

Preparation for your Website

Writing for the Web

It is harder—and 25 percent slower—to read print from a computer monitor than on paper. If people cannot easily read a page, they will lose interest and leave. Help them by using:

- Short sentences
- Short paragraphs
- Aim for no more than 65 characters per line by using wide margins. Longer lines slow reading considerably
- Enticing, sometimes intriguing, headings that are not “preachy”
- In longer blocks of writing, use subheadings on different sections to draw the reader on
- It’s helpful to the person setting up the Web pages to have a hard copy of each article to show the formatting, i.e. paragraph breaks, headings and subheadings
- Articles or copy should then be saved as text files from the word processing program. Only .txt files can be inserted into a Web page, .doc files cannot.

Design ideas

As your committee plans for your site, ideas for how the site will look should be forming. Sketch out these ideas and decide on a design to use. Be sure to include navigation, colors and graphics.

Design tips

- Page backgrounds should be very pale, and normal text should be black. The lower the contrast between the text and background, the harder it is to read. Those with color blindness or other visual impairment will struggle with low contrast or colors they cannot distinguish between.
- Each page should have a title that describes that page. The title is what search engines look for and is what appears in bookmarks.
- Provide contact information on every page.
- Use the “alt” attribute in image tags to give each photo or graphic a name (so readers for the visually impaired have a photo or graphic description to read aloud).

Plan site navigation

Navigation is the way your website pages link together. How visitors will navigate through your site is as important as the appearance of the individual pages. Visitors to your site do not know what all the pages contain. He or she is a stranger, navigating “blindly” through your site and needs as much help as possible.

It is very important that those visiting your site know where they are, where they have been and where they can go.

Navigation Tips

- “Splash pages”—those that are nothing but a large graphic plus an “enter” link—have been proven to lose visitors. People are lost at every unnecessary click.
- Keep pages narrow so the user doesn’t have to scroll horizontally.
- Use the top and left sides of the screen for navigation.
- Minimize the number of page clicks to get to information.
- Long pages turn off visitors. Keep your pages short. Clicking is preferable to scrolling when dealing with a lot of information.
- Use navigation links which explain in sufficient, enticing detail what each page offers.
- “You are here” pointers can help the visitor know where they are.
- Each page should be written as a logical entry point for a visitor, who may arrive directly at the page from a search engine and will then want to know how to reach the rest of the site. It may therefore be wise to have a full set of navigation links on each page, rather than just on the homepage.

Choosing fonts or letter styles

Most people find that sans-serif fonts (fonts without curves at the ends) are clearer—indeed research has shown that sans-serif fonts are 20 percent quicker to read from a monitor. If no “font face” is specified, most people will read the

text in their browser's default serif font.

Font tips

- Don't overuse all caps, bold letters, large type or italics.
- Use one font size or point size for headings and another for text—don't go font happy and use too many.
- Use lots of “white space” (empty space) around text. Break up the text into short paragraphs. Text which is narrower than full-screen is also easier to read.
- “Reversed-out” print, i.e. pale text on a dark background, is hard to read and should not be used except for headings or very short blocks of text.
- Use “san-serif” fonts, like Arial (PC) or Helvetica (Mac), which are 20% faster to read on a computer monitor.

Graphics

Graphics for the Web must be in either of two formats: GIF or JPEG. As a general rule, GIF's are used for solid color graphics, such as logos and line art; and JPEG's are for photos or graphics that have color blends.

Most graphics programs can be used to create GIF's and JPEG's. Two Adobe programs, PhotoShop and Illustrator, offer the greatest range of graphic processing and compressing for the Web, but other less expensive programs are available, i.e. Paint Shop Pro, Fireworks, Freehand, ImageReady.

Graphics tips

- Inexpensive scanners can be used to scan photos and artwork for use on Web pages.
- Most photo processing businesses will save photos for you in JPEG format. Free graphics are also available on the Internet.
- Graphics should be small—under 5K—or they will take a long time to download. Many users have slow Internet connections and will have for many years to come. Learn how to shrink file-sizes of graphics with minimum loss of quality.

Choosing your software

Web pages are written in HyperText Markup Language (HTML). Knowing HTML is not necessary for designing Web pages, but a basic understanding of the tags and attributes helps, even when using “What You See Is What You Get” (WYSIWYG) editing programs. A Web page can be created by using a text editor to write the HTML code, i.e. the notepad on a PC, SimpleText on the Macintosh or saving a document as text in a word processing program. HTML created in this way is no different than code written in commercial HTML editor programs.

There are HTML editor programs that let you write the HTML directly, i.e. BBEdit or HomeSite; others, called What You See Is What You Get (WYSIWYG) editors, write the code for you. With them you see the page as you are designing it. PageMill, Microsoft FrontPage and Dreamweaver are examples of WYSIWYG editor programs.