



500

Simple Website

Hints, Tips, and Techniques

The Easy, All-in-One Guide
to those Inside Secrets for
Building Better Websites

Jamie Freeman



RotoVision

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Contents

Introduction 6

Gallery One 8

Gallery Two 10



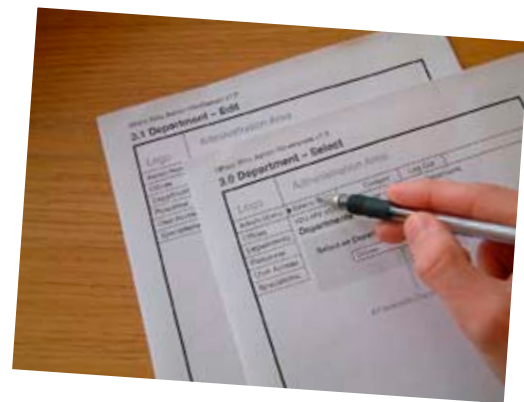
Web Design Basics

Starting out 12

Web forums 18

User testing your site 20

The professional web design process 22



Design

Beyond the visual 24

Design inspiration 26

Design copyright 39



Production Techniques

Creating the site 44

Aqua-style buttons 48

HTML basics 50

Caching 53

PayPal and eBay 55

Two-column layouts 56

Three-column layouts 57

Batch processing 58

Hosting companies 62

Code comments 63

Custom bullet points 64

Contact links 66

Header and footer layout 68

Lists 70

Show your work online 72



Accessibility and Web Standards

Inclusive web design 74

Semantic markup 80



Getting Found

Search engines 84

Using Google 86



Cool Stuff

Advanced web design 92

Adding Flash 96

Exporting Flash 97

Ajax 98

Background images 100

CSS rollover menus 102

Google AdSense 106

Fireworks rollover menus 108

Horizontal rollover menus 110

Password protection 112

Image protection 115

Hacking 116

Flash portfolios 118

PHP portfolios 120

Featured designers 123

Glossary 124

Index 126

Acknowledgments 128

Introduction

500 Simple Website Hints, Tips, and Techniques concisely covers, in six parts, everything you need to know about website design.

When people hear the word “design” they often think only of visual design; what something looks like. However, visual design is just one part of the web design process. In fact, the visual design element of some projects usually only accounts for a small percentage of the work.

Not only is it just one small part of the process, but it tends to happen surprisingly late on. Consider a car designer who’s been briefed to come up with a small family car. Even though they know some basics—it will have four wheels, five

seats, and an internal combustion engine—they still have a huge number of design considerations before they get to choose what color it will be!

It’s the same with website design. You can probably make some basic assumptions—it will be accessed through some kind of web browser, users will click hyperlinks to navigate, etc.—but you have to design every aspect around the aims of the site and the users who will interact with it. In short, web design is not just how it looks but how it works too.

