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Notes from Web Style Guide, Chapter 4 ("Page Design")

Overview

"The spatial organization of graphics and text on the Web page can engage readers with graphic impact, direct their attention, prioritize the information they see, and make their interactions with your Web site more enjoyable and efficient" (53).

Visual Logic: "Dense text documents without contrast and visual relief are [. . .] harder to read, particularly on the relatively low-resolution screens of personal computers. But without the depth and complexity of text, highly graphical pages risk disappointing the user by offering a poor balance of visual sensation, text information, and interactive hypermedia links" (53).

Visual Hierarchy

"The primary task of graphic design is to create a strong, consistent visual hierarchy in which important elements are emphasized and content is organized logically and predictably" (53).

"Contrast is essential" (54). (E.g., never underestimate the value of white space, which needn't be white, but should still serve as a resting place for the eyes and a contrast with text-rich areas of a page.) Use white space to direct the eye and draw attention to organizational elements.

Consistency

Use a graphical theme throughout a Web site, especially in navigation elements that appear near the top and at the bottom of a page (same goes for font and heading styles). A consistent graphical identity tells the viewer where he/she is, working as an anchor (it encourages what they call "site stickiness").

Page Dimensions

AKA "screen real estate." Generally speaking, there's less space to work with than you probably imagine. It may be okay these days to design for an 800 x 600 (pixel) screen (usually a 17" monitor) but in doing so you take risks that people may have to scroll off-screen horizontally to see the full page (major news organizations are designing this way now). 640 x 480 is the screen resolution for a typical 15" monitor.

Graphic "safe area" for printing: 535 x 295 (in pixels)

Graphic "safe area" for screen usage: 595 x 295 (in pixels)

Page Length

Make decisions about page length based upon the content of the material, including whether it is meant to be scanned (e.g., for links) or read (e.g., an article).

Try to keep the length to 2-3 screens or so (or printed pages), but if longer, provide "jump to top" arrows mid-way that help the reader navigate to the top of the page with a click.

On longer pages, provide a link to a file that contains the full text combined as one page that can be printed or saved in one step. Be sure to include the URL and copyright info on these pages.

In general, use shorter pages for graphic-heavy pages or with documents meant to be read online, as well as pages that contain menus or navigation help.

Design Grids

Generally speaking, a full-block layout works best (left-justified).

Critical: "Your goal is to establish a consistent, logical screen layout, one that allows you to "plug in" text and graphics without having to stop and rethink your basic design approach on each new page. Without a firm underlying design grid, your project's page layout will be driven by the problems of the moment, and the overall design of your Web site will seem patchy and confusing" (63).

Design for screens of information (e.g., in "functional screen zones")

Recommended grid: Table Width 525 pixels, with a left cell of 132 pixels and a right cell of 372 pixels and a 10 pixel cell spacing (between cells and a 5 pixel padding)

Headers and Footers

Use titles, subheaders, and footers. Use navigation bars near top and at bottom. The footer needs to establish "provenance," which includes copyright, authorship, date