

Has the written word become secondary to visual impact and functional architecture in web design?

This dissertation will set out to explore a relatively new and non-fixed medium of communication. Web design has existed for nearly twenty years and there is still a lot to learn about this ever developing new medium. In comparison to printed applications such as books, magazines or newspapers, Web sites are an extremely new tool that creative artists, companies and large corporations alike can be used casually for research or actively to promote their purpose. This essay will discuss a very important part of web design, which is most commonly forgotten by Graphic designers and Web designers in general. The importance of the written word which can be viewed as one of the few things that implicitly communicates with the user. The issue that this essay sets out to address is that many web/ graphic designers spend months designing their site, adding colours, inserting pictures, moving images and tuning the site for various browsers and applications etc... With web page constructors favouring the newer and shinier apps more important areas of the website; principally text content; are placed with little consideration on the page. How can new applications address this? I will set out to look at developments in the way text is highlighted and hidden and how the balance between aesthetics and practicality and functional architecture are addressed. For my research, I have read various books concerning web design, writing for web, web page usability and other various studies conducted in this area. The web was also a useful research tool.

Ultimately users visit your website for its content. Everything else is just the backdrop. The design is there to allow people access to the content. The old analogy is somebody who goes to see a theatre performance: When they leave the theatre, you want them to be discussing how great the play was and not how great the costumes were.¹

Jakob Nielsen (Design web usability)

Although like Nielsen says most net users are interested principally in content; certain web pages certainly those in the graphic / web design field stand alone as pieces of interactive art that display the innovative talents of the web design company itself. Text plays a secondary role to the visual layout, similar design aesthetics are employed on many other pages that showcases those in the creative arts such as photographers, performance artists and musicians whose pages have to convey a sense of what the artist is about. For these sites the still and moving image as well as music, take focus in front of passages of text. The 'costume' or visual impact of a website can have greater impact than the text much like a dancer does not have to speak to convey a message or story.

Examples of such a websites where text plays a secondary role include: www.branddoctor.com, www.hostway.com and www.romainrunner.com a site published by Taschen which is well respected. It is no longer online, but I did get in touch with its designer and he kindly sent me directly the non-official link, so I can state it as example of a site that disguises text and relies upon visual impact and functional architecture. Although a majority of sites on the net are not as visually focused as these, which offer a completely different user experience than static HTML. These sites

1 Jakob Nielsen, Designing Web Usability, page 99

still use words mainly to navigate the user around the page and to give useful information. Moving images, videos and the users' direct interaction with the site; (similar to a computer game) puts written word as secondary.



1 www.romainrunner.com



2 www.branddoctor.com

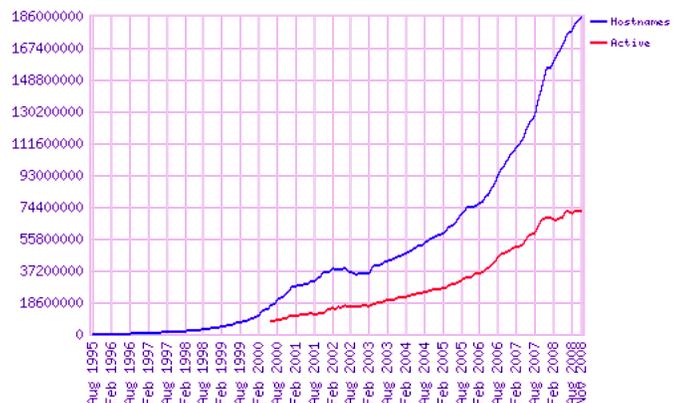


3 www.bobscube.com

How it all began?

