



Designing for the Web vs Designing for Print
By Katherine Nolan

Newcomers to web design, especially those who come via the use of FrontPage or other wysiwyg editors, almost always have previous experience of designing documents for print. Whether this is laying out attractive Word documents, designing Power Point presentations or full professional graphic design work, all will come very quickly to the realization that on the web things are just not the same. Attempts to transfer what worked beautifully in another medium to the screen often end in disappointment.

It can also be quite difficult to convey just what is possible and what is not to clients or employers with relatively little knowledge of how a web page is constructed and viewed. These notes highlight some of the major differences, if you are new to web design then they should clarify some areas for you. They might also come in handy if you are trying to explain to a doubting boss or client just why their brilliant plan might have to be adapted if it is to work online.

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Difference No. 1
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In print everyone sees the same colors

Unless you go down the road of existentialist questioning of objective reality, where your pink could be my green, this is largely true.

Apart from that portion of the population who have one or other form of color blindness, all printed documents look the same to everyone who sees them.

On the web you cannot be certain what people see

While the vast majority of people now use computers capable of viewing millions of colors, there are still some who surf with just 256 colors available to them. This is as nothing compared to the variation caused by different equipment. If you have both a laptop and a desktop computer you will be familiar with the difference in color appearance on each. In fact there is variation between just about every single monitor in existence. Quite apart from the type of monitor and its brand there are the matters of individual choice in contrast and brightness, of the use of protective screens, the amount of daylight in the room and the cleanliness or otherwise of the screen. All will

affect the way the color appears to the end user and you have little or no control over any of them.

What to do about it

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Test your site on as many different computers as you can and get others to test it too. On your screen the contrast between a dark blue background and pale blue text may be quite adequate, on another the text may be unreadable.

Change your settings so that you are using only 356 colors. Don't be overly concerned if the site looks different, your real concern is that it remains usable and readable.

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Difference No. 2

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In print the text will look exactly as you design it

You can use whatever fonts you like, in whatever size you like and that is how the reader will see them.

On the Web it is difficult and sometimes even undesirable to achieve this

An end user will only be able to see a font if it is installed on their computer, a fact that restricts the range of fonts you can usefully employ.

The size of the font can be fixed but then it may be unreadable to those who need to see their text in a larger size. If you leave it so that the font can be altered according to the users choice, you are showing consideration for your users but losing some control over how your page looks to different people. Trying to retain control has many downsides though. The size you specify may look different in different browsers or on different platforms, for example in general text is smaller on Macs than on PCs.

What to do about it

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Sticking to commonly available fonts is a good rule of thumb in the vast majority of cases. Specifying a range of alternative using Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) is a very good idea, that way if the font you choose is not available you can specify a series of alternatives. Where you do use a less common font, test the site in a situation where that font is unavailable, in some cases text that appears fine in your chosen font can be tiny and unreadable in a user default font. You can also choose to specify no font and let the users' choice prevail.

On size there are really no hard and fast rules. Using CSS can be

helpful and give you more control, but the deciding whether to use fixed size text or text that is subject to the users' preference is a choice you must make yourself.

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Difference No. 3
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In print your graphics can be as big, detailed and colorful as you like.

They will look the same to everyone.

There are, of course, budgetary constraints in the use of graphics for print, but other than that pretty much anything goes. Whatever comes out of the printer will be what everyone sees.

On the web size matters and some people will not see your graphics at all

A surprising number of people choose, for reasons of speed or because they are using text only browsers, to surf with graphics turned off. Unless they are of an appropriate physical size and file size still others will not wait around for them to load.

The quality of your graphics will also be affected by your users' choices. Again color availability and monitor resolution and variation come into play. By default AOL will display images at low quality, which can radically affect the appearance of your lovingly created graphics on pages viewed by the many AOL users who never change this default setting.

What you can do about it
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In the case of ensuring graphics are displayed, and how they are displayed, there is not a lot you can do. You can (and should) use only graphics that are suitably optimised for the web and are of a suitable size but if people have graphics turned off or are using AOL's default settings there is not a thing you can do about it. However you can ensure that your site still works for those people. All graphics should have alternate text that gives them some context for non-graphics enabled users. If graphics are used for navigation, then an alternate means of getting about should be provided by including text navigation also.

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Difference No. 5
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In print the layout of the document is fixed

You can layout your print document anyway you like, it will, once

printed remain that way and everyone will see the same layout.

