

Web Design Dos and Don'ts

There is no absolute right or wrong way to design a web site. When people ask me about the best way to design a site, it always seems to come down to “It depends.”

Your design decisions will depend on the type of site you're publishing. Personal sites, entertainment sites, and corporate e-commerce sites all have different priorities and abide by different guidelines, both in terms of content and how that content is presented. And, as you might have already guessed, it depends a lot on your audience, their reason for visiting your site, etc.

Good and bad design decisions are always relative. There are no “nevers”—there's always a site out there for which a web design “don't” makes perfect sense and is really the best solution.

Consider the contents of this chapter to be general guidelines. These are some pointers to possible improvements and some red flags for common beginner traps that can be easily avoided. In the end, you'll need to decide what works best for your site.

General Page Design Advice

The following dos and don'ts apply to the formatting and structure of the whole page.

DO...

Keep all file sizes as small as possible for quick downloads.

Because...

Quick downloads are crucial for a successful user experience. If your pages take forever to download, your visitors may grow impatient and go surf elsewhere. At the very least, they'll get cranky.

DO...

Design for a screen size of 800 × 600 pixels ([see note](#)) unless you are certain that your audience will be viewing your pages with a different configuration.

2007 NOTES

This article was originally published in 2003 as Chapter 21 of [Learning Web Design](#), 2nd edition.

It has been edited to reflect current best practices and my own current opinions.

In this chapter

General page design advice

Text-formatting tips

Graphics advice

Aesthetic suggestions

Jen's pet peeves

2007 NOTES

Given the improved resolution of desktop and laptop monitors, many designers feel comfortable designing for a 1024 × 768 screen size.

Put your most important messages in the first screenful.

Because...

When you design larger page sizes, you risk parts not being visible for users with older, smaller monitors.

DO...

Put your most important messages (who you are, what you do, etc.) in the first screenful (the top 350 pixels of the page).

Because...

Most users make judgments about a site based on that first impression, without taking the time to scroll down for more information.

DO...

Limit the length of your pages to two or three “screenfuls.”

Because...

Longer pages that require a lot of scrolling are unmanageable for online reading and make it more difficult for readers to find their place. For some reason, users do not like to scroll; they’d rather keep moving forward. It is better to break long flows of text into a few separate pages and link them together (Figure 1).

DON'T...

Design specifically for one browser or platform, unless you are 100% certain your audience will be viewing your pages under that configuration.

Because...

You never want to alienate your visitors. Nothing is more off-putting than arriving at a site only to find a sign that says, “You must have X browser running on X platform with X, Y, Z plug-ins to use this site.” The only thing worse is to find that nothing works.

DON'T...

Use too many animations, especially on pages with content you want people to read.

Because...

While animations are effective in drawing attention, users find them annoying and distracting when they are trying to read the text on the page. Even one looping animation can be an annoyance to some people. A whole page of spinning and flashing is a disaster (Figure 2).

