

Introduction to Good Usability

An e-book by peterpixel

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Introduction

Why Read it?

This guide is especially handy if you haven't done a lot of webdesign yet or if you are involved in webdesign but don't do any of the real work. I hope to shed some light on some common interface elements and mistakes people often make with them.

Why Write it?

The reason for writing is because many people (definitely myself included) make many mistakes when making their first website. A lot of books have been written in the past but the threshold for reading them, especially if you have never built a site, is quite big, hence this short guide. This is by no means a complete guide or solid set of rules, but it is definitely a good start.

In General

Stick to the Rules

One of the most important things to remember when designing a site is that the wheel has already been invented. Odds are, even as an experienced designer, you will not be able to design a new sort of interface that actually works well. Not to say that it isn't possible, but it highly unlikely. Being unique and standing out when it comes to interfaces are not always a good thing.

Borrow

Take a look at some of the bigger sites. Usually, a lot of time and money is spent on making them and usually (not always) they are applying common sense. Take notes on how others do it.

You are Less Interesting Than you Think

There are more than 100 million sites on the internet. People don't have all the time in the world to take a look at yours. Therefore, be brief and to the point. As the cliché goes: Less is more.

Interface Design Guides

Breadcrumbs

Electronics > Audio & Video > TVs & HDTVs

Showing 1 - 24 of 2,339 Results

Amazon's take on breadcrumbs. They are located at the top of the page with the last crumb not clickable.

Use Corresponding Labels

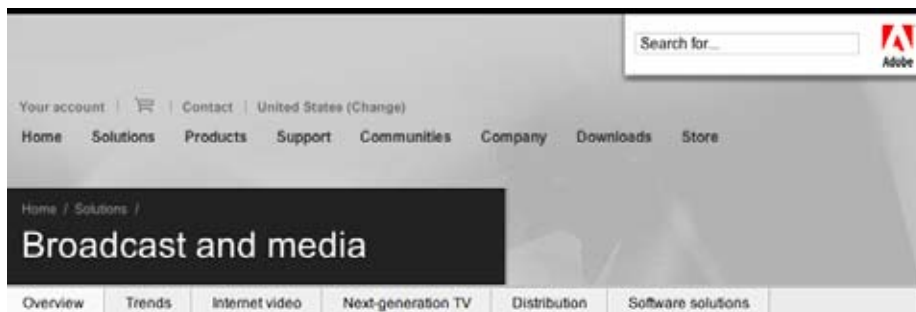
Make sure your crumbs are called the same as the corresponding location, for example do not call a crumb "Personalize" if the page is called "Settings".

Aid Navigation, Not Replace It

Your crumbs should act as a way for users to locate themselves on your site when they arrive and not as a replacement for navigation.

Don't Link to Current Page

The very last crumb in your breadcrumbs should not be clickable. It should simply serve as an indication of where you are within the site. Linking to the current page is generally discouraged.



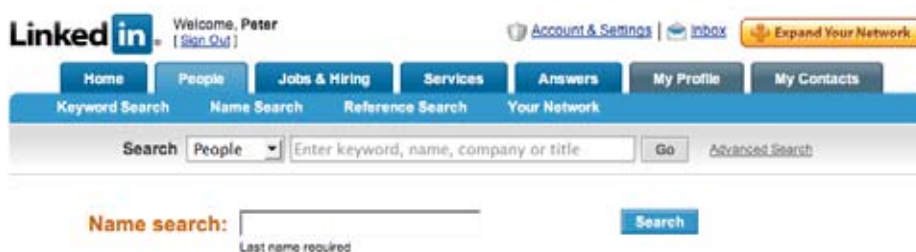
Adobe attempts to convert the last crumb into a header, perhaps creating confusion as to where the last crumb has disappeared to.

Tabs

The tab metaphor is one of the only metaphors from the office that work really well on screen. It has been adopted widely, both on the web and in software interfaces.

One Row of Tabs

The best way to implement tabs are to have only one row of them. When we stack tab rows on top of each other, the interface will become cluttered and the user will have a much harder time to navigate and distinguish between tabs. Please note that this is not the case when the bottom row of tabs have an hierarchical relationship with the top row. In that case two rows of tabs are fine, but be sure to indicate that the bottom row is directly related to the top row. Make them visually distinct.



LinkedIn has two tab rows with the bottom row directly related to the top row. The active tab is clearly indicated and the 2nd row is visually distinct.

Short Labels

It is important to label tabs but keep tab labels short, using two or three words at most.

Active tab indication

Clearly indicate which tab is currently active. This can be done through various ways, color indication works best.

