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1

The Web Design Challenge

Web design is the art of creating websites that are attractive and easy to use.

But it's complicated by all the different browsers and devices visitors use. Learn about the principles for building a site that keeps everyone happy.

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The Goal of This Book

The most exciting thing about the Internet is not the way it's transformed virtually every industry, nor the way it's enabled us all to be better informed about the world, and more in touch with our family and friends, than ever before.

It's the fact that anyone can join in. If you've got something to share, the world is waiting.

You don't need anyone's permission to set up a website. You don't even need that much money: you can sometimes host a site for free and can rent a domain name for a year for about \$10 or £10. Of course, you might choose to invest a bit more. You might want to pay for professional hosting with more advanced features.

If you're promoting your business, you might prefer to commission professional designers, and maybe even pay someone to help promote your site.

If you're doing it all yourself, you'll most likely pay through the time you spend on the design, although you might splash out on some software that makes it easier.

In this book, I'll teach you the key principles of web design, which is the art and science of building effective and attractive websites. This book will introduce you to the key technologies of the web, and the design principles that underpin successful sites.

Whether you're a budding designer who plans to build your own site, or you just want to be able to talk to professional designers in their own language, this book will give you an understanding of how websites are designed, so that you can make the right decisions in launching your own site.

I won't lie to you and tell you that website design can be mastered in 240 pages. The best websites are built using a combination of technical and artistic skill, and a good understanding of how people use the Internet. Above all, it takes practice to learn how to make the most of the technologies the web offers.

But, as the philosopher said, every journey begins with a single step. And this book will ensure you set off in the right direction, with robust knowledge of not just the technologies and techniques you could use, but of those that you should use, and those that will deliver the best experience for your visitors.

Hot tip



You can find supporting resources for this book, including all the links from it (so you don't have to type them in) at www.ineasysteps.com or www.sean.co.uk.

The Diversity of Devices

One of the skills a web designer needs is the ability to put themselves into the shoes of the website visitor. Web designers have to think about what their visitors know, what they will expect the website to do, and how they will expect it to work.

The most basic part of this is understanding the range of different devices that people might use to view your website. These include:

- A desktop computer, laptop or netbook
- An iPhone or other handheld device
- A tablet device, such as an iPad
- A cell phone
- A screenreader, which reads web pages aloud to blind people
- A refreshable Braille display, which a blind person can run their fingers along to read the website content
- A games console, such as the PlayStation 3, Nintendo Wii or Nintendo DS

When we use the word design, we tend to think of something visual. But, in its purest sense, a website isn't necessarily a visual medium. Somebody using a screenreader might experience it as a stream of spoken text. Some handheld devices with small screens include a mode to switch off the layout and just view the content, so that it fits better in the space available.

While you do need your website to look appealing, it's a mistake to think that you can (or should) focus purely on the look of a website. Some of the most important work in web design goes on behind the scenes, where the visitors can't see it. It's about adding meaning to the web page, so that people can use it easily even if their device doesn't support all the features available on a desktop computer.

The challenge of web design is to create a site that is engaging and easy to use, whatever is used to view it. Visitors want the flexibility to use whichever device they prefer. Sometimes they will combine devices, using a desktop during their lunch break at work and a mobile on the way home, for example. All they care about is whether the site works or not. It's your job to make sure it does.



Websites can be viewed using a number of different devices. Shown above, from the top: Apple iPad tablet; Nintendo DS games console; Blackberry mobile phone; Alva refreshable Braille display.