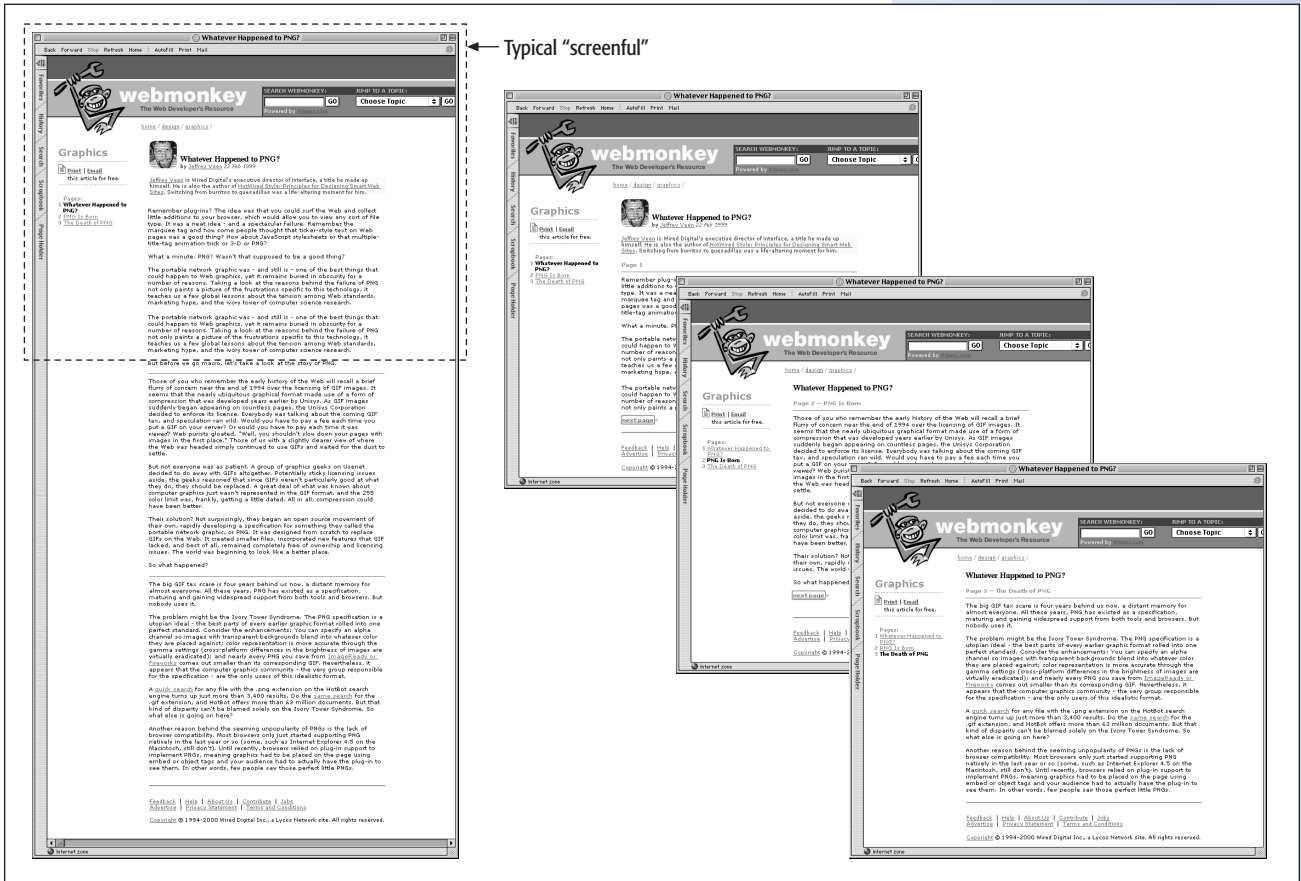


Figure 1. Avoid long scrolling pages. Webmonkey (www.webmonkey.com) does a good job of dividing their long articles into smaller, more manageable pieces that are linked together with a clear navigational system.

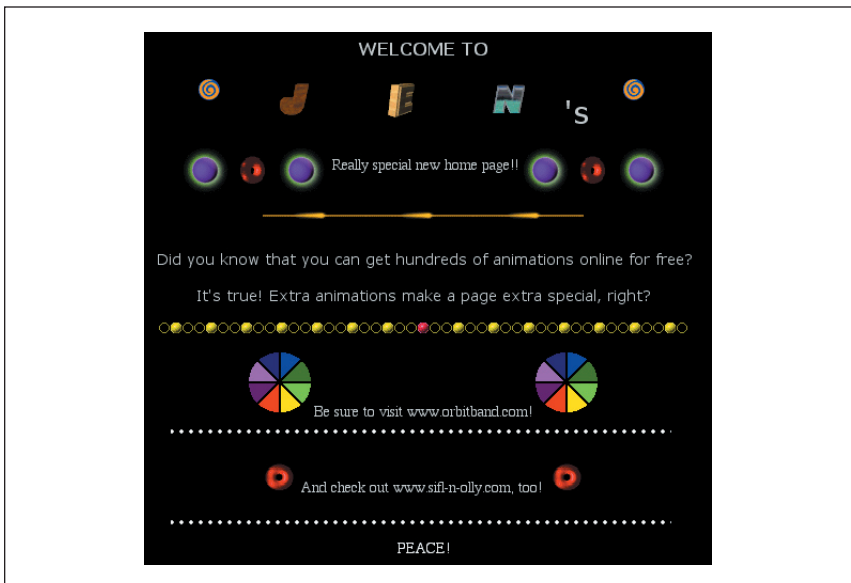


Figure 2. Here's an example of too much animation. Every letter, bullet, and divider bar is animated. This may look like an exaggeration, but I have seen pages like this and worse. This page ([animation.html](#)) is available for viewing in the *chap27* materials folder.

