Chapter 1

Planning for Good Site Design

People argue about what the number-one factor in quality Web site design is, and they probably always will. Some say great graphics are the key. Others say worthwhile information is everything. Still others think that ease of use is the most important factor. I'm not so sure that there's such a thing as a linear ranking for these kinds of things. After all, a good-looking site that doesn't work well is useless. A site with a combination of good content and lousy graphics is nothing to crow about either. This book shows you how to do it all and how it all fits together to make a Web site that's actually worth visiting. If you want to get the basics of Web page structure down pat, check out Chapters 2 and 3 on HTML; for the lowdown on graphic design, make sure you spend some time with Chapter 7.

In this chapter, I walk you through the fundamental things you should consider as you create your Web site. And at the end of the chapter, I give you four basic rules for creating Web sites that work. Take 'em with a grain of salt — remember, you're the ultimate judge.

Drafting a Plan

Are you publicizing a political candidate? Trumpeting your favorite cause? Looking for a job? Selling shoe polish? Notice the verbs in each example. They're the key factors in determining your site's *purpose,* as opposed to its *topic.*

What do you want to accomplish?

Just having a topic isn't enough — you need a purpose, too. The *topic* is merely what the site is about; the *purpose* is what the site does. Say, for example, that you want to create a site about penguins. Okay, that's a nice starting point. You like penguins — they're cute, unusual, and pretty interesting; many people share your interest in them. But why do you want to create a Web site about them? Do you have something to say? Do you have information to give, an opinion to share, or a particular point of view that you want to put across?

You don't need to have a PhD in aquatic ornithology to create such a site. Maybe you just like funny-looking birds that swim. But you still need a purpose, or the site just won't work out in the long run. Perhaps you spent ages plowing through the search engines, and you've gathered together the world's greatest collection of penguin links. But why did you go to all that trouble? What's your purpose?

If the purpose for creating a penguin site is for your own personal enjoyment, you really don't need to do much with the site. In fact, you can just create a Web page on your own hard drive or even settle for leaving the links in your Web browser's bookmarks. If you do want your page on the World Wide Web, however, you need to take into account the needs of your potential visitors, as well as your own needs for creating such a site.

Suppose you're putting your penguin page on the Web for the purpose of sharing everything you know about these birds with the world. How does that purpose change your approach to site design? You need to include more on the Web site than a bare list of links, for one thing. Everything you do with the site must help people understand its purpose. If you're setting up your own domain name, for example, you want to pick one that clearly describes your site's content — such as `www.penguinfacts.com`. (Grab it quick — it still wasn't taken at press time.)

The purpose of your site trickles down through each step you take in creating it. You want the title of each page in the site to specify how it supports the site's purpose. The textual content of each page needs to lead naturally into some specific aspect of the topic that furthers your goal. Each graphical image must be just the right one to drive home or emphasize a critical point.

Who do you want to reach?

Who are the people you expect to visit your site? What geographical or cultural groups do you want the site to appeal to? Without at least a general idea of your potential audience, you can't have much of an idea about what type of site to create.

If data is available about the audience for similar sites, you want to track it down. But where do you find it? Surprisingly, most of it's available from the people you're competing with. (Even if you're not running a commercial site, similar sites are your competitors.) Anyone who's been involved in any type of corporate intelligence work would be shocked at the way people on the World Wide Web casually throw around valuable information, instead of keeping it under lock and key.

Many sites offer links to their visitor data. Even a quick perusal of the server logs (which automatically record information about visitors) can provide you with priceless insights into the sort of people who visit sites similar to the one you're creating. If the sites you want information on don't list links to their log data, send an e-mail message to the Webmaster asking how to access it. Most Webmasters aren't the slightest bit security-conscious about their customer data, and you may be surprised at how many of them are more than willing to spill the beans about their visitors.

Keeping your site fresh

If your material never changes, the odds are pretty good that most people won't come back to it very often, if ever. Unless your sole topic is a rock-solid reference subject, you can't get away with anything less than constant updating. Sure, the *Oxford English Dictionary* can come out with a new edition only every few generations. (The first edition came out in 1928 and the second one in 1989, with only two supplements in between.) But such cases are very rare. Even if you deal with a modern high-tech equivalent, such as a site on the Java programming language or the current HTML standard, you need to stay on your toes.

