

Web Sites and Web Pages: Design Considerations and Tips



from ideas -> to code -> to content

A collection of notes and tips regarding web site creation

Some useful bits to consider when starting a web project

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Introduction and notes

I don't consider myself to be a 'web designer'. That would imply that I have taken specific graphics courses and know all the intricacies of manipulating a web site so it will do song and dance and all that fancy stuff. Far from it, I am a semi computer literate user, I specialize in database creation and design, and in my work have had reason to work on and create web sites and present information in various forms so end users can partake of it.

The personal computer and new software has made it incredibly easy for most anyone who takes a bit of time to create and publish a web site, and thus share info with others.

My notes here are intended to alert people who wish to create a web site, that there are some things that need to be considered as you embark on the adventure of creating a web site.

I hope you find some of the info useful.
Rolf

Copyright and other bits.

This document is a compilation of info I have shamelessly gathered from many other sources. I basically consider all the sources public or open source, so as such there really is no copyright, but just for fun, I will claim that this document is:

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Contents

Document Contents

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| 01. Preparing for a web site | 3 |
| 02. Browser and Computer bits | 4 |
| Not all computers offer the same view | 4-5 |
| 03. Gather your info and content | 6 |
| Web site purpose | 6 |
| Brainstorm Brainstorm Brainstorm | 6 |
| 04. Map out your site | 7 |
| Set the logical order for things | 7 |
| 05. Decide on your style and format | 7 |
| 06. Activate and Implement | 8 |
| Create the mock up site | 8 |
| Test Functionality | 8 |
| Modify and Review | 8 |
| 07. More useful bits | 9 |
| What fits in the browser window | 9 |
| What others have to say | 10 |
| Some notes about fonts and web pages | 11 |

01. Preparing for a web site

Understand the canvas we have to work with for web sites

The web is not like traditional media

In the days of print media, we could choose a page size, and font style and if we chose the reproduction method carefully, the end result that we presented to the viewer reader of our document would be faithful to what we designed.

Before you build that web site you want, you need to consider many things, not the least of which is the message and content.

The first of course is to consider your audience and the content you need/want to present to them. Is the site for information, or entertainment? What kind of message and look and feel you are trying to convey?

Just as with any other delivery media, careful consideration of what you are trying to present, and clarity of the message come first and foremost. This is particularly true of information sites.

What I have compiled here are some things you need to take into consideration when you decide on the content and look and feel of your web site.

Gathering information and creating a web site costs, whether you do it yourself, or have someone do it for you. Since it will be your site, you should be aware of things that affect site creation and performance.

I hope the information is useful to you as you plan for and build a web site, or get someone to help you build a site.



02. Monitor and Browser bits

Not all computers offer the same view

1. Your site guest must be considered

Computers show us info via the monitor, but not all computers have the same screen and monitor configuration. Since you do not have control over the budget of your site visitor and the computer they are using to view your site with, it is wise to take into account some display consideration that will help them have a reasonable viewing experience while at your site.

2. Computer Screen/Monitor Basics

It is not my intent to provide exhaustive details of how computer displays work and how they differ. The intent is to let you know the user that visits your web site may not have the same monitor set up as you do, and as a result the page may not load correctly or look right to them on screen. Of course this is not a good thing, so the best is to plan carefully. The info presented to the right gives you some info about monitor sizes and pixels that make up the viewers screen and their web experience of your site.

3. And then there is the browser window.

Your guest needs to use a web browser to view your site, and the window it displays on the users computer monitor will most certainly not be the same size as the monitor. The browser window needs to have a navigation bar, scroll bars and other things to make it useful, and all those things subtract from the available viewing area.

There is also more info on this on page 9

Other things subtract for the viewable area. The OS reduces the area with menu and status bars, plus you need a browser to view a site, and the browser window takes up space.

Since you can't control the monitor your site guest has, you need to consider possible and common sizes of displays.

Your guest controls the view

Since you can't control the monitor your site guest has, you need to consider possible and common sizes of displays.

Common display sizes and resolutions

Expressed as pixel count width by height

640x480 or VGA older 13" monitors

800x600 or SVGA many 15" & 17" monitors

1024x768 or XGA most but not all 17" monitors

1280x1024 or SXGA 17" & 19" moniotrs

1600x1200 or UXGA 19" and larger

2048x1536 or QXGA

2560x2048 or QSXGA

Even though I've noted monitor sizes beside the resolutions, your guest may be using a strange resolution on a larger monitor.