On the web the appearance of a document can vary widely

Aside from differences 1-4 above, layout of a page will not look the same to everyone. If you design so that the page always fills the screen (using tables measured in percentages for example) the layout will vary with the size of the screen, the browser window and the users resolution. If you use a fixed width design then its appearance on the screen will be quite different for different users also. What fills the screen for a user browsing at 800x600 may require horizontal scrolling by a user at 640x400 and may look lost in the middle of the screen to someone at 1280x1024

These changes can alter the layout causing the relationship between images and text for example to differ from user to user.

What to do about it

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How you choose to design is your call, neither fixed width or 'fluid' designs are inherently right or wrong. However when deciding how to proceed you need to be aware of the effect each will have, to lay out the page in knowledge of these effects and test it in as many different situations as possible. It will not look the same in each but it should look acceptable and be usable.

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Difference No. 6

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Printed material is used in a predictable, linear, way

Mostly people start reading a print document at page one and read from the top left to the bottom right. Most people have been reading some form of printed matter for a very long time and they are familiar and comfortable with its format.

For example they know, from experience, where to find the contents page of a book and its index and they know how to use them. Even if they skip to a part of a document other than the beginning, it is clear to them where the beginning is and where the end is.

It is therefore relatively easy to provide a guide for them, you just number the pages starting at page one, put an index at the back and a table of contents at the front and you are done.

Web material is used in a unpredictable, non-linear, way

You have little control over where people enter your site for one thing, it may be the home page but equally likely it may not. Also few users read the entire content of a page from top to bottom. They look

for links, for signs that tell them where they are; they scan the page quickly to see if it contains the information they need, they frequently ignore anything that is below the 'crease' and out of view when the page first opens.

All the time their finger is on a mouse button, a button that can take them out of there as quickly as it took them in. They routinely jump from page to page, following links as the humor takes them, often to an entirely different site.

There is also very wide variation in the experience level of users. Some may be experienced enough to infer the meaning of an item on the page, such as, for example, a dropdown menu for navigation. Others will have no idea at all how to use it.

What to do about it
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This unpredictability and variability of experience needs to be taken into account in the design of the pages. Each page needs to provide a clear message to the user, telling them where they are, how they can get elsewhere in the site and clearly displaying important information so that the scanning user does not overlook it and move on.

That is why positioning and displaying content such as navigation bars, location indicators and links in a predictable and recognisable (otherwise sometimes referred to as boring!) manner is so important in web design. Funny that nobody ever says that having a book's index at the back is boring - suggestions for example that it might be put in random place in the middle of the book or that representative images rather than words should be used in a table of contents would be treated with ridicule.

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Difference No. 7
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A print document has a defined size and a predictable content

Be it a brochure or a book a reader of a print document will have no difficulty in estimating its size or length, how long it is likely to take to get read it and what sort of information it is likely to contain.

A site can be large or small. Its content may not be immediately obvious

The home page of a site with thousands of pages looks much the same as one with only a dozen. Unless you make it clear to the user what is there.

What to do about it
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Navigation needs to be clear in its definition of links, so that users know what is on the site at a glance and can see how to get to it. Site maps, a clear indication on the home and other pages of what the site contains and an easy means of taking users to the main content areas are all of vital importance.

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Difference No. 8
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The vast majority of readers are fully equipped to read print documents

That is to say, most have a functioning pair of eyes and have learned to read.

Users of a web page may or may not have the necessary equipment

Statistics show that as many as 10% of users cannot use JavaScript, a small number cannot see content in frames, many more have browsers that are not Flash enabled, still more have sound unavailable or turned off or have no ability to view video. Some will have disabled other forms of active content.

If any items that utilize these are essential to the page or no alternative is provided then some users will be simply be unable to view or use the resulting page.

What to do about it
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Where possible alternatives should be provided. For example useful content for no frames browsers, a non-Flash alternative to a Flash site, text navigation where a JavaScript is used for the main navigation menu.

If there are situations where one or other of the above are considered essential to the design then the fact that they are going to be unavailable to a proportion of users must be taken into account and decision on whether to proceed must be taken in the light of this knowledge.

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Difference No. 9
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Print design projects have a defined end

You design the page/brochure/book or what ever it goes to the printer, is distributed and that is that. A later addition is essentially a new project.

Websites are never finished

As long as the site exists it is going to need to be maintained, updated, expanded and even redesigned. The job is never over.

What to do about it

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Sites, no matter how small at the outset, need to be designed with the future in mind and in such a way as to facilitate growth. Navigation in particular needs to be flexible to future requirements. This may simply mean using include pages to allow updating of frequently changed content or it may mean setting up a database at the outset even if it will be little used initially. It certainly means that the planning stage of a site needs to be tackled with a much longer timescale in mind than would be the case for a print document.

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Difference No. 10

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In general web design is more expensive than print design

See Differences 1 - 9!

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