When magazines and newspapers first went onto the web, there was excitement about the massive space and endless scope that the web offered, and how that space could be best used. At first it appears that these new on-line editors did not think of offering a different kind of experience for on-line users; tending to overload the space with overwhelming amounts of text for the reader to choose from with little filtration. Even the early interactive tools and apps were principally focused on organising and delivering old media content and passages copied exactly from the hard copy. But today media companies understand that those vast archives are not the only factor which drives their users to their web sites. Users want content, which is created especially for the web, is manageable and doesn't overwhelm the senses. It is crucial to realize that web users are looking for a particularly web orientated experience and a simple news article as we know it has changed dramatically in its structure and the method of its delivery. On-line users expect audio, videos of breaking news and scrolling banners. We expect a website to provide specific answers to our questions and are eager to search for information that will have value to us if presented in an easily digestible format.

*According to the Netcraft Web Server Survey, there are 3 million sites uploaded every month. By November 2008 there are registered **185,167,897** websites world wide.² The aim of most of them is to grab the users' attention immediately before he/she clicks away.*



2 http://news.netcraft.com/archives/web_server_survey.html

The User is constantly moving in the web space and like an easily distracted child is attracted by flashing advertisements, various links and other elements and forced/encouraged to do non work based activities like for example watching pranks on Youtube.com Why should the user, spend time on a web page that is confusing, loading slowly and doesn't speak to them? Therefore writing for the web has to be clever so it grabs our attention, makes us stay on the page and not be encouraged to click away.

To write a successful web copy it is vital to know the most important aspects needed for improving the users' on-line experience such as the conveying of its message and various aspects, which through a well written web page layout can dramatically help on-line traffic. We have to ask the question: *How does a user read on-line? Is it in the same as reading from a printed application?* We live in very hectic times. People have to deal with massive amounts of information every day. The idea of the user who cuddles with his laptop and cup of hot chocolate over one web page is an inaccurate understanding of our modern habits. As Nielsen and Loaranger (2006) say: *If people carefully studied everything they came across on-line, they would never get to log off and have a life.*³ Most people are searching on the web for answers, gathering together information and doing various tasks. If they won't find what they are looking for quickly and effectively they go look for information elsewhere that's more attractively presented to them. It is like the old analogy of hiding vegetables in your child's meal. Web designers, cleverly hide text in order not to scare or overwhelm the user. It is in how this is done, where the web page succeed or fails.

(www.3ammagazine.com, www.3quarksdaily.com)

There have been many studies on users' behavior while surfing on the net. Information architect Christin Wodtke's study describes reading on-line as three phased. In the first phase, which Wodtke calls "skimming"; the user very quickly skim reads the text moving his/her eyes across the words and finds out how long that certain piece of text is, whether it is separated into columns and whether it contains mark ups and links. In the second phase (scanning) the user re-examines the text. Skipping from column to column, reading the first and last sentences marking key words and trying to find out if the text has any relevance to them. It is not until the third phase that the user is carefully reading the whole text from top to bottom or just those parts which he found in previous research to be relevant. Whether we are browsing on e-commerce websites or online newspapers the same techniques are used by those browsing. (Nielsen and Morkers 1997) *79 percent of our test users always scanned any new page they came across: only 16 percent read word by word.*⁴

Is the web therefore changing the way people read? It certainly does as web is a different medium than print. Similarity could be found for example with reading of newspapers and its articles and headings.

If people search for certain information as Janice Redish in her book '*Let Go of the Words*', notes: *they [users] are on the mission, focused on the hunt.*⁵ The web page therefore must serve as a tool that benefits the users' aims and objectives immediately so the user can effectively stop hunting and start digesting the available content. Jakob Nielsen's research proved that people actually read 25% slower from a computer screen than from a printed application. Also this research suggests that sections of print that are intended for online display need to be reduced by up to 50%. It is recommended therefore, that to get your message across to the target web

3 Jennice Redish, *Let go of the words*, page 4

4 Jonathan Price and Lisa Price, *Hot Text*, page 120

5 Janice Redish, *Let go of the words*, page 54

audience you have to write less. This is very interesting as an example it would be good to look at the MSN or BBC homepage two popular content rich websites that are very text heavy. The page is full of various content mainly headings, which lead to more text but also screenshots of various videos. This is a pure example of many formats of content combined together skillfully through good functional architecture and even if there is a lot of information the users eye is not overwhelmed.



