

Notes from *Web Style Guide (Online)*, Chapter 2, “Interface Design”

An “interface” is that which stands (or mediates) between the viewer/reader and content, which includes graphical material.

Basic Design Precedents

Many of the principles for good web design are to be found in the fundamental lessons of print publishing. Text needs to be legible. A page should make effective use of white space to provide eye relief for the reader. Readers need to know what they’re reading/viewing and who is providing it to them. Too much text on any one page discourages readers from continuing. Visual material should complement, not distract from the central purpose. These principles apply to both print and web-based publication.

General Principles of Page Design

1. **Free-Standing:** Web pages should be free-standing, on the expectation that visitors may come to the page from outside the site (e.g., via a search engine). So include necessary navigation, copyright, and other site information on every page.
2. **Authorship:** Readers want to know who is responsible for the content on any given page, as well as who created it.
3. **Titles:** Every page should have a title, both on the page itself and in the HTML Title tag so that visitors can bookmark the page and know what it is.
4. **Dates:** All pages should have some indication of when they were last updated so that readers know whether anything has changed since their last visit and can also judge the integrity of information with a short shelf-life.
5. **Location:** Indicate on main pages where the site is located. Incorporating the “home” URL on at least the main pages in your site is an easy means of maintaining the connection to where a page originated.

Basic Principles of Interface Design

6. **User-Centered:** Design a node with your particular audience in mind. Are they high-end users? Novices? Information seekers? General browsers? Consumers? Make decisions about the complexity of navigational aids based on your evaluation of why users will visit the site.
7. **Clear Navigation Aids:** This can be one of the most important yet difficult aspect of interface design to manage. A site should be flow-charted because it will likely grow substantially over time. No matter where they are in a site, users should be

- able to return to the main node or other important navigation points. Navigation bars should be present on every node and, if graphical, be well suited to the graphical identity (theme) of the site. People tend to notice menus more readily on the left margin, so that's a good place for them. Web pages are often cluttered with banner ads at their top, so people learn to ignore that space. The right margin sometimes will bleed off the edge of the screen. Menus at the bottom of the page are useful when readers get that far.
8. **No Dead-Ends** : Always provide readers with a way back to other important navigation points in the hierarchy of the site.
 9. **Menus** : Interface studies have shown that users prefer menus that present a minimum of five to seven links, and that users prefer a few very dense screens of choices over many layers of simplified menus.
 10. **Bandwidth**: Bandwidth refers to the speed at which nodes are served to the user, how much information (textual or graphical) can be downloaded in a given time frame. Modem connections are pretty slow and are gradually being replaced by cable, DSL, T1, and T3 lines, which are substantially faster. Site designers should always consider how long the material on a site may take to load on a user's machine, over a range of bandwidths. Users like to be warned when the download time is likely to be longer than 10-15 seconds.
 11. **Consistency**: (Very Important!) For maximum functionality and legibility your page and site design should be built on a consistent pattern of modular units, all sharing the same basic layout grids, graphic themes, editorial conventions, and hierarchies of organization.
 12. **Reliability**: Links should be checked regularly to ensure that they lead where they're supposed to.
 13. **Feedback**: User-feedback can be very useful for site designers and information providers, so users should be encouraged to provide it.
 14. **ALT Tags**: When you include graphics as an important aspect of the interface (e.g., for navigation), use the ALT html tag so that visually impaired users can read (or have read to them) the function or description of the graphical interface.
 15. **Back/Forward/Next Page/Previous Page**: These navigation aids at the bottom of long documents (2 or more screens) help readers decide where to go next, especially when they may have come upon the particular document in its middle. See a typical *New York Times* feature story on the WWW for an excellent example.