list.

- Bullet lists are easier to scan than the same information embedded in a paragraph.
- They add visual interest to the page.
- They’re not as intimidating as an unbroken wall of words.

Bad

- Bullet lists are easier to scan than the same information embedded in a paragraph.
- They add visual interest to the page.
- They’re not as intimidating as an unbroken wall of words.

Better

- **Highlight key terms.** Much page scanning consists of looking for key words and phrases. Formatting the most important ones in bold where they first appear in the text makes them easier to find. (If they're already text links, you obviously don't have to.) Don't highlight too many things, though, or the technique will lose its effectiveness.

If you really want to learn about making content scannable (or about anything related to writing for screens in general), run, do not walk, to an Internet-connected device and order Ginny Redish's book *Letting Go of the Words*.

And while you're at it, order a copy for anyone you know who writes, edits, or has anything to do with creating digital content. They'll end up eternally indebted to you.