DON'T...

Use “Under Construction” signs. In particular, don’t make “under construction” pages that appear after a user clicks on the link. If your site or section isn’t ready, simply don’t post it.

Because...

Although you may intend to show that you have information that will be available soon, “Under Construction” signs and other placeholders just make it look like you don’t have your act together. I especially hate it when I end up on a “construction” page after I’ve taken the time to follow a link from the home page (Figure 3). Providing links that go nowhere is a waste of your visitors’ time and patience. An alternative is to include a Coming Soon section on the home page that explains what you are planning for the site without the dead-end links.



Figure 3. “Under Construction” pages like this are annoying. If the section is not available, don’t provide a link to it.

Text Tips

These tidbits of wisdom pertain to the formatting of text. In many cases, text on web pages follows the same design guidelines as text on a printed page. Some of these recommendations are applicable only to the special requirements of the web medium.

DO...

Take the time to proofread your site.

Because...

Typos and bad grammar reflect badly on your site and your business. If your authoring tool does not have a built-in spellchecker, be sure to have another person carefully review your content.

DO...

Make the structure of your information clear by giving similar elements the same design and important elements more visual weight (using size, space, or color) (Figure 4).

Because...

It enables your readers to understand your content at a glance and speeds up the process of finding what they need.



Figure 4. This excerpt from a past Webmonkey page (www.webmonkey.com) uses type treatments effectively to convey the structure of the information. Article listings have the same structure, with the article title given the most visual weight. Section titles are also treated similarly and are given lots of space to set them apart from other listings.

DO...

Break your content into small paragraphs or, even better, write your content specifically for web reading in the first place.

Because...

It is easier to read text on a screen when it is in small, easy-to-scan portions. Web text paragraphs should be as short as possible, or even be reduced to bulleted lists.

DO...

Change your link and visited-link colors when using a dark background color or pattern.

Because...

The default dark blue link color is readable only against light colors.

DON'T...

Set type in all capital letters.

Because...

All capital letters are harder to read than upper- and lowercase letters (Figure 5). In addition, it makes it look like you're shouting your message, which is just rude.

DON'T...

Set more than a few words in italics.

Because...

Most browsers just slant the regular text font to achieve an "italic" (Figure 5). The result is often nearly unreadable, especially for large quantities of text at small sizes.

DON'T...

Set text in all capital, bold, and italics (Figure 5).

Because...

Three wrongs don't make a right. This is just overkill, but I see it all the time.

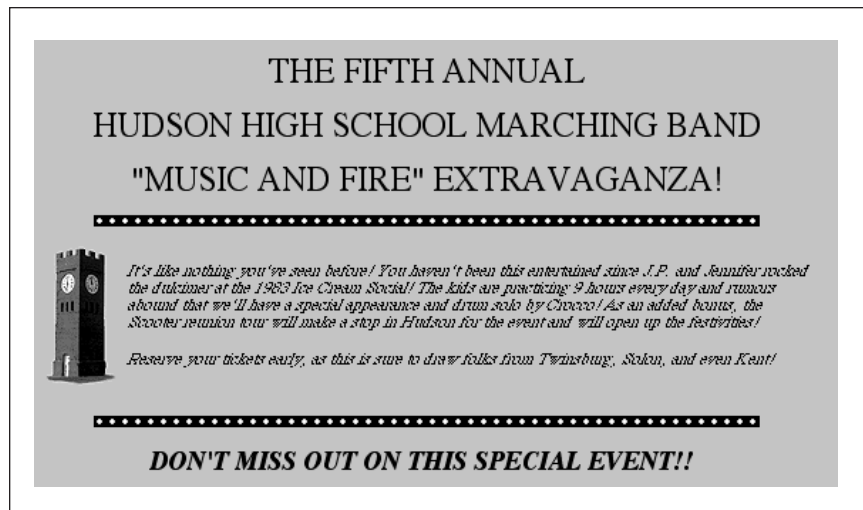


Figure 5. Avoid setting large amounts of text in all capital letters or all italic text, because it makes it more difficult to read. A combination of capitals, italic, and bold styles is overkill.