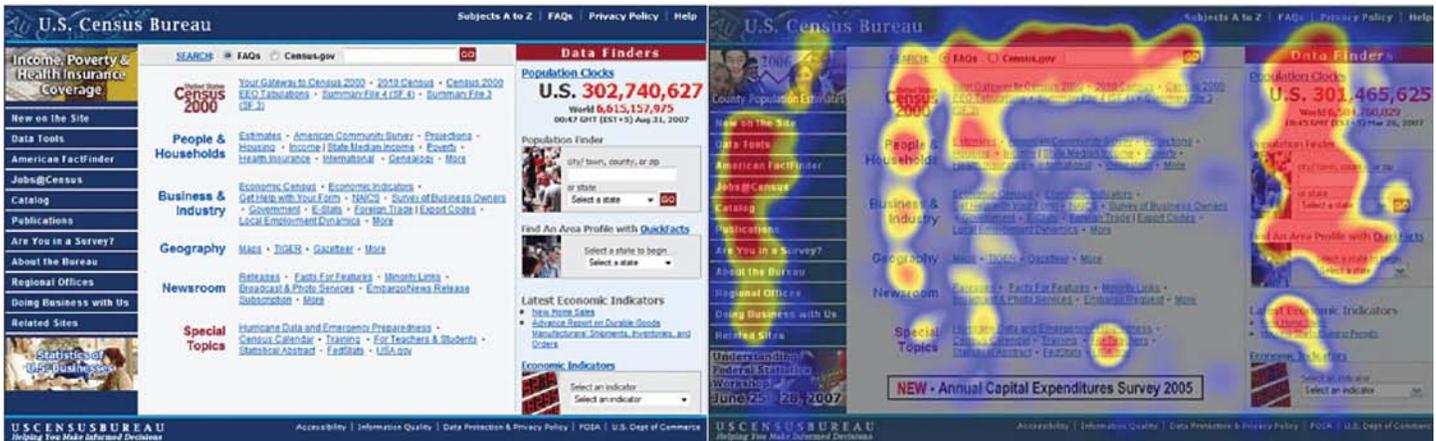
2 www.msn.com

3 www.bbc.co.uk

There has been lots of research conducted on web page readers by usability experts [www.enquiroresearch.com, eyetools.com, Nielsen Norman Group]. As an example to support this thesis it would be good to look at an example of research that has been done in this field. How accurate are those tests?

As Colin Johnson, President & CEO, [Eyetools Inc](#) notes: *An eyetracker can capture and report what people are looking at to within a centimeter's distance when you measure a person's point of gaze on a typical computer screen. The manufacturers of eyetracking devices report this accuracy in units called "visual angle." The Tobii eyetracker that we used in this study is accurate to within 1 centimeter of visual angle. This means that if you draw an imaginary line from a person's pupil to the item she is viewing, the machine will report what it thinks she is looking at within 1 degree of that imaginary line.*⁶

Users look mainly at headings and bullet lists showing little consideration of the left navigation bar.



6 <http://www.poynterextra.org/eyetrack2004/accuracy.htm>



9 eye tracking computer

The yellow colours indicate where the user looks least on the page and the red areas indicate where the main focus on what the users gaze upon.

Joe Clark Building Accesible Websites mentions that even the way blind people act on-line is similar. They actually scan with their ears, listening to their screen readers. After hearing only a few words they jump from paragraph, headings and through links.