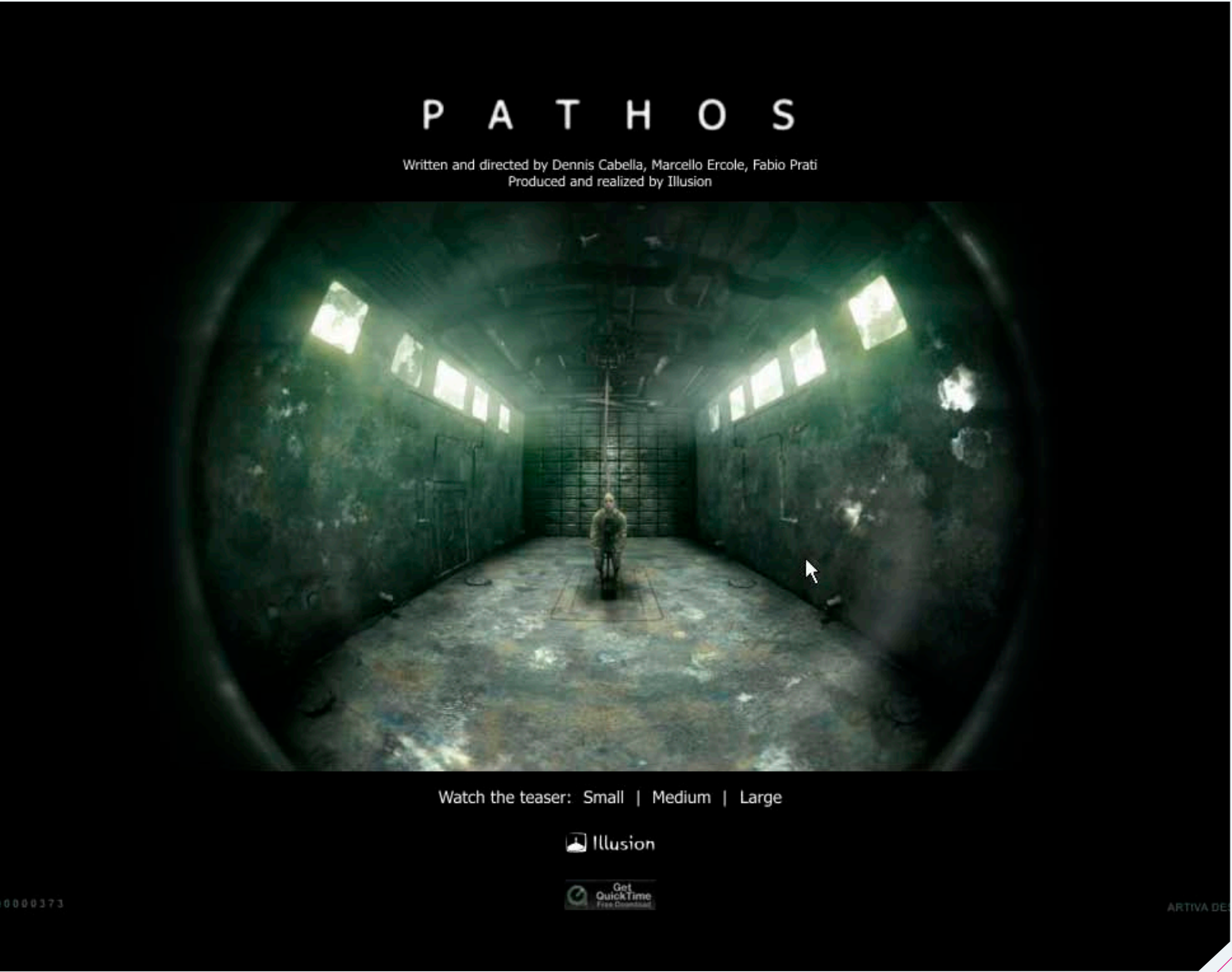


Of course, the lucky car designer occasionally gets asked to think outside the box and come up with a fabulous new concept vehicle. It might have six wheels, or none, fuel cell technology or solar power. Likewise, there might be occasions where you are tasked with designing a ground-breaking online experience which can throw all existing preconceptions to the wind. Good luck with that! Those projects are great fun, but are usually appropriate only

for very small target audiences. There is something of a trickle-down effect though, and yesterday’s way-out techniques can become tomorrow’s web standards.

Many of the hints, tips, and techniques in this book have taken me many years to learn. When I first started designing websites back in 1995 we were making it all up as we went along. That’s still true to some extent today, but we now have the experience of all the people who went before us—their failures as well as their successes—to draw upon.

