

Usability and Website Design

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When designing websites, users should be the main focus throughout the website design process. When an expert designs a website their creation will seem simple to them. So they are tempted to believe that everyone else will see it in the same way. That is where the fallacy arises that designers often overlook that users, may not come from the same technical background as them.

With the internet, there is a common set of design principles users are becoming accustomed to. So it can be helpful to follow some of the design conventions that are used by popular websites. This includes certain layouts and features on common web sites.

Recent studies have shown that the blue-underlined text seems to be the most consistent display of links and provide the most clicks. Using other colors drastically reduces a users understanding of the link. When using graphical links users are even less likely to realize that it is a link. An advantage of using text links is that browsers support differentiating links depending on if they were visited or unvisited which cannot be supported with graphics.

When designing the website you will want to shape the website to you own liking. However, users should be allowed the freedom to set their own preferences. Background and text link colors should be able to be changed. Also, make sure that the use of contrast between background and text is easily readable.

Another common practice that can increase usability is the use of semantic tags rather than format tags. Format tags do offer more control over the appearance of text, but semantic tags can be more usable across different platforms. This will increase the likelihood of users using different browsers to get same interpretation of text regardless of how it is displayed.

Here are some common Dos and don'ts for usability

- **Do:**
 - Use ALT tags for all graphics, especially navigation graphics.
 - Use black text on white background whenever possible for optimal legibility.
 - Use either plain-color backgrounds or extremely subtle background patterns.
 - Make sure text is in a printable color (not white).
 - Place navigation in a consistent location on each page of your website.
 - Use a familiar location for navigation bars.
 - Keep the design from scrolling horizontally.
 - Use one axis of symmetry for centered text on a page.
 - Encourage scrolling by splitting an image at the fold.
- **Don't:**
 - Allow ALT tags to get clipped (especially an issue for small, fixed width images).
 - Display static text in blue or underlined.
 - Use **boldface** or ALL CAPS for long pieces of text. These slow down reading.
 - Leave too much white space--reduces scan ability.
 - Make the user scroll to find critical information, especially transaction buttons and navigation links.
 - Use horizontal rules to separate chunks of content.
 - Alternate too frequently between centered text and left-aligned text. Most text should be left-aligned.
 - Fix pages at larger than 800 x 600 pixels. Larger pages may force users to scroll horizontally.

Places for Web Design Information

Great Web design information can be found all over the Internet.

So can Not-So-Great Web design information...

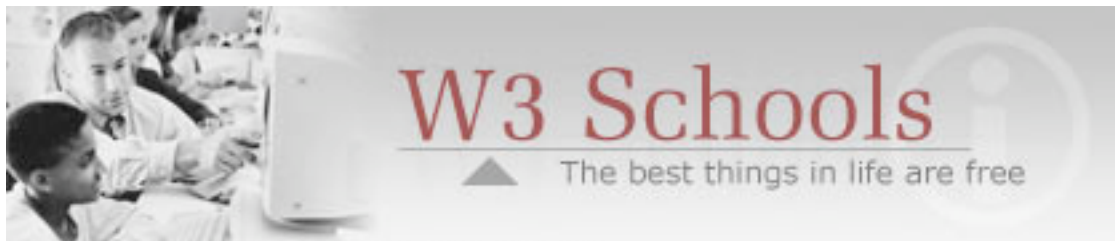
Here are some links to some great resources



HOW-TO-BUILD-WEBSITES.COM
THE EASIEST WEB DESIGN TUTORIAL ON THE WEB

<http://www.how-to-build-websites.com/>

This is an entire web design tutorial including videos on various aspects of web site design.



<http://www.w3schools.com/>

This site is a very comprehensive teaching site on Web technologies

trace.wisc.edu

Designing More Usable Web Sites

<http://trace.wisc.edu/world/web/#awsg>

This is a great site at the University of Wisconsin that covers web design but especially discusses the ideas behind universal access, which concerns designing web sites for those with visual, physical, or mental disabilities. Designers in this area are in great demand as all government sites must meet universal access guidelines.



<http://www.digital-web.com/>

Even if you are a novice, reading material and looking at designs by professionals is always a great idea.

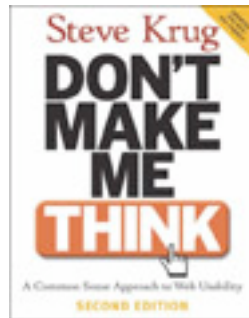
useit.com: Jakob Nielsen's Website

<http://www.useit.com/>

Jakob Nielsen is one of the foremost experts in web usability and discusses many ideas on how to make web pages user friendly. He is very opinionated and, many times, it may not be possible to easily incorporate his ideas but it is nice to know about.

<http://www.sensible.com/>

If you are looking at a career in web design, the author of this site is also the author of one of the best books on web page and web site design.



It is a thin, very easy to read book but has some of the best information in the field. If there is any book to buy, get this one.



<http://www.webstyleguide.com/index.html?/index.html>

This is a complete on-line book on writing and design for the Web. It is more than just a web design site but also discusses concepts on digital pictures, how people read on-line, etc.



<http://universalusability.com/index.html>

This is another site devoted to universal usability so all can use the Web, including visually handicapped.