Conversation

Janice Redish in *Let Go of the Words*; compares good writing for the web as conversational. She states that in many cases a website is like a phone. 'Ask yourself, what would people ask me about this topic on the phone? Reply to them as if they were on the phone.'⁷

It is crucial that a web page has to be able to "talk" to the user as the creator of the web page can not be present to answer all questions that are raised by users. The website itself has to be able to answer those questions for them and lead users easily through its content. It must help users to achieve their goal in getting the necessary information they need. Web design is human centred technology and therefore to write a text appropriate for a website it is essential to understand the on-line reader; who they are, why they come to the site and what is important to them. In order to get closer to the users/ customers and make a connection between them and the product or website customers need to feel almost like they are receiving a unique or personal experience. Visitors of web pages need to feel at ease with the format and layout (functional architecture). This could be achieved with a conversational style of writing, which gives the user a sense that they are being spoken to directly and that the website understands the user's needs.

In the book *Hot Text, Web Writing That Works* it specifies that you have to get to know your audience. Jonathan and Lisa Price discuss that in order to target niches groups and individuals web designers have to be very specific in the way the web site is laid out and the content. If you know your users you can tailor the site making it more

7 Janice Redish, Lets go of the words, page 4

suitable for them. This is true for niche websites which take up a large share of the net space. However it could be argued that this tactic does not work on large websites with a broad user spectrum including a much wider demographic. Therefore on websites with heavy traffic like E-Bay or Hotmail for example (used by people of all ages and different cultures), it is important that jargon is not used. Language and visuals that are alien to the user only encourages them to click away.

Headings

A reader's first impression is critical. You need to get your message over fast and effectively. What could convey a message fast enough than a well written title? If the user reads a well written title, then he will know what the content is about. The title must therefore be straight to the point, and meaningful.

It is also helpful to break certain articles and written content into two or three headings, main headings, subheadings and sometimes sub-subheadings. That compliments the way people read on the web skimming for the main idea and structure of the site.

Leslie Rotan (Online news editor from Detroit News) says: *'A lot of these essentials between the printed application and on-line are the same. As far as accuracy, as far as what you are looking for when you are editing, but when you are editing for the web you have to work light and quick. Instead of having a lot of deadlines, you have constant deadlines. News is always breaking and they need to get on-line as soon as possible. So you need to work fast, and you need to work smart.'*⁸

This brings us on to headline writing for the web principally on content heavy sites such as Skynews.com, Reuters.com and other online news websites. A headline for a newspaper needs to be clever and fun, something that will bring out the photos and attract users to articles. But that is not quite how it works on the web because first of all your goal is to attract readers to your website which currently is highly likely to originate from a Google search. You have to think like someone who is looking for a particular story. Web headings with keywords and snappy titles are more likely to be picked up by the search engine as well as being attractive once the user reaches the website. It is important to put keywords closer to the beginning of the headlines because they will be given more weight by search engines. For example if you were looking for an article on a bus crash; you would get more hits from the headline 'Bus Crash Kills Fifty People' than 'Fifty People Die in Bus Crash.' This is because people will type bus crash into the search box. Good functional architecture takes the users mind-set into account and tries its best to second guess it.

Things have to be spelled out implicitly such as the use of place names, peoples' names etc.. People who are reading headlines on the web are quickly browsing and making snap decisions about whether or not to read the story. In the printed medium we have the luxury of having the content presented for us. We only need to glance at a headline to know if it is relevant. Artifacts are presented in a simple yes or no format. Headlines often have to be short because they are going out to RSS feeds wap to peoples' mobile devices so it has to be easily digestible for them. Therefore functional Architecture in web design where text is the principal format is important. However, as discussed previously there are many niche websites that do not fit into this category.

8 <http://forums.detnews.com/redesign/blogs/greenlifeblog/index.cfm?Xport/web/bloggerid=90>

Paragraphs

It is much easier to read from a book where all the relevant information that you are searching for is in front of you in one easy format. That does not work for the web as it cannot be held, like a book or read the same way, the pages are also backlit and reading can often be hard work for the eyes. For example if the user is looking for some information on a product or service, he/she may often face a massive block of text that is unappealing to read. Why is that? Why is the user not interested? How many times have you been searching for information on the web, and all you get as a result of your research was useless text? On many web pages on the net, users have to stroll through lots of text to find the relevant information often giving up halfway. Would you then go somewhere else and read another long block of text to find out that this was not useful as well? Of course not. Get to the point!!!! In other words, save the actual meaning and get rid of the rest.