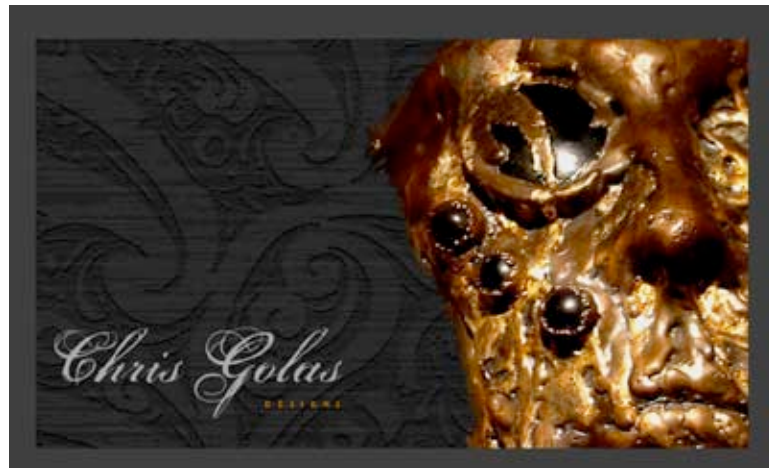
Of course, I’m still learning. This book won’t tell you everything you need to know, but it will hopefully provide some inspiration along with valuable hints, tips, and techniques to get you well on the way to becoming a great website designer. Good luck, and in the language of the internet, :-)



GALLERY ONE



GALLERY TWO



Web Design Basics

Starting out

This chapter will take you through some of the fundamentals of website design. It can be tempting to start building your site straight away, but trust me; this stuff is without question the most important aspect of creating a successful website. If you bear the following hints, tips, and techniques in mind throughout your project you are far more likely to come up with a great website, and far less likely to have to rebuild it a year down the line.

001 Planning

On big projects the planning phase can account for 60 percent of the time required for the whole job. But it's time well spent, and even if your project isn't particularly complicated, you should still take time to plan carefully from the start. It can save you a lot of headaches later on!



002 It's not a book!

Many designers coming from a print design background make the mistake of treating a website like it's a book, with one page logically following on from another. Remember that browsing websites is nonlinear; people jump from page to page, even from site to site, so all your pages need to be clear no matter what order they're viewed in.

003 Do you need a website?

Ask yourself if you really need a website. It may sound like an obvious question, but often people end up with sites simply because they feel they ought to have one; everyone else has got one, I want one too! In those cases the sites tend to wither on the vine as they are seldom updated and the content that is there can seem a little pointless.

004 What is your site for?

Before you start building your website, ask yourself this: what is it actually for? Whatever the answer, you will have a measure by which to judge whether the site is a success, and having that answer helps keep you on track during your project.

005 What is a home page?

A "home page" is the first page visitors usually see on a website, although people sometimes refer to their whole site as their home page, which confuses the issue. Be specific, and use the term correctly; it will help you communicate with other people involved with the project.



006 Not everyone sees your home page

You can never be sure that people will see your home page first—if at all. They may have followed a link from another site that bypasses your home page; that's the beauty of the web! But bear this fact in mind when planning and designing your site, and provide clear navigation back to the home page.