Hot tip

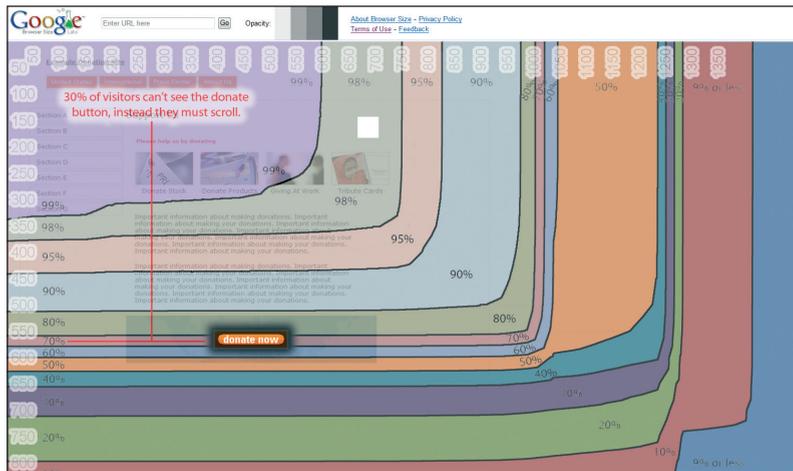
Web browsers are mostly free of charge, so why not download a few of the popular ones so that you can try them out? You'll get a taste of how they differ from your browser of choice, and can use them for testing your website design as it evolves.

How Devices Affect Design

Different devices have different capabilities, and this should inform the decisions you make while designing your website. For example:

- There might be no support for pictures (or “graphics”) on the device. A screenreader and Braille display can't show images, and mobile devices sometimes enable users to switch them off to speed up their browsing.
- There might be no conventional keyboard. It puts everyone off if they have to type in lots of information to use a website, but those who have to use a virtual keyboard on their touch screen might be especially deterred.
- The website animation technology Flash might not be supported. The iPhone and iPad don't use Flash, and non-visual devices (such as screenreaders) can't render it either.
- There might be no mouse. Some users struggle to use a mouse because of physical impairment, and some devices (including games consoles and netbooks) don't have a mouse. If you demand precise use of a mouse, you might lose visitors.
- There is a wide range of screen sizes. Even on a desktop computer, people will have different sized monitors and will open the browser window to different widths, depending on what else they're doing at the same time as web browsing. Designers tend to have large monitors, but they shouldn't forget that most of their audience have to settle for smaller screens.
- Devices differ in how much of the web page can be seen at once. Mobile devices might provide a small picture of the whole web page with little detail, so users can identify the content to zoom in on. Clear headings are important to help users navigate to the section they should read. Users with poor vision sometimes use screen magnifiers to massively enlarge a small part of the screen. If people are zoomed in on one part of the page, they can't see any updates you make to a different part of it.
- A screenreader user can't get a quick overview of what's on the page by skim-reading it: while a PC screen is two-dimensional, a screenreader has a one dimensional interface: a stream of audio reading the web page aloud.

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Left: Google Browser Size (<http://browsersize.googlelabs.com/>) shows the size of the browser window for Google users. Google mocked up a charity website to show that 30% of people can't see the donation button without scrolling, if it's too far down the page.

The web browser challenge

As well as the differences in hardware used to visit websites, people often have a choice over which software they use. On a desktop computer, they might be using Microsoft's Internet Explorer or Apple's Safari browser. They might have downloaded Google's Chrome browser or the free Firefox browser. Or they might be using Opera, a browser from Norway which is popular worldwide. They might even use more than one browser, depending on whether they're at work or at home.

That's another reason why website design is a challenge: Web designers have to build sites that work with a wide range of different browsers, and each browser has its own quirks.

It doesn't end there, though. These browsers are updated regularly, but not everybody upgrades at the same time. Internet Explorer version 6 (IE6) was released way back in 2001 but still has a significant market share, particularly in the corporate and government sectors where any software upgrade is a job for the central IT team.

Despite high profile campaigns in the web community to persuade people to switch to something more secure and more fully featured, many people are still using IE6. If you're a web designer, you can choose to ignore it but are you willing to turn away those customers?

Hot tip



Use your web analytics software to identify the most popular browsers among people who visit your website. Bear in mind, though, that anyone who can't use your website easily might just leave. See Chapter 16 for more on analytics.

Hot tip

Your website will also include a file for each image, and might also include files for audio recordings, videos and downloadable files like brochures in the printer-friendly PDF format.

Hot tip

How quickly a web page downloads depends on how many files it has, and how large they are in total. Each additional file results in another request to the server, which takes time, in addition to the time taken to download. To speed up a page, minimize the number of different image, style sheet, Javascript and Flash files you use. You can minify your HTML, CSS and Javascript, which means taking all the unnecessary spacing out to make files smaller. Major corporate sites set a limit of 300kb per page.