DON'T...

Insert line breaks unless you really mean them.

Because...

Text wraps differently for each user, depending on the browser's default text size setting and the width of the browser window. If you've inserted hard line breaks (
 to format lines of text, you run the risk of the text rewrapping in an awkward way (Figure 6).

DON'T...

Set type significantly smaller than the browser's default.

Because...

Type that is set small may look tidy on your machine, but it may be downright unreadable on a browser with its type set to a smaller size than yours (Figure 7). Using em or percentage units in style sheets will at least allow users to zoom the text larger.

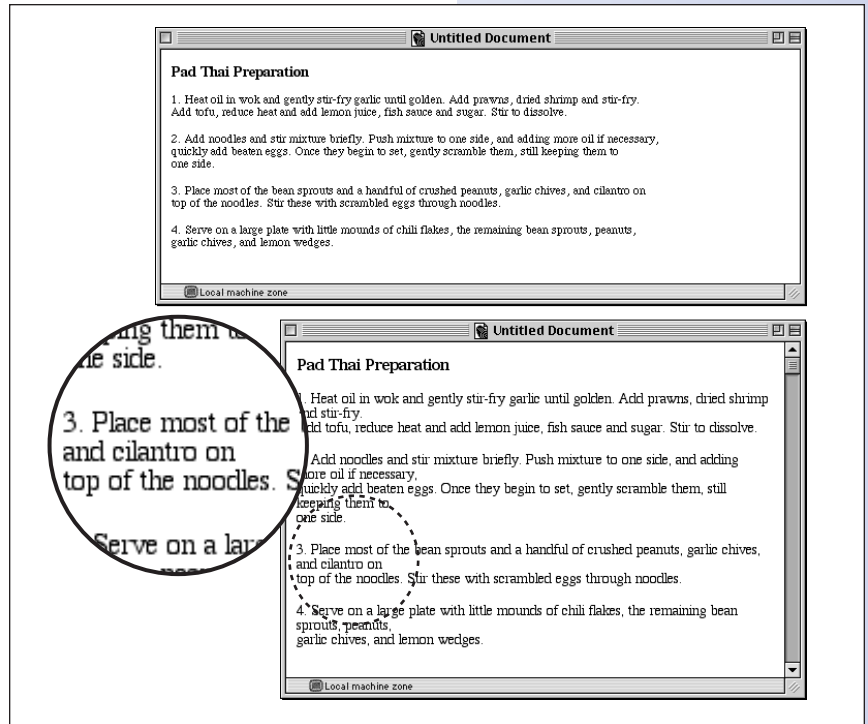


Figure 6. I've entered a break (
) at the end of each line in this example to control the width of the text. Unfortunately, with different browser settings the lines rewrap, resulting in a number of stubby little lines.



Figure 7. Type that is set small may be completely unreadable depending on the user's browser setup and platform (Macs tend to display text smaller than PCs).

Graphics Advice

These dos and don'ts apply to both graphic production and placing graphics on the page using HTML.

