

DE FACTO STANDARDS

Sometimes librarians have some control over the standards that define a new service or technology; sometimes forces outside their control thrust those standards on librarians. Whether libraries control their standards-based approach to technology or must adhere to one, they do not yet understand, usability and effectiveness of the services behind the standard are affected.

Standards—both accepted and de facto—for graphical user interfaces (GUIs), in general, and the Web in particular, have established themselves as self-sustaining metaphors. Desktops look more like the Web. One Web page aspires to look more like another. Although more usability engineering before the personal computer's near ubiquitousness might have made the interfaces somewhat more usable, in many ways, libraries are stuck with what they have.

Link and Text Style

For better or worse, blue and purple represent the de facto standard for unvisited and visited Web links, respectively. These colors are not ideal; they're not even among most Web-safe colors available. Nevertheless, they represent what users have come to expect.

Style sheets and enhanced font capabilities on the Web have empowered Web designers to revisit this standard. Sites that use their own symbols, such as school or corporate colors to replace blue and purple might think they are cleverly applying the tools of HTML. To the casual browser or the uninitiated, however, breaking with the standard can cause confusion. Redefining link colors to match a site's identity should be encouraged, but it should not violate the principle behind underlining and using differing colors to distinguish between visited and unvisited links.

Removing the ability for a user to distinguish between where they have and have not been could cause serious loss of site traffic. A graphic designer might look at a site with these text color dichotomies and shriek with horror and upset sensibilities, but one who does so is mired in the world of print design. Hypertext changes the nature of design and usability, a fact that remains lost on professionals making the transition from designing for print to designing for an online community.

With the exception of discussing the need for speed, and in part because of the now general acceptance that too many and too large graphics merely clog the Web, this report has not closely examined the use of graphics on Web sites. Many tools enhance site speed by shrinking graphic file size. Enormous or ostentatious graphics are easy to spot and are most likely the first negative comment in any usability test, survey, or focus group.

One particular use of graphics is, however, increasingly disturbing: using graphics to represent words. Easier-to-use graphical editing tools (such as the HTML WYSIWYG software that preceded them) have made graphic design easier for all HTML publishers. That these graphic tools arrived on the scene just shortly before the advent of style sheets—coupled with the higher learning curve that comes with style sheets—gave rise to a vast array of Web sites that use graphics to represent text.

For some fantastic examples of the power of style sheets and the code that goes along with those examples go to these links:

W3Schools.com
www.w3schools.com/css/css_examples.asp

Dept. of Computing Services, University of Saskatchewan
www.usask.ca/dcs/courses/cail/css/index.html

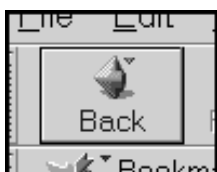
Or simply go to your favorite search engine and do a query for "CSS Examples"

There are only two good reasons to use graphics to represent text. First, the text is too deeply embedded in a graphic to separate the two. Second, the graphic is used as the <INPUT> tag to submit a FORM submission. The latter represents a major shortcoming of the HTML standard, namely that a string of text cannot be used easily as the link that submits data via a FORM (this can be accomplished with various javascripts).

Several wonderful examples exist, showing how designers use simple style sheets to create graphical looking text. Users are rewarded with aesthetically pleasing Web sites that do not take forever to download. Adding visited and nonvisited style to the text gives the user an added bonus, and removes the burden on the Web designer to somehow denote that a user has already clicked a graphical link.

The Back Button

Many information architects say nothing is more important to a Web site than consistent, efficient, and intuitive navigation. A champion of consistency, the author has come to realize grudgingly that only one navigational feature will ever dominate the Web, and it has nothing to do with good HTML or Web design. Despite a lack of statistics generated by Web logs, and without either research or local testing to back up the assertion, common sense points to the browser Back button as the favorite navigational tool on the Internet.



The Back button is still everyone's favorite navigational tool.

Frequent reliance on the Back button is why nothing frustrates a user more than to have the Back button disabled, absent, or malfunctioning. Users will view a service with disdain—or worse, never use it again—when:

- Users are redirected to a site via a new full-sized window without warning, effectively replacing the Back button with the "close window" function. When a pop-up occupies the entire screen, users should be warned that clicking will perform this function. If the pop-up is smaller, information on the primary screen should be retained.
- Users fill out a long form, submit it, encounter an error, and then see an empty form when using the Back button to correct the error.
- Users encounter a Web site that will not let them back out of the site without quickly clicking back twice, or using some other sort of sophisticated trick to bypass the sophisticated trick that tried to trap them.

Users' love of the Back button, a love greater than the desire to adapt to the perfectly functional navigational tools designed to allow users to click without error, might stunt development efforts, but the Back button's dominance in the world of Web browsing is here to stay.