The area in a browser window that displays your site may be smaller than you'd like it to be.

The browser grid: What's commonly left to display content

on 640x480 - 600 x 300

on 800x600 - 760 x 420

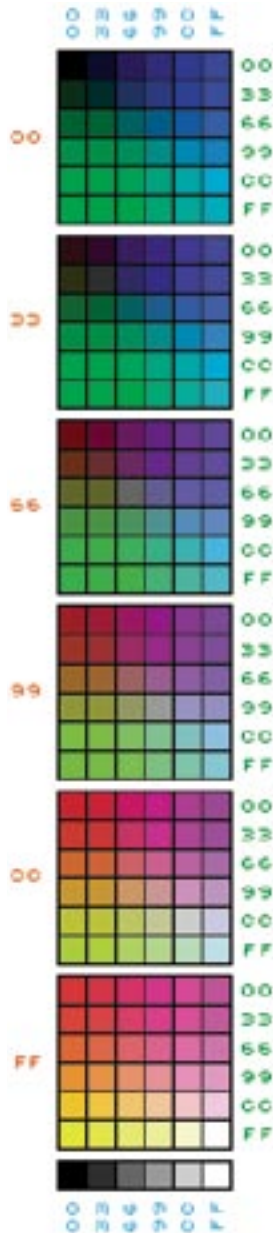
on 1024x768 - 955 x 600

After you allow room for the browser window to do things, the space for the web site is reduced.

02. Monitor and Browser bits

Not all computers offer the same view

The web safe palette is a set of colors that can be counted on to work reasonably well on a wide selection of monitors and operating systems.



4. Color may be an issue

More and more computers are being sold with displays and video drivers that provide a consistent high end output. However, a lot of computers still in use can not be counted on to be the latest and greatest, or to display things the same way as you saw them on your own system.

5. Font use and Web Browsers

Just as with the monitor size, you can count on having an issue with fonts and their display on a web site.

You have no way of knowing what fonts a user has installed, and what their browser is capable of displaying things on screen the same way you intended them to be when you laid out your site. As a result, one needs to be careful in font selection for a web site, and make use of style sheets that will let a site display something that is clear and readable.

6. Avoid OS and Browser Dependence

The web is supposed to be accessible to all. The worst mistake that can be made is to design for a specific browser or OS thus possibly making the content of your pages dependant on a particular configuration, and perhaps inaccessible to your guest/visitor/client.

7. Choose wisely while designing your site

As you gather and prepare material for your site, it is important to remember that your guest comes to your site, and you can not dictate what equipment they have or need. Keeping the variations of monitors, fonts and colors in mind while creating your site can help you, and will make sure your site is viewable and presentable on a variety or computers, browsers and operating systems.

03. Gather your info and content

Web site purpose

Inform? - Entertain? - Sell? - What is the purpose of your site

Since modern web sites can offer a variety of media rich information to the visitor, it is really important that you are very clear on the main message and purpose of your site, and that you present that information in an easy to access and useable format.

One of the challenges when creating a web site is to remember the message and not get caught up in all the 'neat' things the web can deliver. Carefully consider if the feature you want to add will actually be useful and add to the value of the content.

Brainstorm Brainstorm Brainstorm

Brainstorm to create lists and gather data

Depending on the purpose and nature of your site, you will have a variety of information you need to present. The old fashioned technique of brainstorming to gather info and then sorting and sifting it and then assigning it a place in the content you wish to present is vital.

Using brainstorming methods lets you make lists of things you want as part of your message. The challenge is then to organize that data and work on a way to present it in a concise usable manner to the visitor to your site.

Organize and evaluate the data you gathered

After gathering potential page info, you need to organize the info to see what is valid, what may be duplicated, or what may need to be said or presented differently.

Being clear about the purpose and message your site is to present makes all the difference. The approach for an information site is much different than that of an entertainment or sales site. Structuring your message so it is relevant and clear does not mean it will be boring.

Get outside review help

I have found over the years, that often we know what we are talking about, or want to communicate, but the guests/visitors we are targeting may not know or understand what we are talking about. This is of particular concern if technical info is presented.

You need to make sure the information you have gathered and want to present to your target audience is in a format that is clear and they can understand and relate to.

04. Map out your site

Set the logical order for things

Guided tour or non linear experience?