Introducing Key Technologies

A website is made up of lots of different technologies and types of file. Part of the challenge of web design is learning how to use these different tools and technologies together, and how to pick the right ones for each aspect of your design. We'll cover the most important of these later in the book, but for now, here's a summary of the role they can play in your website.

HTML

HTML is the main language used for writing web pages. When somebody downloads one of your web pages, the first thing they are sent is a HTML file. HTML enables you to describe the structure of your text content, and to tell the web browser where it can find the other files for the web page, including its images and CSS files. HTML5 is the latest version, but many people are still using browsers that don't support its new features, so you need to make sure that your website also works without these.

CSS

CSS is used for the design and layout of your web page. It contains instructions for colors, fonts, and the position of different elements on the screen. CSS3 is the latest version and introduces features like rounded corners and multiple background images.

Javascript

Javascript enables you to update your web page after it has downloaded, and to respond to user actions on it. Some people have written sophisticated games using Javascript, but it's typically used for simple effects like refreshing the screen with the latest news, or revealing some new content on the page when somebody clicks on a tab. Javascript is also often used to check that a form has been completed correctly (for example, by checking there is an @ sign in an email address). This check can be performed before the user submits the form, so that the user gets instant feedback. Not all devices support Javascript, so you need to ensure that your site (especially its navigation) also works without it.

Java

Confusingly, Java and Javascript are not the same thing at all. Java enables you to run little programs inside your web page, as long as the browser has a Java plug-in. It's extremely slow, so almost nobody uses it for new websites today. If you already have content in Java, recreate it using Javascript or Flash.

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Flash / Silverlight

Flash and Silverlight are used for more sophisticated interactions. You can use them to create animations and games or to display rich media, such as audio or video. Adobe's Flash is much better established, but Silverlight has been created by Microsoft, who aim to make it as popular. Flash and Silverlight require a plug-in to enable users to see and interact with their content.

Like Javascript, you shouldn't depend on these technologies for features of your website that you can easily implement another way.

Ajax

Ajax is a special way of using Javascript to update a web page, by getting new information from the server without updating the whole web page. When you use Google Maps, for example, it doesn't download the entire planet's worth of maps to your computer. It just downloads the bits you want to see. If you zoom in, it downloads a higher resolution map of the area you're looking at. If you pan to another town, it fetches its map from the server. Ajax is the term used for the combination of technologies that enables the website to fetch the new information you need, whenever you need it. If you need to use Ajax techniques, you'll need to master HTML, CSS and Javascript first.

Server scripting languages (PHP/MySQL)

There are a number of different server scripting languages, and they tend to go through fashionable phases. The most popular one today is PHP, but others include ASP and Perl. These enable you to write programs that run on the server, so that web pages can be customized for each visitor. This is particularly useful if the site needs to offer personalized content, such as a social networking site that will want to serve a different home page to each person depending on who their friends are.

Server side scripting languages are also used for sites with lots of pages. Their content can be stored in a database, and when somebody wants to look at it, the program on the server makes the web page HTML and sends it out. It saves you having to maintain hundreds of web pages, because you can just take care of one template, the scripting program, and the database of content. See Chapter 13 for more on content management systems, which enable you to do this.

Hot tip



A plug-in is software that is added to a browser to enable it to handle new types of content. If users don't have the plug-in, they won't be able to view that content, so you'll need to provide alternative content, too. Very few websites will be able to convince people to install software just to view that site, so you should stick to using plug-ins that are already popular.

Hot tip



MySQL is the name of the database software most often used with PHP. Hosting companies will charge a bit more for servers that support PHP and MySQL, but can usually help you to set up the database. You can find lots of free PHP scripts you can install on your server, to offer features like forums.

Hot tip

Take every opportunity to try out your website on unfamiliar devices. It's impractical for most people to own every device available, but if you come across one in a shop or at a friend's house, don't miss the chance to see how your site performs.

Hot tip

A website could use the new CSS3 properties to create rounded corners on a box of content. If the browser doesn't support CSS3, the box will have square corners instead. This is a good example of degrading gracefully. The content can all still be accessed, but its presentation has adapted to work on a more limited browser.