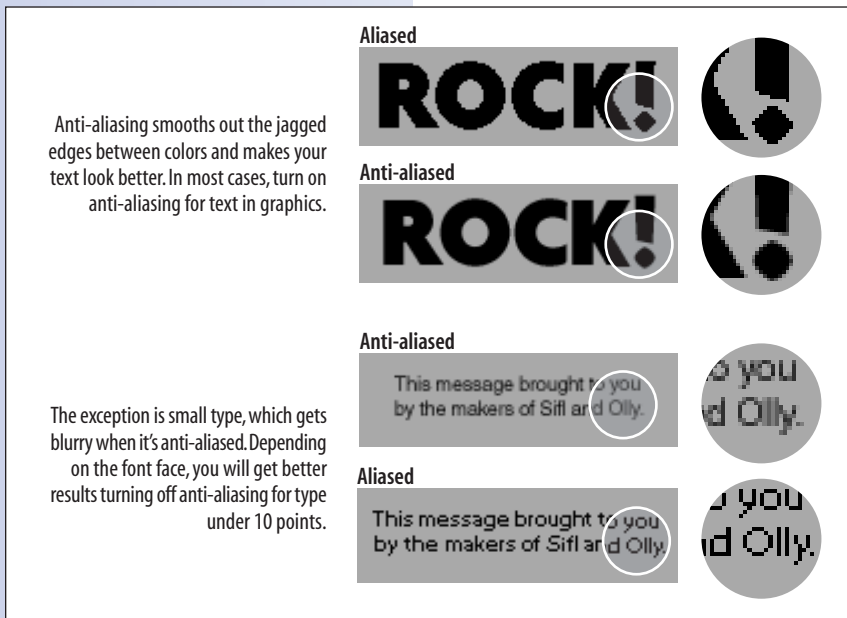


Figure 8. Proper use of anti-aliasing will improve the quality of your images.



Figure 9. Halos, the ugly fringe around transparent graphics, are easily preventable.

Clean and well-produced graphics help make your site look professional.

DO...

Use anti-aliasing for most text in graphics (except for text under 9 or 10 points, depending on the font).

Because...

Smooth anti-aliased edges will make your graphics look more polished and professional. For some fonts under 10 points, however, anti-aliasing may blur the whole letter shape and make the text less readable. It is usually better to turn off anti-aliasing for very small text (Figure 8).

DO...

Aim to keep graphic files under 30 KB. Exceptions may be made, however, for sites aimed at high-bandwidth audiences.

Because...

A 30 KB graphic could take approximately 30 seconds to download over a modem Internet connection, and that's a long time to wait for something to appear on the screen. Of course, you should keep all graphic file sizes as small as possible (I aim for under 10 KB). Ideally, the total of all the graphics on the page should be under 30 KB.

DO...

Take the time to prevent halos around transparent graphics.

Because...

Halos in your images make your graphics look sloppy and unprofessional (Figure 9).

DO...

Turn off the blue border around linked graphics.

Because...

Blue boxes around linked graphics detract from the design of the page (Figure 10, top). To turn off the border, use a CSS style rule that sets the border for linked images to `none`:

```
a img { border: none; }
```

Your graphics will blend more smoothly into the page.

DO...

Provide alternative text for every graphic. Alternate text displays in the event that the graphic doesn't.

Because...

This is the easiest way to make the content of your site accessible to a wider audience, including people with text-only browsers and users who have their graphics turned off for faster page downloading. Specify alternative text using the `alt` attribute in the `` element. In addition, if the `alt` attribute is missing, your document will not be valid.

DON'T...

Make graphics that look like buttons but don't link to anything (Figure 11).

Because...

A 3-D beveling effect is a strong visual cue for “click here.” I've seen some sites that used this visual effect on ordinary graphical labels. I was duped into clicking on them, and nothing happened. Similarly, do not add a gratuitous rollover effect to a button-like graphic that is not a link.



Figure 10. Linked graphics look much better with borders turned off.

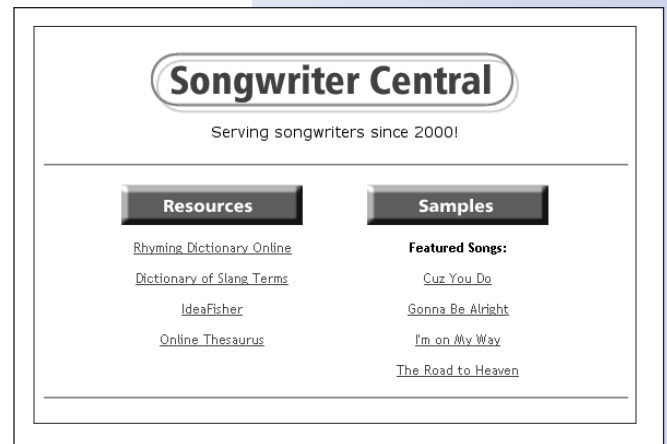


Figure 11. These section header graphics beg to be clicked because of the 3-D bevel effect. Contrary to appearances, they are not buttons and don't do anything.