If your core material is something that doesn't change often, you need to add some peripheral material that you can replace more frequently. Consider adding a Tip of the Day, fresh links, a Did You Know? column, or something along those lines so you can avoid offering only stale content to your return visitors.

How often you need to update your site depends partially on your topic and partially on your site policy. With sites that deal with volatile topics such as breaking international news, you need to update on an hourly basis at a minimum. On the other hand, sites that analyze the news can stand a more leisurely pace — daily, weekly, or even monthly — because their scope is considerably wider.

Even if your topic doesn't absolutely demand a certain update schedule, you should still establish a regular policy for how often you add fresh material to your site. Whatever schedule you establish, make sure you stick with it.

Remember the comfort factor and bear in mind that your site's visitors will be less comfortable if they don't know what to expect from you. Consistency on your side helps build trust on theirs.

A Web site must change at least once a month to keep visitors interested in coming back to it.

User-generated content

When the World Wide Web first got started, it was pretty much a one-way street — Webmasters like you always made the decisions about what would appear and how it could be used. As the Web has evolved, however, it has taken on some important new characteristics.

Today, some of the Web's most popular sites aren't so much controlled by their Webmasters as they are by their users. Places like YouTube and MySpace are hotbeds for the users' self-expression — and, indeed, that is their reason for existence. The new trend that has led to the phrase "Web 2.0" is user-generated content, supplemented by social networking.

Of course, the majority of Web sites are still generated almost totally by either individuals or small teams working together, but the public's hunger for its own chance to shine is seemingly insatiable — and it's something you might want to keep in mind as you design your own Web site. Wikipedia and the other wikis are collaborative efforts, and the old personal home page has largely given way to *blogs* — Web logs, or personalized diaries that can be syndicated and sent to others automatically. (See Chapter 12 for more information on blogs.)

Designing the Look of Your Site

All great art depends on having every necessary component in place and nothing — not one thing — that you don't need there. Great literature doesn't add extraneous characters or pad its plot lines. Great paintings don't have extra brush strokes or colors thrown in for no particular reason. When you're practicing the art of Web design, strive for that kind of purity.

Appealing to your audience

The audience — which is made up of the visitors you hope to attract to your site — determines the content. To set some basic limits, think of these visitors as being at a beginning, an intermediate, or an advanced level, and gauge your content accordingly. If you're aiming advanced content at a beginning audience or vice versa, you're looking at failure from the word go.

Not only does your audience determine your content, but its preferences influence your visual-design requirements as well. If your audience consists of high-school students whose interests revolve mainly around the latest musical sensations, you need a far different look from what you'd shoot for if it consists of retired naval officers who want to know about international events.

For the young music lovers, for example, you need to strike a tone that's lighthearted and exciting, both in your words and graphics. Brighter colors and a more relaxed and informal tone for the text are the call here. For the old salts, though, you need to take a heavier approach, with darker, duller colors and a middling-formal approach to language.

Whatever the group you're aiming for, ask yourself the following questions:

- ✔ **How do they communicate with one another?** Roller-hockey players don't communicate quite the same way as cartographers do. What are the level and style of language usage in the group? Do its members have a particular jargon, slang, or regional dialect? If so, can you use it comfortably and correctly?

- ✔ **What kind and color of clothes do they wear?** This kind of information tells you volumes about their preferences. People who are willing to wear suits and ties in midsummer don't think the same way as those who prefer casual clothing. The colors they wear also indicate the color ranges they're likely to feel comfortable with on your site.

- ✔ **What's their worldview?** For many people, the world consists of their apartment or house; the road between it and their workplace; their cubicle, office, or factory floor; and a couple of restaurants somewhere along that pathway. For others, the world consists only of Wall Street and the Asian financial markets. For some, the world is a series of airports, cell phones, and e-mail messages. Anything that exists outside your audience's worldview is invisible to them and probably doesn't belong on your Web site.

Find out all that you can — from what kind of cars your visitors drive to the hours they wake and sleep. Any kind of information you can nail down about your visitors and their lives helps you to understand them — and that understanding can't help but improve your site's appeal.

Avoiding clutter

If you're one of those people who keeps a perfectly clean desk where your speakers line up exactly perpendicular to the edge of your monitor, whose laundry basket is more than occasionally empty, and who always knows where to find everything you own, I probably can't tell you much about organization. If you're like the rest of us, however, read on.