Degrading Gracefully

You might be thinking that the solution is to create a different website for all the different user groups you have. You're not the first to think of this.

Some years ago, it was fashionable for organizations to create a separate, text-only version of their website for the benefit of screenreader users. These users have requirements that are extremely different to the typical PC user, so many companies thought it would be easier to make a separate site for them than to reconcile their needs with those of mainstream website visitors.

Having a separate screenreader site created two major problems. The first was that this site inevitably ended up getting neglected. When resources were scarce, website managers would prioritize updating the main site. The text-only version would be put to one side and, ultimately, be forgotten. A screenreader user might visit the site for the latest news and find that it wasn't available to them, although it was available to others using the main website. The organization's attempt to look after blind visitors by specifically catering for their needs ultimately resulted in them being discriminated against.

The second problem was more subtle. Some screenreader users felt they were missing out because the organization had stripped out all the visual content. The fact that they couldn't see the content didn't mean that they weren't interested in what was in it, or what its message was. Pictures often provide context or supporting information for text or visitor comments.

One site for all

Today, it's not necessary to create a separate website for specific audiences. There are too many different devices and configurations for you to cater for them all anyway. Instead, you should aim to create a single website design that degrades gracefully. That means that it can still be used if particular features aren't available on the visitor's device or browser. For example, if somebody can't see a photo, you should provide text that explains its content. If the web browser doesn't support content created using Flash or Javascript, visitors should still be able to navigate the site and use the rest of its content.

A well designed website will work on any device and web browser.

What About Mobile?

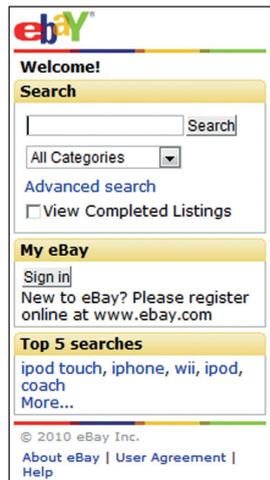
There is one exception to the rule of “one site for all”, which you might have come across. Many companies today are creating separate mobile websites. The difference in size between the largest available PC screen and the smallest mobile screen is so vast, some companies argue that serving two separate websites is the best way to keep both audiences happy.

While websites should always be optimized for speed, users of mobile devices often have a slower web connection than those using a desktop PC, too, so they need a site that is optimized to download in small chunks, with excessive decorative images stripped out.

There are two times when it’s a good idea to create a separate site for users of mobile devices, assuming a significant chunk of your audience might want to use mobile devices:

- If you have a tiny website. You can probably maintain two different versions of a website easily if it’s only got five pages.
- If you have a vast website. If your site has hundreds of pages, you’ll probably need to use a content management system for it (see Chapter 13). This should make it possible to have your mobile site automatically generated from the same database of articles as your main website. That will ensure your mobile site always reflects the same content as the main site, and will update at the same time.

It adds a lot of complexity to maintain more than one website, however you do it. You’ll have to decide whether the extra work is justified for your website.



Hot tip



If you don’t have a mobile device, you can still get an idea of how mobile sites differ. You can often use your desktop browser to visit a mobile website, such as m.ebay.com or mobile.wikipedia.org.



Hot tip

If you outsource your design, take particular care to make sure the designers are creating an accessible design. If you're never asked to provide any alternative text, ask yourself whether they're making it up for you, or not bothering with it at all.

Hot tip

Try navigating the web by keyboard for yourself, especially your own site when it's ready for testing. In Internet Explorer, click a web page and then use the Tab key to move through the links. Press Enter to visit a link, and the Backspace key to go back a page. Use the Up and Down arrow keys to scroll the page.

Understanding Accessibility

Accessibility is all about making sure your website can be used easily by everybody. When people talk about accessibility, they often think of blind people using screenreaders. But it's not just about those who use completely different technologies to visit your website.