Home Page Tab

There is an age old discussion on whether the Home page (if you have one) should have a tab or not. Cases and situations vary but I believe that the home page should indeed be a tab. The reason for this is that it corresponds with the users idea of the site. The counter argument is that it doesn't correspond with the structure of the site but this shouldn't be an argument: your users do not care about the structure and in all likelihood, they don't know what it is.

Tabs Should Be Tabs

Tabs should not be a replacement of breadcrumbs, meaning that the first crumb shouldn't be removed with the argument that it is being represented by the active tab.

Linking

Conform

The best approach for links are to follow standards. Links should preferably be underlined and making them blue won't hurt either. Visited links should also be indicated as such.



Apple gets their links and breadcrumbs mostly right, except for the fact that the last crumb is not clickable although is identical to the link to its left.

Easily Identifiable

Links should be clearly identified. If you do not want to underline or make them blue, make sure they are visually different from surrounding content. They should stand out. Be careful though, no one wants to read a passage littered with highly visual and distracting links. If the link is a button or a image, make sure it changes its state when a user hovers over it. An exception to this is the logo or homepage link, located at the top of your site. Through the years we have come to expect that clicking on the logo will take us to the home page.

[Prev](#)



[Next](#)

Windows Live search enlarged the clickable area available by making the entire box containing the page number clickable.

Spacing

Make sure you leave enough space between links to avoid users clicking the wrong link.

New Tab or Not?

Should a link load in a new tab? Arguments can be found for and against both options. The context of the link is an important factor in deciding this. If a user isn't likely to want to navigate away (permanently) from the page, let links open in a new tab. PDF's are also best shown in new tabs. If you are linking local

content in your site, stay away from links opening in a new tab. It is better to let users decide whether to let a link open up in a new page or not than to force this decision on them.

Indicate What is Being Linked To

I am not talking about preview thumbnails of links but more about small visual indications: icons or preferably text, when applicable. Heavy content such as mp3's or PDF's should be indicated as such. Also avoid naming links "click here". It tells me nothing about the link and requires blind faith on the part of the users.

52. [^] Australian Film Commission. What are Australians Watching?, [Free-to-Air, 1999–2004 TV](#)
53. [^] It's an Honour - Symbols - Australian National Anthem [and](#) DFAT - "The Australian National Anthem" [\(2002 \(updated 2005\)\)](#) "National Symbols [\(PDF\)](#)", *Parliamentary Handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 29th Edition.
54. [^] Department of Immigration and Citizenship [\(PDF\)](#)

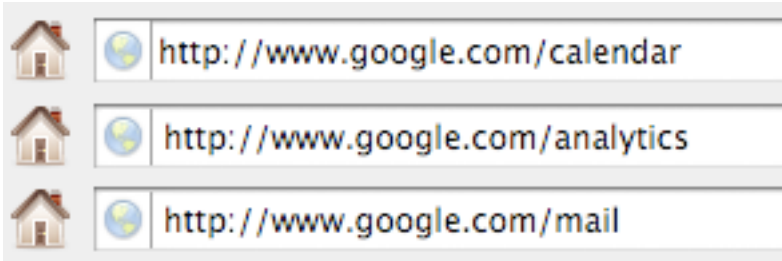
Wikipedia clearly indicates internal, external and exceptional file links.

URL Shortening

The usage of services that shorten your URL like tinyurl is a tough question. Although shortening the URL might look better, it gives the user no idea of what is being linked to. The context is also important. If I am not likely to type the URL, I wouldn't care if it is too long. The flip side is that when users make a printout of your site, URL shortening is preferable.

URL Usability

Note that not encouraging services like tinyurl does not mean you should ignore URL length or naming, to the contrary. The



Google redirects you to the correct service if you type in any of these URL's, making it easy to remember where their products can be found.

best scenario would be for your users to guess what page they are on, simply by looking at the URL, especially if they are accessing major subsections of your site.

In-page Links

Try to stay away from in-page linking (anchor tags). This does not conform with the users model of a link. We expect a new page and not a new location within the current page.

Email Adresses

At all costs, avoid the mailto link unless the title of the link is an email address. Clicking a link and seeing a mail client open instead of a new tab is not expected by the user.

Overlays

Breaks Convention

I would advise you to use an overlay sparingly. However cool they may seem, like linking within a document, they do not conform to our mental model of a link. If you want to use an overlay ask yourself whether the user might want to open that link in a new, dedicated tab. If the answer is “no”, you can consider



An example of an overlay, or Lightbox.

an overlay.

System Critical

A good time to use an overlay is when you need system critical feedback from a user (which shouldn't be that often). This might be the case when, for instance, you have to login to access certain information.

Drop Down Menu

Mimic OS behavior

When you are implementing a drop down menu in your site, it is best to completely copy operating system behavior.

Beware of Hiding Underlying Content

By nature drop down menus, when active, covers other content. Take care of how long a menu is and what it is covering when open.