Cluttered and chaotic web sites tend to reflect badly on the company the site represents.

DON'T...

Make thumbnail-sized images by scaling down full-sized images with the `width` and `height` attributes in the `` tag (or with `width` and `height` style properties).

Because...

It forces an unnecessarily large download. It is better to make a second graphic at the thumbnail size that will download quickly.

DON'T...

Link thumbnail graphics to similarly sized images.

Because...

It is common to use thumbnail images as links to their full-sized counterparts, so it is frustrating and a waste of time to click on a thumbnail only to get another thumbnail. Users expect a view with more detail when a thumbnail is a link. If you don't have a significantly larger image, don't link the small version.

Aesthetic Suggestions

The way your site looks communicates a certain level of professionalism. A cluttered and chaotic web site tend to reflect badly on the company the site represents. Even if corporate image isn't one of your priorities, basic readability is important for any site. Here are a few suggestions that pertain to that all-important first impression.

DON'T...

Center everything on the page.

Because...

Centering the whole page makes the content difficult to read (Figure 12). This is not to say that you should never center anything. For some types of information, particularly when the page contains just a few elements or when you want a formal tone, center alignment is the best choice, both logically and aesthetically.

It is best to stick with left justification for pages with a significant amount of content. I also recommend establishing one or two strong lines of alignment and stick with them. This creates a clean first impression and makes it easier to find information.

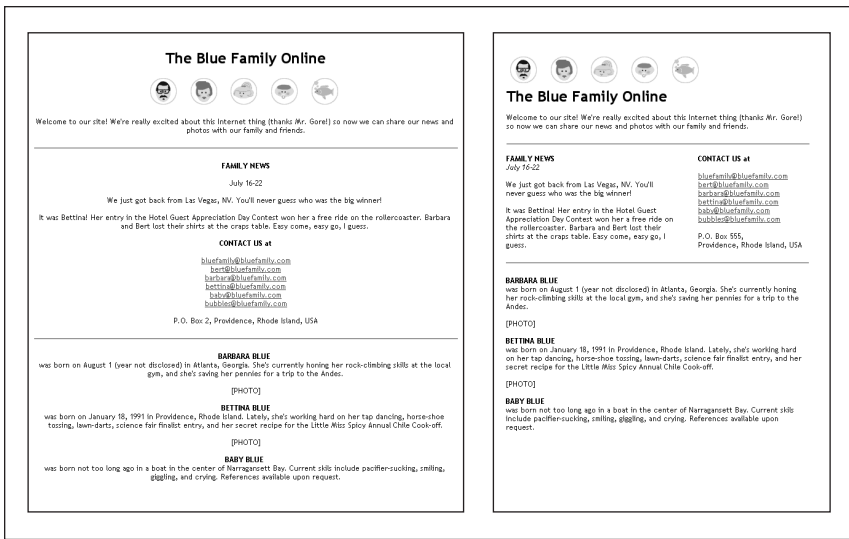


Figure 12. Avoid centering all the content on a page. Not only are the edges ragged and untidy, it is more difficult to read since each line starts at a different position. Notice how much clearer the page is when I use a create strong left alignments.

DON'T...

Mix alignments. In other words, avoid combinations of left-justified, centered, and right-justified elements on the same page (Figure 13).

Because...

Not only is it less elegant than a page with a single alignment, it also hinders clear communication because the readers' eyes need to jump all over the page.