There are lots of people who have more subtle needs that you can help or hinder through the way you design your website. A lot of these people wouldn't consider themselves to have any special needs at all. They'd just find your website hard to use, and give up. For example:

- Can somebody who is color-blind understand the availability of tickets, or is it shown as purely different colored blobs?
- Can somebody who has impaired vision increase the font on your web page so it's easier to read?
- If somebody can't use the mouse, can they navigate your site using the keyboard?
- Can a visitor with impaired hearing get the same information that you've included in an audio file?
- Can somebody with a mental impairment understand your content, or is it too jargony and long-winded?

Most professional website designers today understand the importance of accessibility, but it's the least visible aspect of a website design project, so it can be overlooked. Much of the important work is to do with how a website is coded, and when you visit it using a conventional desktop PC, you can't easily tell whether it's been well designed for other devices or not.

Accessible websites tend to be easier for everybody to use. They adapt well to mobile devices, and are easier for search engines to index, too. If you need to convince colleagues of the importance of accessibility, you could argue that you want to reach as many customers as possible, or could point out that your business might contravene disability discrimination laws if you don't.

Most websites strive for accessibility because they want to be as inclusive as possible, though. It's not hard to make most websites accessible, and it doesn't cost any more, as long as you plan to make your site accessible from the start.

Top Accessibility Principles

I'll share some tips for making your site accessible when we look at HTML and navigation later, but to provide some context, there are some basic principles that can go a long way towards making your site easy to use.

- 1** Provide alternative text for anything that isn't text, such as an image or video. This does not necessarily appear on screen. When you add an image to a web page, for example, you also provide alternative text that is only presented to the user if the image isn't available.
- 2** Make sure that your site still works when Javascript, Flash or other interactive elements are switched off. When this is impossible, provide the same information in text form on an accessible web page.
- 3** If users have to respond within a certain time limit, make sure that they are warned and have enough time to request more time, if they need it. Give users controls to start and stop content that moves or updates itself.
- 4** Use clear and consistent navigation. Make sure that users can easily understand where each link will take them, and give each page a title that describes its purpose.
- 5** Make sure the website can be used with the keyboard, and that users can see what link or element they are focused on.
- 6** Make it easy to skip straight to the content. If your web page has a long list of links or header information, provide a link that enables people to jump straight to where the article starts. This is particularly important for screenreader users.
- 7** Don't open pop-up windows, or change the window the user is in, without warning. This is confusing if you can't see the screen, and it stops the Back button working, the most important navigational tool on the Internet.



Make sure your alternative text conveys the same information that it is replacing, but keep it brief. You can say "close up of clock tower", or "the gold detailing of Big Ben shines on a sunny day". Ask yourself what the purpose of the image is, and try to articulate that. You don't have to mention the blue skies, or where the big hand is pointing, unless it's important.

Hot tip



Don't provide alternative text for purely decorative images. Make these background images, so that assistive technology can ignore them.

Hot tip

For detailed guidance, see the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) published by web standards body W3C (www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/). Section 508 (www.section508.gov) outlines accessibility requirements for US government agencies, and includes good advice for all websites.

Hot tip

There are several automated accessibility checkers online, including Wave (<http://wave.webaim.org/>) and Cynthia Says (www.cynthiasays.com). They test your website against the WCAG guidelines. They can help identify problems and are a great way for you to learn the guidelines in the context of your site. But accessibility is about whether real people can use your site, not whether it appears to tick a particular box or not. You'll have to use your own judgement and feedback from users, too.

...cont'd

- 8 Use the simplest language appropriate for your site's subject matter. Complicated language is harder to understand, especially if you can't easily flick your eyes back to the previous line for a refresher on what it said.
- 9 Give users control over how they view your content. Make sure your site works, for example, if people enlarge the default text size in their browser.
- 10 Make sure that any information conveyed by color can also be understood in other ways. For example, it's okay to use different colors to draw attention to different icons, but you might also make them different shapes or put them in different columns to indicate their meaning.
- 11 Make sure there is enough contrast in the foreground and background colors you choose, for everything to be legible on a black and white screen.
- 12 Avoid overcomplicated page layouts. If there are too many different sections or boxes, it can be overwhelming for visitors to try to navigate.
- 13 Use HTML and CSS correctly. Test whether the code has any errors in it. Desktop browsers can be quite forgiving, but assistive technology might struggle to understand your web page if it includes technical errors.
- 14 Use the accessibility features available in HTML to help people navigate tables and forms. They enable you to provide a context that might otherwise be communicated by the position of things on the screen.
- 15 Don't use a picture of text unless it's essential. It's a good way to show a company logo, for example. But don't create an image for a paragraph of text just because you like a particular font.