Many web pages are set up for commercial/retail purposes. The trick is that if you want to sell something to the potential buyer, everything needs to be done in such a way that he/she will buy the end the product. The virtual shopping basket is a great example of this and is another great piece of functional architecture. By replacing a list of what products you are purchasing with an icon the website can avoid using unnecessary text. Also it is quick, easy to use and does not interfere with the shoppers' experience. This shows that Functional Architecture is not dependent on the written word and an effective website has to address the balance of what is presented on screen to the user.

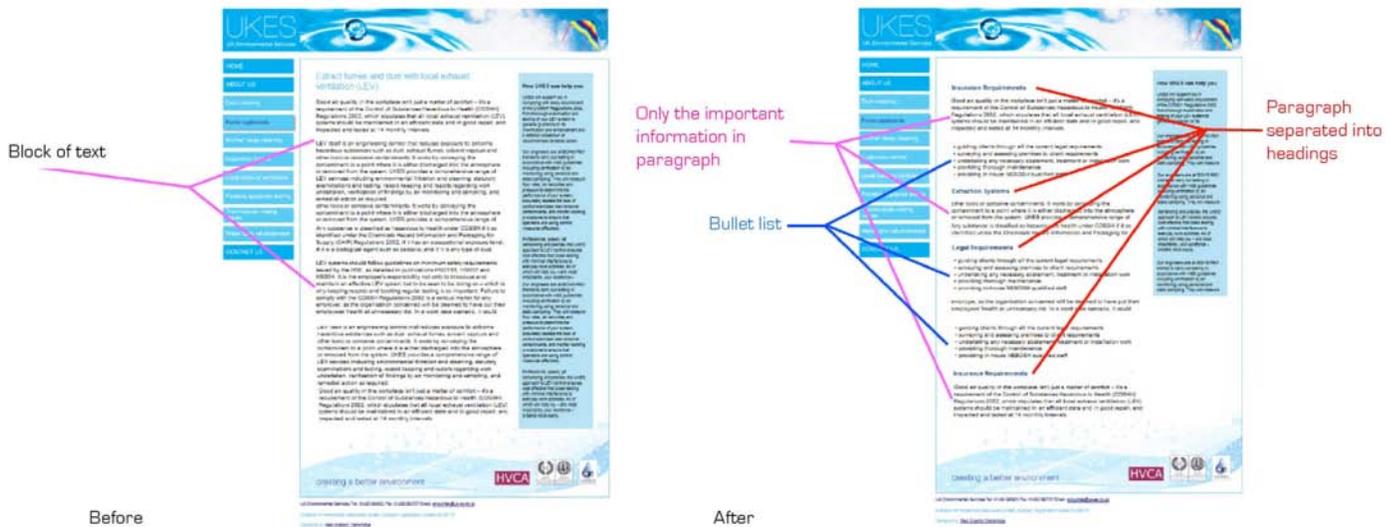
Janice Radish sites three major elements required: helping site visitors find what they want, giving them the right information about products and finally getting them through the buying process effectively and efficiently. Pay-Pal, E-bay is another great example of this. Designing from the inside is the key. Many people don't care about business history. They are interested in the price of their items. They want relevant information on how to get what they are after and how to get it fast. They require choice and hassle free operation or they will move quickly elsewhere.

Give to your users more than they are expecting. That helps you to gain more regular users. The web experience is different than reading a book as something has to be done about long paragraphs of text which put the user off. From a practical point of view, the designer has to respect the page user who is searching for the answers on the web. There is no need to dish out an entire document, when a reader on the web is only looking for facts and not reading for pleasure. Texts for the web have to have a certain length. Generally it is stated around 200 to 500 words per page. That does not mean that on the web it is impossible to find longer texts, as this kind of longer text are mostly scholarly articles for narrowly specified readers or perhaps the occasional novel, poem or e-book.

