

SCCLL Web Site Design Resources

By Katie Jones, Electronic Services Librarian, Wyoming State Law Library

These tips and resources are **not** comprehensive for all aspects of web site design or development. Rather, the goal is to provide just a few tips and resources to get you started on how to create a user-centered web site following basic usability design principles.

Tips

User-centered design

In broad terms, user-centered design (UCD) is a design philosophy and a process in which the needs, wants, and limitations of the end user of an interface or document are given extensive attention at each stage of the design process. User-centered design can be characterized as a multi-stage problem solving process that not only requires designers to analyze and foresee how users are likely to use an interface, but to test the validity of their assumptions with regards to user behaviour in real world tests with actual users (Wikipedia, retrieved February 22, 2006 from http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=User-centered_design&oldid=36792212).

A good web site is effective, efficient and satisfying. Users should be able to accomplish a given task correctly, completely and comfortably, with minimal effort. Upon task completion, the experience should have been positive.

Navigation

The traditional layout and organization of a brick and mortar establishment does not always translate well to the online environment.

- Carefully examine and evaluate the hierarchy of your web site from the perspective of the end user.
- Use very little to no library jargon. Jargon is not helpful for most users in any scenario, but it is especially confusing when used for navigation.
- Be careful where and how you place and label directional links and buttons. Primary navigation should be directly adjacent to the main content area of the page. Don't forget a link/button/*something* that will direct the user to the home page from any other page in the web site—consistently placed, of course.
- Consider providing bread crumbs (usually placed near the top of a web page). This navigational technique will decrease the possibility of the user becoming lost in your web site, as well as aid those who come to a page within your site from a search engine.
- Is the file structure simple to follow—do page names accurately reflect what is available on that page?
- Are the URLs/web addresses meaningful?
- How deep into the web site does the user need to drill in order to find information? There is a fine line between having a few web pages with too much information on each page and many buried pages with little bits of information on each one.
- Is there a search mechanism or site map for the web site? Usability has shown that a simple keyword search box located in the top right or left corners is preferred by users.

Simplicity & Consistency

The web site design should be clean, consistent and standardized (including the coding: XHTML, CSS, JavaScript, etc.). This will increase the design integrity and stability. A philosophy of "less is more" should be kept in mind at all times for user-centered design (and even content). A few seconds of scanning will often determine for a user if your web site not only has the information needed, but also whether it will be easy to find and use.

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The color scheme (especially for links), font choices, graphics, layout, and concise, organized use of text are important components to consider.

- Limit font styles, sizes, colors, etc. Choose contrasting text and background colors for legibility and accessibility.
- Follow standard conventions for links. Make it obvious that it's a link and clickable. Use colors to indicate if the link has been visited or not.
- Use graphics to emphasize content, not for decoration. Watch the size (on the screen and on the server) of the graphic. Large graphics can slow load times and detract from textual information. Limit the use of animated graphics—animation is often ignored because it looks like advertising.
- A liquid design for fonts and page width is highly suggested.
- Use subheadings, bullets and borders to break the text up into clearly defined sections for a clear visual hierarchy on each page, increasing the ease of scannability.
- When adding content, be succinct, minimizing noise as much as possible. As Steve Krug suggests, omit ~~needless~~ words—happy talk must die.
- Always keep your design consistent and accessible, particularly with regard to formatting and placement. Users with disabilities often use tools that interact differently with a web site. It is a good practice to incorporate alternative text for graphics and tables.

Testing & evaluation

As indicated above in the Wikipedia description of user-centered design, once the web site has been created you must continue to test it and evaluate its effectiveness. Or, if you have the time and resources, test various designs before launching the live site. Many libraries (mostly academic) have published studies of their web site usability test methods. There are many ideas to be gleaned from these studies. One excellent idea provided by Laura Cobus to encourage users to complete a test is to offer free copying or printing.

Resources

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