

Six principles of good Web design

Designing a Web site requires an eye for visual design, consideration for your audience, some knowledge of the technical aspects of the Web, and, of course, worthwhile content to offer. As you set out to design your Web site, keep the following six principles in mind.

1. Consistency

Make it easy for visitors to understand the structure of your site by keeping the design uniform throughout its pages. Using the same layout, fonts, color palettes, and navigational scheme on every page will make your site visually consistent and user-friendly. An easy way to achieve this consistency is to create, save, and test a page template to begin with and then use it to produce all the pages on the site.

2. Convenience

Make it easy for visitors to find their way around your site. Place a masthead or title at the top of every page that identifies the site and include consistent navigational links to the main pages of the site such as the homepage. Consider providing a site map or index page that offers an overview of the site and links to every page.

3. Readability

Make it easy for visitors to read your pages and to find information. Choose a text color that is easy to read against your chosen background color, such as a dark text on a light background. Avoid placing text against a patterned background, which makes it difficult to read. Break the text into meaningful chunks to make it more readable. Give titles, subtitles, and content text a different visual treatment to establish their hierarchy on a page. Make judicious use of “white space” between sections of text and between text and images to give your pages an uncluttered look. Avoid making your visitors scroll in two directions to view the contents of a page.

4. Speed

Make it easy for visitors to download your pages. If your pages take longer than 20 seconds or so to download with a 56K modem, you will likely lose visitors to your site. Reduce the download time of your site by keeping the number of images (especially large ones) on each page to a minimum. Consider using thumbnail images as links to larger images that appear on their own pop-up pages. Recycle graphics (such as banners, buttons, and icons) throughout your site to decrease the download time for each page. This in turn will make the site more visually consistent. Most important, refrain from gratuitous use of graphics (especially animated ones) that add nothing more than “eye candy” on your pages.

5. Accessibility

Make your site accessible to a broad audience. Your pages may look great on your computer; but someone visiting your site using a different browser, computer, or monitor may see something quite different or may not see the pages at all. While it is impossible to accommodate everyone who might visit your site, there are things you can do that will make your pages compatible with various hardware and software configurations. For instance, use a standard font (such as Arial or Times Roman) for the text on your pages rather than a specialty font (like Broadway or Perpetua) that most visitors are unlikely to have available on their computers. Be considerate of those who access your site using a standard dial-up connection by keeping your page sizes as small as possible. The size of a Web page includes the size of the HTML code, plus the size of each image file, and any additional elements (like musical files) added to the page. For example, if you include four images that are 10K each to a HTML page that is also 10K in size, your overall Web page is 50K in size. Ideally, you should keep your Web page sizes to less than 40K.

Also, bear in mind that the screen resolution of your visitors' monitors will vary and that this will influence how your pages are seen. Conventional wisdom currently suggests that you should design your Web pages for monitors set at 800 x 600 pixels—the most common screen resolution among Web users worldwide. However, most computer monitors sold today are set at 1024 x 768 pixels or higher. Consequently, the industry standard is likely to shift to a higher resolution in the near future.

6. Testing

Before launching your site, test all of its pages with as many different computers and monitors as possible as well as with different versions of Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator. Although you may not be able to fix all the irregularities that occur with different systems, finding out how your pages look to others—especially to your target audience—will enable you to troubleshoot the problems visitors may encounter on your site before you go live.