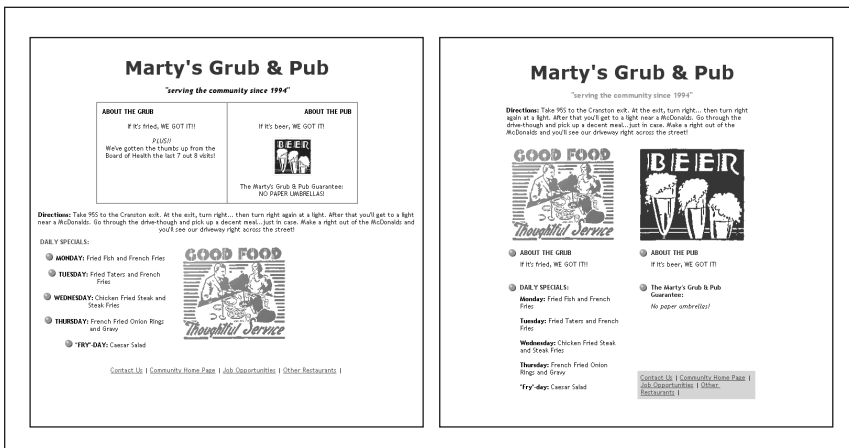


Figure 13. The messy page on the left suffers from the combination of too many text alignments. The page on the right takes the same elements but gives the page a cleaner (and more usable) look by sticking with a consistent alignment.

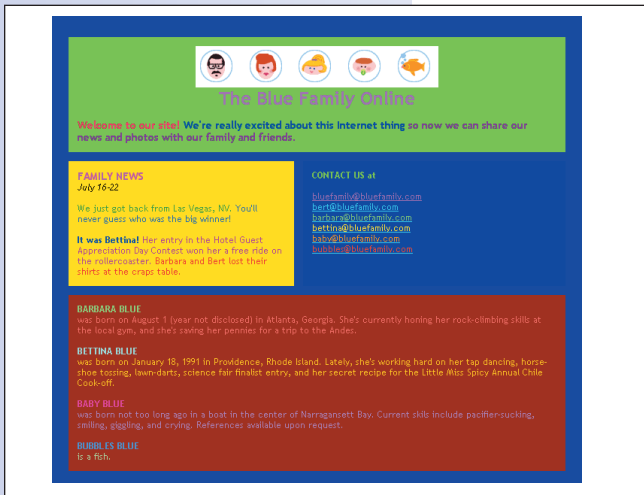


Figure 14. This page suffers from color overkill. Making every element a different bright color is a sure way to create visual chaos.

DON'T...

Use too many colors.

Because...

It's visually chaotic and makes it difficult to prioritize the information (Figure 14). Better to choose one or two dominant colors and one highlight color and stick with them throughout the site.

DON'T...

Use wild background tile patterns (Figure 15).

Because...

It makes it difficult to read the text on the page. Background patterns should be as subtle as possible. I use only backgrounds that have solid colors in the text areas.

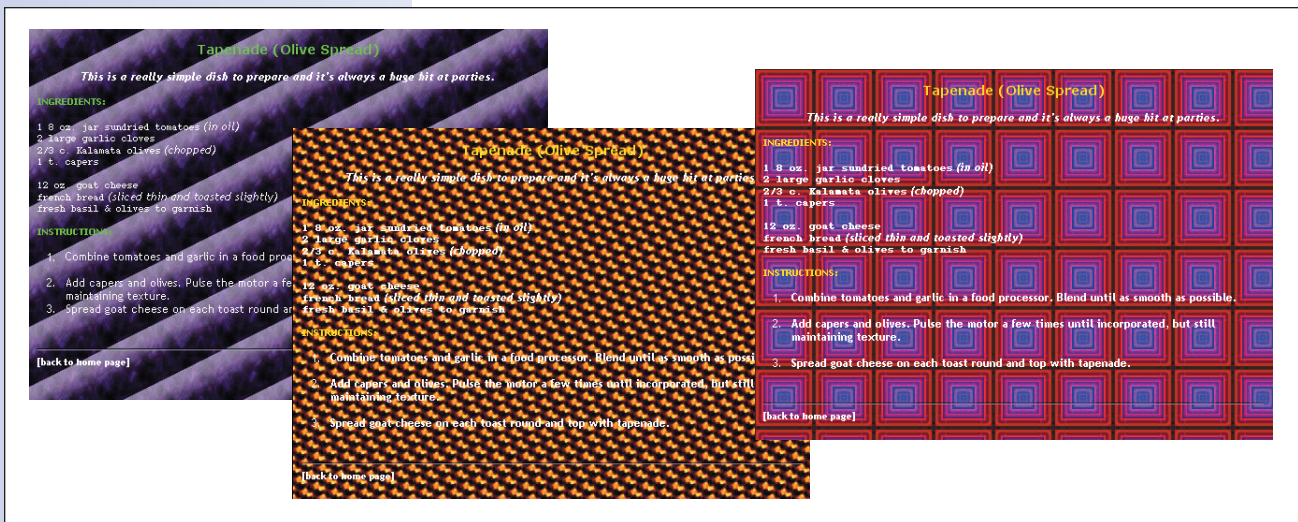


Figure 15. Bold background patterns can make the text on the page unreadable..