Far too many Webmasters seem to think that the best kind of Web page is one that has everything in the world crammed into it. It's like a novel that introduces 27 characters in the first two pages — the overkill ruins it, and your mind is left swimming.

Perhaps you absolutely must put together a Web page containing a dozen frames, several JavaScript pop-ups, numerous Java applets running in the background, and a bunch of animated GIFs that move around the screen by using Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) positioning. If so, please, please, *don't* put in an image map, too.

The line between losing and winning is very fine if you're considering using Web gadgetry. Without it, most sites seem a bit on the dull side, and Web designers exhibit a really strong keep-up-with-the-Joneses streak that usually results in a frenzy of site changes whenever some new technique becomes popular. Too much of a good thing — or too many good things in one place — can, however, become a real problem.

The key is to remember your site's purpose as you're designing any page. If anything you're considering adding to the page doesn't serve that purpose, don't add it. If you discover some fun or glitzy gizmo that you simply *must* put on a page — and I show you plenty in this book to tempt you — first determine if you can make it fit in with what you already have on that page. If you absolutely can't fit it in, but you still want to add it, maybe you can take something else out to make room for it.

This doesn't mean you can't have more than one unusual feature on a page — just make sure that you follow a path of moderation.

Achieving Usability

Usability is an important word for Web designers. It means just what it says — making a site usable. Without usability, nothing else you do matters. What good is it to have wonderful content if nobody can find it? What good is it to have beautiful graphics on a page that is inaccessible except by dumb luck?

Fortunately, designing a usable Web site isn't difficult, and following a few simple rules can set you on your way. As with any set of rules, you may want to break these from time to time, but you do so at your own peril:

- ✓ **Keep your navigation system consistent on all the pages in your Web site.** If you have a link to your home page at the top of half your pages and you put that link at the bottom of the rest, you'll confuse your visitors.
- ✓ **Put links to your home page and your search function on both the top and bottom of every page.** Too many Web designers put them on only the top or the bottom, forcing users to scroll to find them. Don't make your visitors do extra work.

✔ **Never use blue, underlined text for anything but a link.** In fact, try to avoid underlining at all. Use bold or italics for emphasis instead; otherwise you'll fool a lot of people into clicking underlined text to no effect.

✔ **Don't use too many links in a navigation bar.** Half a dozen is about the most you should add. Remember that a navigation bar is not a site map, but a guide to the major sections within your site.

✔ **Use words!** Using graphical icons may make your pages prettier, but you should design your navigation bar (or whatever alternative you use) to instantly communicate what it means to someone who has never been to your site before. In this case, a picture is *not* worth a thousand words.

✔ **If your site is composed of hierarchical pages (and most of them are), consider using *breadcrumb navigation.*** The term comes from the idea of leaving a trail of breadcrumbs as you walk so you can easily retrace your steps. When applied to a Web site, the metaphor refers to a listing at the top of the page showing the current page's relationship to the hierarchy; most often, these breadcrumbs are links that you can click to go directly back to any place along the trail.

The Big Rules for Planning Your Site

Here are some short rules to condense the information in this chapter down to a few rules that I think are pretty good guidelines, going by my own experience as both designer and visitor. Make these rules a part of your very being. Do them in calligraphy and hang them on your wall. Use a wood-burning kit to engrave them on your desk. Tattoo them backward on your forehead so you see them in the mirror every morning.

✔ **Rule #1:** The Web is for reaching out to people.

✔ **Rule #2:** Keep your Web pages lean and clean.

✔ **Rule #3:** Know who your visitors are and what they want.

Remember that design and content are more a matter of art than science, which means that your own gut feelings count more than anything else. If someone tells you that your design decisions are wrong, and that person is someone whose input you respect, you certainly want to give that opinion some consideration. But if you're firmly convinced that you're right, never let anyone else's concepts override your own. This brings me to The Big Rule:

✔ **Rule #4:** It's your Web site. It's your vision. Do it your way.

Online Sources for Web Design

Table 1-1 lists some places on the World Wide Web where you can find more information on the topics covered in this chapter.

Table 1-1	Online Resources for Web Design
Web Site Name	**Web Address**
Beginners Web Design Tutorial	`www.how-to-build-websites.com`
useit.com	`www.useit.com`
Web Pages That Suck	`www.webpagesthatsuck.com`
Web Style Guide	`www.webstyleguide.com/index.html?/contents.html`