DIY or Outsource?

Should you design your site yourself, or pay somebody else to do it for you? It depends on what you want to achieve with your website design project.

The strengths of DIY

Creating your own website can be an extremely satisfying, creative project. People build websites for the same reason they write novels and sing songs: it's fun, and it's rewarding to increase your expertise over time. Building websites has an added dimension, because what you make can be easily found by others, so you can get feedback. It's also a very cost-effective approach, compared to hiring a team of professionals.

If you want to build your own website, you can take one of two paths. Firstly, you can learn how HTML and CSS work and code your site by hand. These technologies aren't too hard to learn, and this book includes a quick tour around their most important features, to get you started. Hand coding your site gives you maximum control and flexibility.

Alternatively, you could use a visual design package. These enable you to build a website in the same way you might make a newsletter in a word processor. They make it much easier to get started with website design, although it can take a lot of effort to build something impressive.

Once you know how to create websites, you could buy a template and adapt it, to accelerate your web design process.

Outsourcing your design

Working with a web design firm is likely to lead to more professional-looking results first time. You can benefit from the firm's experience designing perhaps hundreds of websites. You can focus on your content and the site's purpose and don't have to worry too much about technical details.

That said, it's still *your* website, and you need to take responsibility for managing the designers. You need to understand enough about web design to know whether their proposals are a good idea or not, and what the technical limitations might be on any designs they propose.

You might also want to learn enough HTML and CSS to be able to edit the design after the project has ended.

Hot tip



If you want to build your own site, make time to experiment with the different tools and techniques on offer. The best way to learn is by doing, so try out the examples in this book to see how they work. You can download the example code from this book at www.ineasysteps.com or author's website, www.sean.co.uk.

Hot tip



If you commission somebody else to build your website, make sure you have the ability to update it easily later.

Hot tip



Make sure you plan enough time for designers to do a good job on your website. Design is a process, with designers suggesting ideas and you providing feedback, until you reach the design you want. Make sure you allow enough time for initial research and testing throughout, too.

Hot tip

If you want to practise your web design skills but don't have any content available, there's an exercise on my website, www.sean.co.uk you could try. It provides a pack of text and photos for a fictional hotel called Castle Fictoria.

Hot tip

Designers often use dummy text, called "lorem ipsum", if they don't have real text ready yet. You can find generators online, or you can use Microsoft Word. Type =lorem(3,2) into a document and press enter to generate three paragraphs of two sentences each. It's better to use real content whenever possible, to avoid the need to edit it later to fit the design.

Hot tip

There are often multiple ways to do the same thing using software. I can't show you them all in this book, so feel free to experiment if you spot a shortcut or alternative approach that you prefer.

How to Set Up Your Website

Now that you understand the design challenge, you're ready to take it on! Here is an outline of the process, although your own project might include extra steps, such as getting the CEO to approve the content:

- 1 Planning.** Time invested in planning at the start will avoid rework later. In particular, a clear understanding of the site's purpose should inform the whole process.
- 2 Content creation.** You need to write your text and gather your pictures so that the website can be designed to present them in the best way.
- 3 Web design.** This involves many small steps. You'll need to structure your content, and design how it is presented. You also need to think about how people will move between different parts of your website. You might want to integrate a shopping cart or social networking features. You can commission a web design firm, or you can learn the technologies to design it yourself.
- 4 Testing.** To make sure your design works, you need to test it at regular intervals. Design is often an experimental process, with the designer implementing an idea, testing it with prospective site visitors, and using the feedback to refine the design.
- 5 Launching the website.** To make your website available to the public, you need to copy it onto a web server, which will send the web pages to your site visitors over the Internet. You will need to rent web server space from a hosting company.
- 6 Promoting the website.** Attract visitors by making it easy for people to find your site through search engines, adverts, and links.
- 7 Measuring your success.** Find out how well your site is fulfilling its purpose, and use that information to refine it.