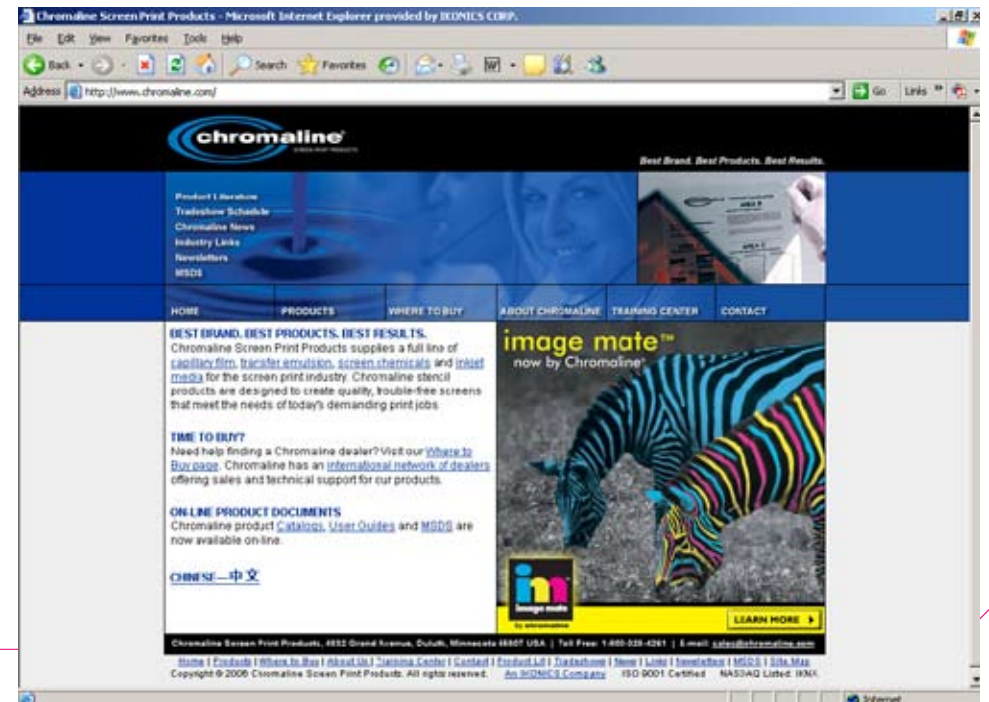
007 Organizing your content

Don't be tempted to put every page in your main menu; too many choices will give your users information overload. Instead, you need to design a hierarchy, placing items within sections. This relieves the pressure on the menu, which now only needs to contain links to the sections.



008 A taxonomy for your content

Taxonomy is the classification of organisms, relating them to one another in a logical system. For example, ants and beetles are both members of the insect family. Your content—especially if you have lots of it—needs to be similarly organized. For example, spanners and hammers are both tools, so you might choose to put them together in a section called "Tools." You could further classify them as handtools, to differentiate them from power tools, and so on.



009 Dip a toe in the water

It's a good idea to dip a toe in the water before diving in. A good way to do this with web design is to try one of the free blogging services. You will get an idea of what it's like to put a site together, update it, style it, and so on. If you keep it up—and become frustrated with the restrictions these free services impose—then it's time to move into building “proper” websites.

010 Direct links from your home page

Once you've figured out a good hierarchy for your contents you might well have content deep in your site that needs to be more prominent. Don't be tempted to move that content into the main menu. Instead, create links on the home page—perhaps in the text, or even using graphic “flashes”—to draw attention to it, while maintaining the integrity of your “information architecture.”

011 Draw a site map

A site map is a great way to plan the overall structure of your site. It helps you group related items together to make it easier for your visitors to find their way around your site. A site map is also useful for showing to a client to help them visualize what you have in mind.