Web sites can contain enormous amounts of valuable information, but unless the user can access it with ease, the info may be useless and never accessed. One of the original concepts of the web is the hyper-link. A way to get to other places and pieces of information via a simple link. The link may be in a structured form such as a menu or navigation bar, or may be key words embedded in text the viewer reads that leads them to the related information.

A good practice is always to have a way for a user to know where they are, and how to get back to key points of reference for your site.

The key to making this work is to create a map of what your site contains, and in so doing be able to provide a way for you to either guide the viewer through the information, or let them explore in their own way but not get totally lost and lose the message on your site.

Web sites provide a new way to get to different bits of information. However, keep in mind that you also have a message you want to present, and you may need to guide the user through your site as well as letting them randomly explore via a variety of links.

Carefully evaluate the navigation links that are needed to access info.

05. Decide on your style and format

Once you have gathered and decided on all the info that you feel needs to be on your site, and a way to link it so that users can navigate the site and get the info you need, you will be ready to set the style and look and feel of the site.

Decide on a workable viewing size

Careful planning and evaluation of what needs to be on pages is critical. There is nothing worse than forcing a simple view to scroll to get vital information.

Create a useable font and color style scheme

A web site needs to be easy to read so the guest can obtain and make sense of the info on it. Choosing clear easy to read fonts and web safe colors will help greatly.

Create an integrated look and feel

A consistent style and presentation format on your site goes a long way toward creating a pleasing web experience for your site visitor.

Aside from technical considerations that relate to monitors and browsers and user experience, the style of a site sets the tone of the information carried on it. To some extent this will be determined by the overall nature of the site.

Are you informing visitors of what you offer, are you trying to entertain them or are you selling a gadget. The style for each approach is usually quite different.

06. Activate & Implement

Create the mock up site

Once you have done the brainstorming and made lists of why you want a site, what your message is and what you want on the site, and some of the style features you may want, it is time to proceed with building a mock up site.

If you are working with someone who builds web sites, they can most often provide a hosted sample that you can then view and test with a variety of users, computers and browsers.

Test Functionality

As the mock up site is being built and is released for private testing, it is important to test on a variety of computers and browser configurations. As mentioned before, you have no control over what your guest is visiting your site with, and it is important that they still get the information they need and a good user experience.

This especially needs to be remembered when it comes to 'fancy' features that may not always work as expected on all computers.

Modify and Review

Once you have tested the site, reviewed it carefully and are happy with the content, it is of course time to go live and either publish the site or replace the previous site.

A careful check and review is a good idea before you go live to the world.

Once the site is up and running, keeping it updated and adding fresh content if appropriate is also a good idea.

Mock-up Notes:

It wasn't that long ago that sites proudly wore an under construction badge. These days that is considered bad practice for the most part. Especially if the new site is publicly hosted, users can get to it, and then find lots of under construction pages with no content.

Features Notes:

While deciding what you want on your site, you may have encountered sites that have some pretty fancy things going on behind the scenes to make them work. Great stuff, but do you really need a 'Flash' intro on a home page? Do you really need fancy menu roll overs and script actions?

All those features cost more, and in some cases may not provide value to the site, let alone always work as expected.

Keep it clear and concise:

The first goal is to make sure the site meets basic needs. It needs to clearly state your message and the info you have to provide.

There is nothing wrong with keeping things simple and elegant.

Frill and fluff does not make your message come across any clearer than well crafted words about who you are and what you do and offer.

07. More useful bits

More about the desktop

A monitor will state that it can display a certain number of pixels wide by a certain number high, or even give a range of resolutions it can provide, all on the same size of screen.

That's great, but when viewing a web site some of that area disappears as you need to subtract for the desktop overhead and what a browser needs to do its thing and show you a web page.



Task bar on Windows OS computers

As shown in the graphic above and below, items such as the Taskbar or Menu bar subtract from the active desktop area the browser can display content in.