Consistent Naming



The drop down menu on the Digg site indicates clearly where I am hovering

Like breadcrumbs and tabs, take care that you name your menu items and pages consistently.

Never Nest

Avoid nested menus at all cost. They are hard to navigate

through, especially on the web. If you must, stick to two layers of menus.

Scroll

Never Horizontal Scroll

In the Western world we read from left to right, top to bottom. Because of this, scrolling horizontally is not easy. Take care that your users screen resolution is wide enough for your site. At the time of writing, a screen resolution of 1024x768 are most common. Take into account though, that your browser takes up some space too.

Stick to Operating System Defaults

Styling your scrollbar should be avoided. A user will recognize his system default scrollbar much quicker than a styled scrollbar.

Hide Scrollbar When Necessary

When a scrollbar is not needed, hide it. Seeing a scrollbar when there is nothing to scroll will confuse users.

Avoid Nested Scrollbars

Scrollbars within a page should be avoided. The only real excuse to use this is when scrolling the entire page is not preferable and the focus should remain at the top.

Icons

Icons versus Labels

The problems with icons are that when they don't work, they *really* don't work. Labels on the other hand, are much less likely to confuse, even if they are bad. Icons are also much more labour intensive to create. A picture is also much more ambiguous than a word and pictures can mean different things in different cultures, so take care when using icons.

Stick to a Family

If you use icons, stick to a family. Line them all up and ask yourself whether they could be related. It is not just the colors of icons that make them look alike, but also their shape, light reflection and texture.



A set of the Tango icon library, with strict guidelines.

Content

Titles

Hierarchy Important

Do the squint test and if your titles are not easily identifiable, take another look at your text hierarchy. Your titles should be strong. The use of Serifs and or less legible fonts are acceptable in titles. This speaks for itself, but keep a title close to the top of the page. Make it one of the first things you see after the top navigation.

Splash Screen

Obvious

This should be easy for everybody: stay away from splash screens at all times. The user wants content, not a welcome message. I can't think of any justifiable reason to use a splash screen.



Tech news site Wired clearly indicates the importance of articles through clear text hierarchy.

Body Text

Text Length

Writing for the web is a whole different thing than writing for print. The discussion about the differences between print and screen has been going on since the computer screen was invented but one thing that is sure is that users want smaller pieces of text. They hardly ever read an entire page, instead, they scan for keywords.

Leading

As with print design, take a look at your leading. This is more tricky than it sounds but try to find the right balance. A good starting point would be 12px leading or more for a font size of 10px.

Width

This is one area where print is vastly different from screen, on a computer it is never certain what the size is of the screen of the user. This poses a problem for the width of a piece of text. I would suggest a length of between 12 and 16 words per line and a fixed text width layout.

Fonts

Market Penetration

Another area where print and screen differs immensely is fonts. In order for your page to display correctly, take a look at the market penetration of fonts. Sure bets are Tahoma and Verdana

(both designed especially for on-screen usage), both with more than 90% availability on OS X and Windows.

Serif versus Sans

Serifs are far better for print reading than Sans Serifs. This all has to do with how your screen displays fonts. Recently there have been Serif fonts designed for screen use, most notably Georgia.

Video

New

The massive increase in bandwidth has made delivering video content online a much more viable option but video on the web is relatively new, leaving much room for errors, also making it very interesting for usability folks to keep an eye on.

Usage Context

When using video online make sure it is actually the right solution. Take a critical look at your message and ask yourself whether it is actually delivered best through video. Users get distracted much faster online than in a different context and lengthy boring videos won't attract many users.

Delivering Format

For delivering video content online I would recommend using Flash. In addition to being cross platform Flash has a very high market penetration. Adobe statistics state that Flash 9 penetration in December 2007 is 95.7% in mature markets,

making it a perfect tool for delivering video content.

Distracting

Watching a video is an activity that differs from other web activities in the sense that it requires you to keep looking, without pausing, and also (in most cases) keep listening. When you are simply reading or scanning an article you can look away to do something else, with video this is not the case. If you want users to be focussed on your video make sure that there are minimal distractions.

Autoplay or Not?

Sites handle this issue differently. I would suggest to you to let a movie preload but to not let it play, this gives the user the freedom to decide whether they want to start playing a clip.

Controls

Once again, stick to what is commonly used. Make sure the user can see how far the video has loaded and how far it has played.

Further Reading

If you have enjoyed this short introduction I recommend you read some of these books:

Don't Make Me Think! A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability, Steve Krug

About Face 3: The Essentials of Interaction Design by Alan Cooper, Robert Reimann, and David Cronin

Designing the Obvious: A Common Sense Approach to Web Application Design by Robert Hoekman

The Big Red Fez by Seth Godin



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