012 Don't try to fit everything in your site map

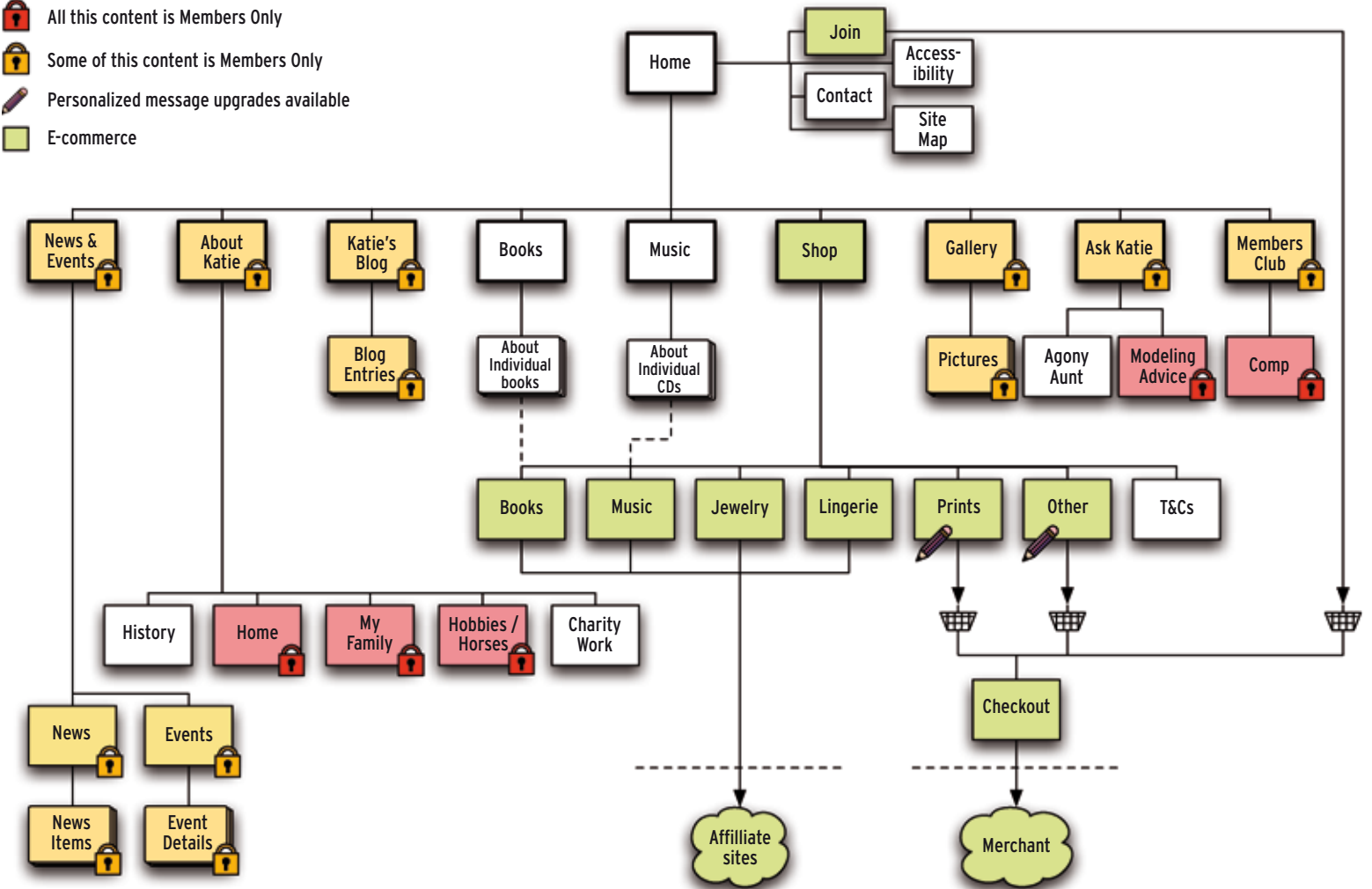
When you're designing your site, and perhaps creating a site map to show your client, don't be tempted to try and fit all the concepts of the site on one sheet of paper! If an area of your site is complex (perhaps a shopping process) then split off into another page, or consider full-blown wireframes (see tip 020).

013 Get help with the writing

If writing isn't exactly your strong point, ask a friend for help with bringing the copy up to standard. Remember, on the vast majority of websites the text is really what users visit for.

Katie Price Site Map

-  All this content is Members Only
-  Some of this content is Members Only
-  Personalized message upgrades available
-  E-commerce





014 Identify your target audience

Before starting a new website, always ask yourself: who is this site aimed at? Once you have a clear idea of the intended audience you'll be able to plan accordingly. Without answering this question, your site may never quite hit the mark.

015 Site or page; what's the difference?

People often refer to "my web page" when what they usually mean is "my website." A website is made up of multiple pages that are linked together.

016 What's a menu for?

The purpose of the menu is to show people what's available in the site. It doesn't have to show every last thing on the site, but it must clearly show the types of thing that are available.

017 What's a submenu?

While the main menu shows what the site offers, the submenu shows the contents of a section within the site. For example, in a section called "Products" you would expect to see a submenu that listed those products.

018 Appropriate navigation

A site with thousands of pages needs sophisticated information architecture and navigation to allow users to find what they're after. But searches, cookie trails, subsections, submenus, and so on might all be overkill for a small site, so apply navigation techniques appropriate to the project.

