

BEST PRACTICES—STYLE, CONTENT, AND DESIGN

Separate Style from Content

That anyone can make a Web page represents both the most wonderful and most dangerous aspect of the Web. If working on the Web were not so much fun, fewer people would be trying to make a living at it. Given the grassroots origin of most library Web endeavors, letting anyone—or everyone—have a turn at the fun of Web design was simple. Somewhere, style gained equal footing with content, and in some cases surpassed content altogether. Traditionally, libraries excel at content, and fortunately libraries as a whole also have a vast wealth of expertise in Web design, information architecture, and providing online services. The trick often comes when separating and then integrating style with content.

One of the best things to happen to Web design is the advent of the Cascading Style Sheet (CSS). Originally intended as a medium for displaying information and content, frustrated HTML jockeys unwittingly conspired with the major Web browser makers to change the nature of HTML. Certain elements of HTML were reconfigured to change layout and style, font capabilities were added, as well as other less useful features.

Tables represent perhaps the best example of HTML gone wrong; originally intended for the presentation of tabular data, the HTML table was used for almost every purpose except that one. The proliferation of graphical browsers and WYSIWYG editors introduced enough font variations to make even the simplest Web page a dizzying jumble.

“To successfully introduce style sheets into your organization, you must fund an active evangelism program to teach your content creators how to use the centrally defined style sheet.”

—Jakob Nielsen (Nielsen, p.83)

Essentially, CSS separates content from presentation. Ultimately, content is what users seek; design and presentation are simply the backdrop to a user's desire to access that information. Font style, size, color, and various layout designs can all be dictated by a centralized style sheet.

Since libraries are practically alone in the world of Web publishing in that they let almost anyone create content, careful control of a centralized style guide is vital to the success of consistent layout, design, and presentation. Convincing librarians to abandon the fun of design for the importance of content is a difficult effort that serves the library and the user well.

Too many Web sites use graphics to represent words. Style sheets obviate the need to do so, and few good reasons exist to make a user wait for an image to download to read a word that could have been presented instantly as simple (yet stylized) text.

WYSIWYG means What You See Is What You Get.

Text Usage

Scannable text, bulleted lists, and white space are essential. For presenting information online, use 50% of the text you would use in a print publication.

Libraries must keep in mind that this rule does not apply to much of their information. A distinction should be drawn between the content provided by a library (for example, full-text of an article, e-books, and catalog records) and the library's own content (for example, library information, subject guides, and service descriptions). A good way to make this distinction is to ask whether you yourself would print the information, or if you want to read the information on the screen and move on.

Scrolling. Antiscrolling sentiment nearly turned half the Web into a long series of postage-stamp-sized information boxes, forcing users to click rather than follow the normal flow of information. Although left-right scrolling on a Web site is still a poor choice, presenting information in a way that requires vertical scrolling is hardly a burden on users. Nevertheless, think of a Web page as a page in a newspaper—important information belongs above the fold. Something has to make the user want to scroll below that first screen.

Sometimes designers forget they are working in a hypertext environment. Converting text to hypertext also provides the user's eyes a rest when confronted with a lot of text. Make sure that hypertext serves a purpose and does not merely divert a user down a meaningless path. Hyperlinking text such as *it* or pronouns with no clear references are meaningless. Keep watch for three dangerous kinds of links:

Mystery Links: bizarre or obscure words where the user will not know what to expect unless the link is followed.

False Twins: Two links with similar or identical wording that lead to different places.

Nonidentical Twins: Two links with different wording that go to the exact same place.

These terms are taken from a recent article in the *Journal of Electronic Publishing*, which has a useful link to Ten Link Rules for hypertext (McAdams and Berger).

Besides the assumption that only a small percentage of your content will actually be read by the average user, consider two other important factors when creating text for a Web site. First, if you expect someone to print a large amount of text, then you should offer a printer-friendly version. Use of this feature can be found in many full-text databases, news services, and online information providers. If the Web site already separates presentation from content through use of a style sheet, then this feature is all the easier to implement.

Second, assume (and prepare yourself) for the eventuality of uninvited crawling and indexing. Search engines build their indexes by crawling the Web for new content. Careful use of HTML tagging can increase the effectiveness of indexing activity. Standardized use of metadata (discussed below) increases efficiency, especially for a localized search engine.

www.press.umich.edu/jep/o6-03/McAdams/pages/ten_links.html

Finally, can you think of anything more difficult than trying to read several lines of text centered on the screen? Unless they are reading a poem or a greeting card, users do not care to encounter large volumes of centered text. Nothing makes this easier to read, and left justification is a good standard to follow.

THE ONLY THING THAT MIGHT BE HARDER TO READ
IS SOMETHING WRITTEN IN ALL CAPS.

Frames

People either love frames or hate them. Even the most practiced HTML coder must be careful with one of the most dangerous features ever added to the HTML specification. Style sheets now offer solutions that mimic features that frames provide, so there are good reasons to replace frames with style sheets:

- Bookmarks will not function properly.
- Printing is difficult if not impossible for novice users.
- Search engines, though seeking solutions, still have problems indexing sites that implement frames.
- The location (URL) bar of one's Web browser should tell the user where he or she is. Using frames hides this important information and gives the illusion of a single URL for all the information provided on a series of Web pages.

Rarely will the features of frame use outweigh the diminished usability that results. Carefully consider the use of frames and implement them with caution.

Multimedia

Multimedia has taken on new meaning, since most content is delivered in one medium (that is, text, sound, image, or animation). The delivery of any of these media via the Web has made the Internet into a multimedia delivery system. Though not quite ready for mass application, new technologies such as streaming content and extreme file compression—coupled with ever-faster download times—make multimedia content both feasible for content delivery and desirable by a growing number of users.

In the world of libraries, more and more users are remotely located, and lack the sort of human interaction to which many library users have become accustomed. Whether bibliographic instruction, electronic course reserves, or just marketing materials for your library, the temptation to introduce multimedia is great, and probably represents a growing area for library Web development over the next few years. Multimedia should be delivered with some simple ground rules to make the experience better for users.

Users should always have some way to preview what they are about to

download. Brief descriptions, a still image, or even a preview clip can help. To help users with varying types of connections, a page that includes file size, duration, and average download times can aid considerably in the decision of whether to download specific items.

Animation

Animation on the Web is usually just distracting. The development of Flash applications—adding dynamic and moving images to Web content without long download times—might prove to be an exception when used carefully. But a distinction between Flash, probably better classified as multimedia, and smaller animations allow designers to address the latter while reserving judgment on the former.

Animations are hard on peripheral vision. Designed to attract attention regardless of the content for which a user has come, their place on a library Web site should be well justified. Can the site communicate its message without the animation? Do scrolling tables of content or stock-ticker messages add usability to the site, or are these animations merely design solutions looking for usability problems?

Bleeding edge, and even leading edge developers might not like the notion, but Jakob Nielsen recommends waiting at least a year before implementing new technologies into a user interface (Nielsen, p. 42). For those who do not wish to wait, perhaps a good compromise includes keeping alternative content delivery up and running while the new technology's acceptance can be adequately assessed.

Use of video, sound, new plug-ins, XML, or any advanced Web technology should always be developed with the user in mind. Whether the user is a disabled patron who might be cut off from access to content by a new technology or a high-end user whose hand-held wireless device is disabled by the high bandwidth and large screen requirements of multimedia, Web designers should think carefully about and plan prudently for various methods of content delivery.