Menu bar on Mac OS or many Linux systems



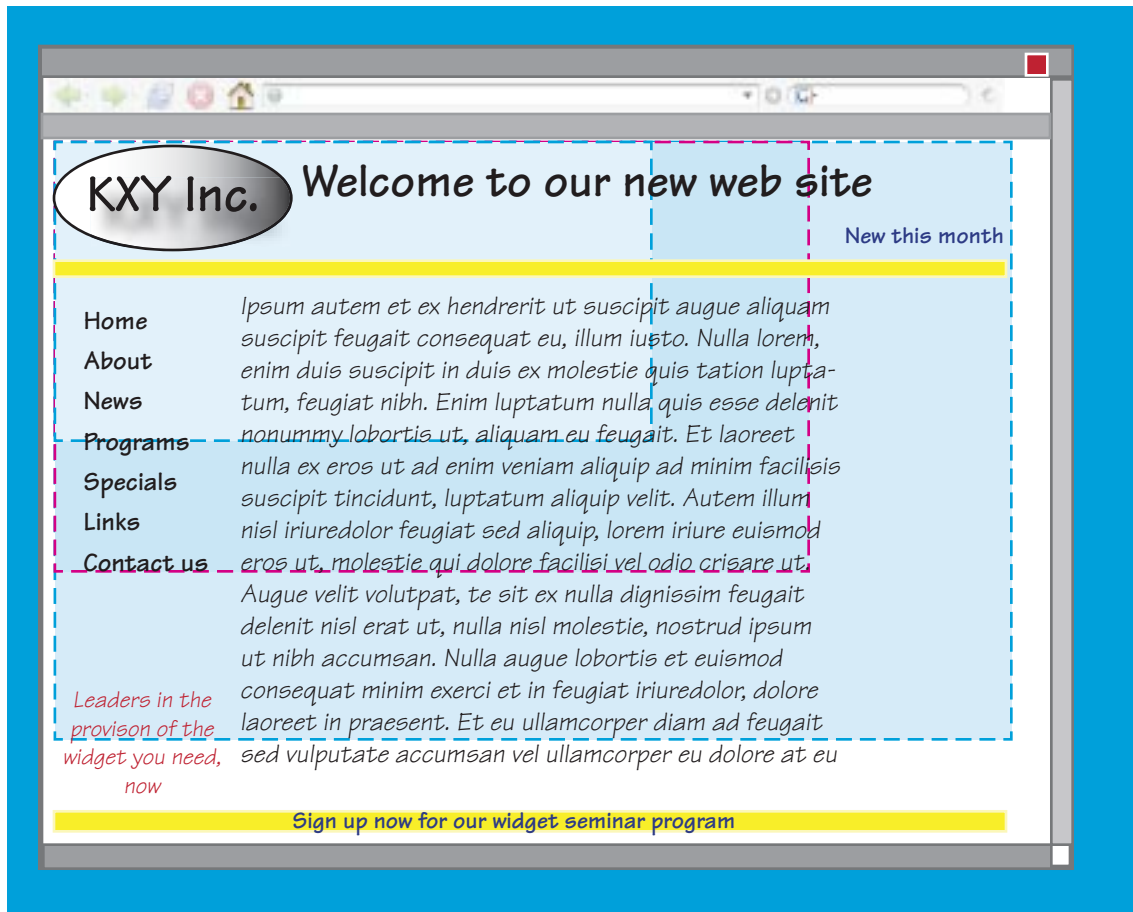
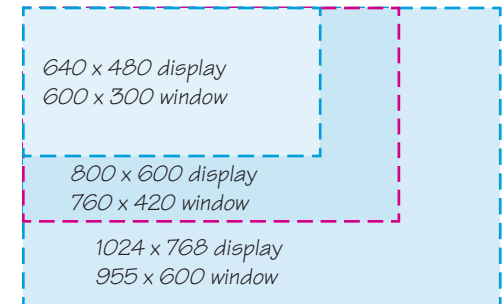
What fits in the browser window

The shaded areas at right and below in the sample show the relative amount of a page a normal browser will show to the user when they load a web page.

As you can see from the mock up below, planning the web page to fit makes a difference. If the site is not planned carefully, users might miss info or need to scroll.

While scrolling is not always a problem the message and impact of a page may vary if a lot of scrolling is required, and some key content item gets broken in the scrolling.

The analogy to consider here would be the impact of putting a viewing mask over a printed page.



07. More useful bits

What others have to say about web building

Web building tips

The notes below come from an Australian web site

As you prepare and consider a web site, do some of the groundwork. This will eventually save you money when you talk to the person who will build your site for you.