DESIGN TIP

Consider the Existing Corporate Image

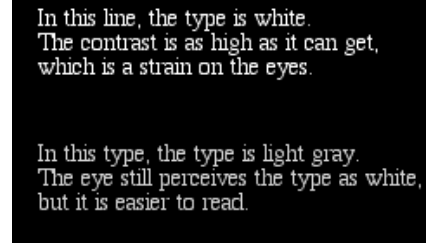
Tie the look and feel of your site into your corporate identity (if one exists). Web sites should be considered part of a unified identity package. Your audience should be able to recognize your company whether they see it in print, on television, or online. Too often, web designers take the look and feel of a web site in their own direction, which foils any attempt to build a coherent and recognizable corporate image or brand.

DON'T...

Automatically use white type on dark backgrounds, particularly for large amounts of small text.

Because...

The contrast is too high and it can be uncomfortable to read (Figure 16). Better to choose a very light shade instead, such as a light gray against black, or a very pale blue against dark blue. The text will still be clear, and the slightly lower contrast is more gentle on the eyes, making your page look less glaring overall.



In this line, the type is white.
The contrast is as high as it can get,
which is a strain on the eyes.

In this type, the type is light gray.
The eye still perceives the type as white,
but it is easier to read.

Figure 16. Lots of white type on a dark background can be uncomfortable to read. Try lightly tinting the text color instead.

Jen's Pet Peeves

Granted, these recommendations may come down to personal taste, but I would be shirking my responsibilities if I didn't at least mention them.

DON'T...

Assume a black background will automatically make your site "cool" (Figure 17).

Because...

If it isn't done right, the effect can be overly dramatic and "heavy metal." Of course, it can be handled very elegantly, so there are plenty of exceptions. But for the average site (especially a small-business site), black backgrounds are inappropriate.

DON'T...

Use a globe, especially a spinning globe (Figure 17).

Because...

Globes as icons have been so overused that they no longer carry any meaning at all. This is just a visual cliché.

DON'T...

Use rainbow dividers, especially animated rainbow dividers. Same goes for other illustrated and animated page elements typical of what you'd find at a free clip art site.

Because...

They are sure-fire indication of amateur web design and have been since the very beginning. Not cool, just tacky (Figure 17).



Figure 17. The web page of my nightmares!

This page has it all:

- Gratuitous black background
- Animated rainbow dividers
- A spinning globe
- An unreadable link color
- Meaningless icons
- Too many colors
- Bad alignment

TRY IT

Exercise 1: Fix the Nightmare Page

It is plain to see that the page in Figure 17 could use some improvement.

All of the source files for this page have been provided in the *chap21* materials folder. Using the knowledge and skills you've picked up in this chapter and throughout the book, redesign the page in a professional manner.

Pay attention to readability and visual style. Think about colors, alignment, and text formatting. You may also want to create your own set of graphics.

There is no answer to this exercise in the back of the book, but it is an opportunity to combine the skills from this chapter and the rest of the book.

Test Yourself

Decide whether each of these design tips is a Do or a Don't.

1. Design specifically for Internet Explorer on Windows.
2. Change the link and visited link colors when you use dark backgrounds.
3. Design most pages to fit 800×600 or 1024×768 pixel monitors.
4. Use only white type on black backgrounds.
5. Use an "Under Construction" page if your real page isn't done to let users know you're working on it.
6. Use animation to attract attention to each important thing on the page.
7. Set content in all capital letters.
8. Include the `alt` attribute for images.
9. Make text in graphics anti-aliased when it is 10 point and larger.
10. Use a spinning globe whenever possible.