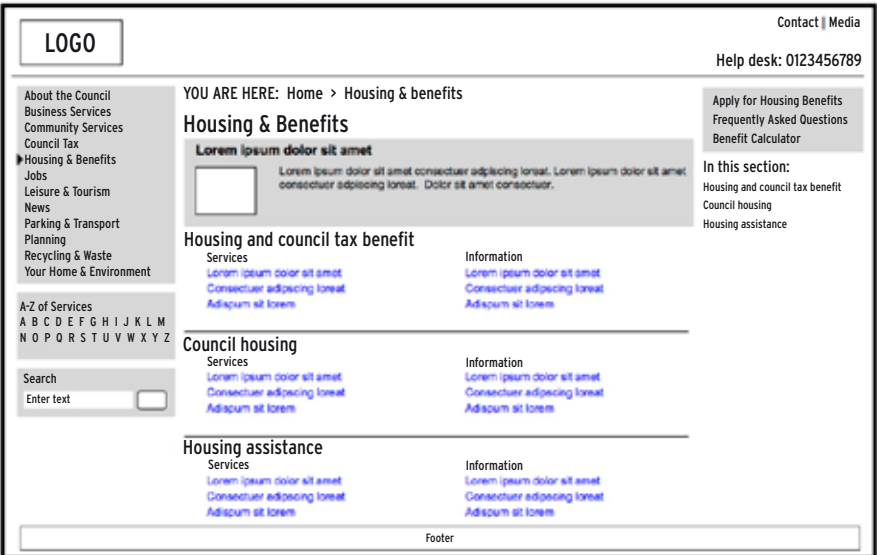
019 Information architecture

Information architecture is the process of planning out where everything will go on your site, and how your users will navigate around it. Write down all the subjects your site will contain on post-it notes, then arrange them into groups that logically fit together.

020 Wireframes: the storyboards of web design

Filmmakers use storyboards to help plan out a movie. This process helps to ensure that what they're doing will work before they actually start filming. Wireframes are very similar to storyboards; they are simple outlines and boxes, often drawn by hand, laying out the main functions (e.g. navigation, search boxes, forms, etc.) of a site before you start to build it.

3.01 Section Index Page - example 2



021 Don't steal other people's content

Don't steal content from other people's websites. The copyright on everything you see on the web belongs to someone—photographs, illustrations, animations—and unless they give you permission to use it, you could be violating your local copyright laws.

022 Ask for permission

People can be surprisingly generous, and this is often especially true on the web. If you want to use an image you found on someone's website, just email them and ask if it's OK to do so. Offer them a credit with a link to their site and they'll probably be happy to oblige.

023 Don't be afraid to ask

If you see something cool on the web and wonder how it was done, why not ask the website designers responsible? Many designers will be happy to share their expertise; after all, experienced web designers were once beginners too.



Web Forums

024 Using forums

Forums on web design are a great place to pick up helpful information. You will often find plenty of people who have already been through the problems you might be facing and they'll be happy to help. One day, you might be the one passing on advice.

025 Choose the right forum

Busy forums often have different areas for different topics. For example, a web design forum may have specific areas on JavaScript, Usability, PHP Scripting, HTML, etc. Get to know the forum before you start posting to make sure you are in the right area.

026 Helping out on forums

As well as asking questions on forums, don't forget to answer them too. If you know the answer to someone's question then let them know; it's this "give and take" that makes forums work.

027 Mailing lists

Mailing lists are an alternative to forums. Instead of visiting a website to take part, emails are sent direct to your inbox. Some people prefer this as you get notified as soon as a new posting arrives. Also, the "threads" are always available on your computer even when you're not online.

028 Off-topic posting

Mailing lists are great for making friends too, but if you are discussing a subject that is not on the general topic of the list, preface your email subject line with "[OT]" to help busy people distinguish between important posts and chitchat.



029 Using free website building services

For many people, using one of the free do-it-yourself website or blogging services is a great way to get online. A quick web search will show you which services are available.

030 Study others' source code

Every single programmer I've ever met learned their skills the same way: by studying the source code in other people's sites! Select "View Source" in your web browser and you can see the HTML, CSS, and even JavaScripts that have been used. Studying them is a great way to learn.

031 How much software do you need?

As a practical minimum you'll need three types of software: one for creating graphics, one for building the HTML pages, and one for uploading it all to your web server. Some packages combine two or more of these functions.

032 Find cheaper software alternatives

Professional software packages can cost huge amounts of money, but most of the work can be done with free or shareware alternatives. For example, I do all my handwritten code using BBEdit. This is available as a free version which includes most of the pro features.

