

Some Starting Points in Website Design

Designing Websites is a deceptively complex task. Even though new programs for Website design like Dreamweaver and GoLive have made the simple task of creating simple pages relatively easy, **designing a page that is informative, interesting, and easy to use** remains a challenge for many people.

This sheet deals with two design categories: screen design and information architecture. **Screen design** deals with how information (text, pictures, animation, color) is structured on a single page of a Website. **Information architecture** involves how pages are linked together, and how users move from page to page within a site.

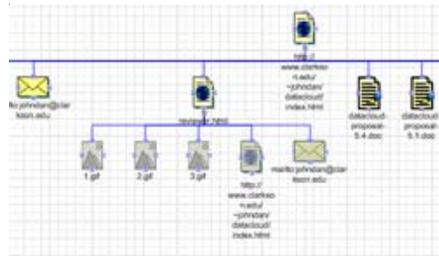
Information Architecture

Architects design complex structures that people move within. Traditional architects design for concrete, wood, glass, and other construction materials; information architects design for light, color, animation, and virtual movement.



Although you might often begin a website by working on a single page, it often makes more sense to step back and think about the types of information you'll want on your site and the structure that will support users of that information. When users come to your site, what types of information are they looking for? How will they use that information?

For a relatively small site, you may find that all of the information fits on a single screen, or slightly more than a screen. If that's true, then you will want to jump to the Screen Layout section to help you think about how to structure an individual page. But if you'll have more than about one screen's full of information, you'll want to begin by categorizing that information. You can begin with a top-down approach, specifying categories, or you can begin with a bottom-up approach, specifying individual items and then reorganizing them into categories.



After you've established your categories, you should attempt to draw a rough map of the site. You can use a computer program such as Visio, or merely sketch the site by hand. Show where main pages are, and where connections exist among pages. Put yourself in your users' shoes and ask, If I was on this page,

what other pages might I need to go to? In addition, as your site increases in size, ask yourself if important information is near the top or center of the hierarchy. Users dislike having to click endlessly to dig down to information they want quickly or need frequently.

Finally, think carefully about the terms that you use to title pages, sections, and navigation elements. Will those terms make sense to users? Will the words that you've used as links (in text or in navigation elements) really help users figure out what information is on the other side of that link?

Screen Design

Although it can be an extremely complex topic, screen design can be understood according to five primary aspects:

- Hierarchy
- White Space
- Proximity
- Similarity
- Genre

There are more, but these can serve as a starting point.

Hierarchy: The visual weight or importance of elements on a page. Larger and darker elements have more "weight", while smaller, lighter elements have less weight (and are lower in the hierarchy). In Web screens, animated text and rollover images also tend to have much higher visual hierarchy than static elements. (Use them judiciously: animations have so much visual weight they can overpower the whole page.) When people look at screens, they begin by looking at the element with at the highest level in the hierarchy, then move downward to successively lower levels. One way to understand hierarchy is to use the "squint" test. Step back from the screen and squint, until the individual letters and images on the page blur. If a page has a good, coherent hierarchy, you should be able to identify a handful of elements or areas on the page. If the page is just a mass of gray when you squint (for example, a page of nothing but 12-point text), then the hierarchy is flat, and readers will have difficulty scanning the page.



White Space: The space between areas on a page that helps separate them. Although you were probably taught by your English teacher that blank space on a page was a bad thing, it's actually very important in helping structure a page. White space can improve hierarchy by making individual areas of a page more prominent. Web pages also tend to need more white space than print documents.



Note: "White space" doesn't necessarily have to be "white". It's merely the color of the background and could be any color (or even a pattern). Another way to think of white space is according to "figure/ground": important information is the "figure" and in the front of the page, perceptually speaking, while less important information is the "ground" or "background" that allows the figure to pop to the front. Pages with very busy backgrounds are often difficult to view because they have poor figure/ground separation or poor use of white space.

Proximity: When users look at a page, they assume that elements that are near each other are somehow related. Use that principle to help structure your page. For example, if you have text that discusses an image, put that text near the image.



Similarity: Users assume that items with some sort of similarity (color, shape, size) are somehow related to each other. Use this principle to help build classes of objects. Navigation buttons and icons should probably all be similar in size, shape, and font. If icons are used for a particular category, the icons should be designed in similar styles (even if the specific picture is different). Conversely, if objects are very different, users assume they have very different categories of purpose.

Genre: Genres are categories of texts, common types that users assume will operate similarly. For example, "email" is a genre. We expect it to have some sort of To:, From:, Subject: and Date: header. We also expect email to be relatively informal in tone (it will likely use "you" and "I" and may have contractions, sentence fragments, and even misspellings without causing concern.



Genres are important because users constantly and actively rely on their understanding of genre in order to process documents they see. Web pages tend to obey certain genre expectations. Unvisited links are normally a certain color (blue); navigation systems are generally on the left (vertical) or top (horizontal) edges of screens; etc. Although genres are often violated, understanding and following genre conventions can help you assist readers in working with your Website.

For example, even within genres you'll find important divisions or subgenres. Consider the overall look and feel of a corporate business site compared to a sports team site. What sorts of differences do you see? What are the effects of those differences on users? What are the different expectations about types of information you might find on each site?



Finally, users often bring their own personal experiences and their contexts to a Website. Think about who might be viewing the pages you design? Your friends? Parents? Students who might potentially enroll at your school? Potentially employers who might be considering you for a job? Those particular users and contexts need to be taken into account as you think about and design your pages.