- *Make sure you know why you want a website and what you want your website to do for you. Write down some broad goals. This will help you understand your website requirements and find a solution to best suit your needs. We will help you break down your goals into achievable milestones.*
- *Surf the Internet and compile a list of websites that appeal to you in aspects of: color scheme, content, layout and other related design properties. If there is something you don't like, make a note of this too. This will allow us to factor in your personal tastes and preferences into the design process and ensure a result you will be proud of.*
- *Plan the content of your website. Draw a hierarchical tree menu structure so that you can see how everything will fit in and write down the names of your pages. You know your company better than anyone! Write the content for your website - we can help you fine tune and optimize it for the web.*
- *Take some pictures for your website. Snapshots of staff, products or your work environment improve the visual appeal of your website and familiarize your customers and potential customers with your business. High quality pictures are best, your designer can later optimize them for quick downloading.*
- *The more information you can provide your web designer, the quicker the design process will be*

Design and graphics tips

Even though we are talking about web sites, the common graphics tips below make a lot of sense, consider them carefully.

Top 5 Design Disasters to Avoid

*From Jacci Howard Bear,
Your Guide to Desktop Publishing.*

Sometimes we can break the rules, try something different. But for most of us, these simple guidelines will give our desktop documents polish and professionalism. Keep the mark of the beginner out of your desktop publications.

1) Too Many Fonts

Tone down the type. Bored by the monotony of typewritten or single typeface documents, we go wild when confronted by the variety of typefaces in layout and graphics software. In most documents, two or three faces are more than enough.

More: Use Fewer Fonts

2) Type in ALL CAPS

Stop shouting. On-line TYPING IN ALL CAPS is considered shouting and is frowned on in most cases. In print, shouting is never worse than when it is done with decorative or script typefaces. It's ugly. It's hard to read. Just don't do it, PLEASE!

More: Use ALL CAPS with the Right Fonts

3) Overuse of Frames and Boxes

Don't be framed — again. Frames are wonderful — in moderation. A frame loses its ability to emphasize blocks of text if every other block on the page is boxed.

More: Use Frames, Boxes, Borders with a Purpose

4) Amateurish Punctuation

Punctuate like a pro. Learn how to create proper typographical punctuation (curly quotes, apostrophes, em-dashes, etc.) and hanging punctuation. Some programs do it automatically.

More: Use Proper Typographical Punctuation

5) Excessive Use of Clip Art

Cut the clip art clutter. Clip art is wonderful, abundant, and fun to use. It can spice up fliers, newsletters, and posters. Yet too many pictures on a page make it hard for the reader to concentrate on what the documents says. Use clip art with moderation and with purpose. Use clip art that supports your text or illustrates a point.

07. More useful bits

Some notes about fonts and web pages

When designing for output to paper, we can select fonts that are pleasing to us, and know that when printed, they will look as we planned.

When designing for a web site, we run into some problems, the first being that not all computers are configured the same, so that means the user may not have the font in their system we have chosen.

To avoid any display issues, it is wise to use a style sheet and sets of what are considered web safe fonts. These are common display fonts present on most newer computers, and will display correctly.

Fonts work and display differently on screen and in printed output. What looks good on one screen, and also on printed output may not look good when viewed on another system. The screen resolution and pixel density, the OS on the computer, the installed fonts, and the features of the browser all affect the display.

The samples at right give you an overview of what some fonts may look like. However, actual on screen views in a browser may vary somewhat.

Although other fonts can be used, they need to be chosen carefully so that the web pages are still readable and useful.

The pages in this document and most of the text other than call out captions were set using Tekton, which is not a web safe font.

A quick overview of using web safe font style sets

It is common to create a style sheet for a web page. The style sheet then asks the browser to display the text in one of a set of fonts it may be able to find on the guests system.

Shown below are the samples of one of the more common sans-serif [no curly bits] web safe font sets. Such a font set provides clear readable text on a variety of systems, as the computer can use one of the installed fonts it has available and can reproduce.

Verdana - plain

Verdana - plain

Verdana provides a clean easy to read display at a variety of sizes. it can become harsh at larger bold sizes

Verdana - bold

Verdana - plain

Tahoma - plain

Tahoma - plain

Tahoma also provides a clean easy to read display at a variety of sizes.

Tahoma - bold

Tahoma - plain

Arial - plain

Arial - plain

Arial still provides a clean easy to read display, although it may be light in weight on some screens due to it being a variable character width font.

Arial - bold

Arial - plain

Helvetica - plain

Helvetica - plain

Helvetica although a print font still provides a reasonable on screen display. It is also a variable character width font.

Helvetica - bold

Helvetica - plain

sans-serif - plain

sans-serif - plain

The sans-serif option asks the computer to display a plain font that is readable. It is a fallback option if other fonts are not available.

sans-serif - bold

sans-serif - plain

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