033 Universal broadband?

Despite what the adverts imply, not everyone has broadband! It can be tempting to fill your site with 16Mb animations, but spare a thought for the majority of users who still get online using dial-up—especially true for rural, older, or poorer users.

034 Don't use visitor counters

We all want to know how many people visit our websites, but for the majority of us the answer is "not many!" So don't use a counter on your pages, use a web stats package instead. It will give you more information, look more professional, and save you potential embarrassment.





User testing your site

035 User testing

User testing (also called “usability testing”) is carried out to ensure that your website will be usable by people in the real world. It’s better to spot problems and fix them early on, preferably before your site is launched!

036 Jakob Nielsen

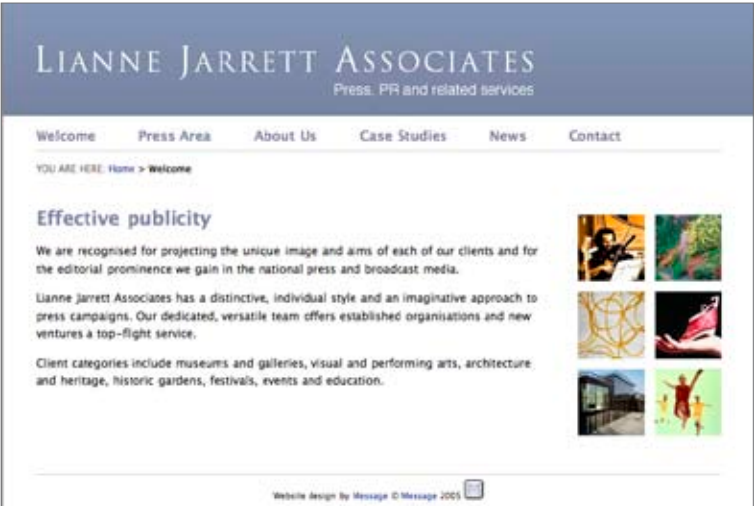
Jakob Nielsen is one of the leading experts on usability and his website is worth a look. It may not be the prettiest site in the world but he knows what he’s talking about. You might not agree with everything he says (I know I don’t!) but his “Top Ten Mistakes in Web Design” page makes for stimulating reading: www.useit.com/alertbox/9605.html

037 Basic user testing

A simple user test involves getting a few friends to try out your site before you launch it. Set them some tasks, such as “find a product and add it to your shopping cart,” without prompting them as to how your site works. Make a note of any difficulties they encounter—and fix them!

038 Advanced user testing: 1

If your site is a professional project it’s a good idea to carry out more thorough user testing to protect your client’s investment. You should get between four and six test subjects of different ages and experience and set them all the same tasks to carry out on the site.



039 Advanced user testing: 2

Ideally, you should carry out at least two rounds of tests; one at the planning stage using paper mock-ups, and a second at the visual design stage before building the site. Implement any changes before moving on to the next stage, and use different people for each round of tests. A third round—carried out once the site is built, but before it is launched—should simply confirm what you have already found.

040 Video your user tests

Set up a video camera to record your user tests, pointing it at the screen. This will allow you to review your users’ actions and judge the tests more objectively. It will also pick up their comments, which can be extremely instructive.



041 The house-building analogy

You can only add a certain amount onto an existing house before the original design scheme starts to break down. In extreme cases, even the very foundations might fail. At some point you have to tear it down and start again, designing the house you want from the ground up. The same holds true with web design.

042 When to use lists

If you find yourself writing out a series of related items, ask yourself if they represent a “list.” If so, you should code them up correctly as an HTML list. A good example of a list is actually a menu; it is after all a list of pages in a website.

043 When to use ordered lists

If your list items also have a certain order (in other words, one naturally follows from another) you should consider using an ordered list. This will put numbers in front of the items, rather than just bullet points.



044 When to use tables

The simple answer is that you should use tables to present tabular data. Try to avoid using them if your information is just a simple list... use an HTML list instead! And under no circumstances should you use them simply for layout purposes.