If answers are hidden somewhere in long columns of text the web user will not spend his time to searching. All the user wants is to read the answer and that is sometimes only two or three sentences from all the text. The success of a good web page is that it is getting straight to the point and all those intros and long explanations are changed to more relevant text, which is short but informative and rich. The visitor's time is therefore not wasted as happens on many pages. Susannah Ross *Writing for the web* mentioned the use of active space. Breaking the text into small chunks, using a lot of

headings, using of short paragraphs and space them out from each other, use of bullets, lists and tables to separate the text.⁹

Reduced scrolling is also very important. There is lot of web pages which have text separated into columns like in newspapers. What can this cause? A user will get quickly bored by scrolling up and down just to get through the text. Another example Janice Redish uses in her book is that of CompareInterestRates.com. They tried various ways on how to improve their online form. Laonbright [an e-commerce company that helps mortgage companies get business] worked with Caroline Jarrett (usability consultant) They made changes, including photos, background colour and text changes as well as the colour of text in form fields without any major rise in users interest. After revoking the text to a very simple one introducing sentence and bullet lists they increased conversation rates *'from 5 to 7.3 percent in one stream of traffic and from 10 to 12.5 percent in another stream of traffic.'*¹⁰ *The impact of the change to text was significant.*



Pyramid style

To grab the attention of the reader on the web a good piece of functional architecture is the inverted pyramid style. This actually requires a bit of different thinking. In the writing of essays the conclusion comes last. But on the web the busy user wants to read the conclusion first. That is because the user is scanning through the text on the page, they usually read only the first two sentences of each paragraph. They quickly move from one paragraph to another and if interested come back. Jonathan and Lisa Price *Hot text* mentioned the similarity of the pyramid style with methods taught at schools of journalism. Journalists are taught this technique as people reading newspapers mostly skim the headlines and read only the first paragraph. This is very interesting from the view of comparing newspapers to the web. They are both about passing the message and the inverted pyramid rapidly helps to convey the message to the user. It is an example of how good functional architecture can manipulate text.

9 Suzannah Ross, Writing for web, page 143-4

10 Janice Redish, Let go of the words, page 109

Links

Writing for the web is not only influenced by a different way of reading of text but also with the method of how reach certain text. Just typing an address into the address bar is not the only way of finding what the reader is after and surely not the most frequent. The user can reach the requested page by either following a link, selecting an element in the navigation or clicking on an advertisement. However a web user is most likely to find a site from search results. In what way is a link getting on a page in the search results? Users set an inquiry and the search engine on the basis of searching web contents in its database will choose pages with a relevant link.

In writing for the web it is more and more important to know searched words and phrases. This is known as SEO where keywords are integrated into websites in order to be found in searches. It is important for the web that text written for it should be coming from the word-stock of its readers. Not from scholarly lingo, which nobody understands but a narrow circle of professionals.

The text for a link or navigation item should give the reader a rough idea what a certain page is going to be about. A link such as a *Career with British gas* does not have to be understandable, as far as job vacancies or job offers. If we get back to the fact that search engines are driven not only by text on the page itself but also by text links directed towards it. We all have to agree that from the point of view of optimization, search engines are the much more convenient and effective mediums of getting people to the site. For example we can search under the link word "job" rather than "career", to find the same information and much more if desired.

Use of words

*"Never use a long word when a short one will do. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or jargon word if you can think of an every day equivalent"*¹¹

George Orwell (1946)

We can agree that a good webpage should echo a conversation. It is necessary to use words accurately according to who you are talking to. In conversation people usually have to listen to the others to be able to give a correct response. *People, interestingly understand some words quicker than others. Use of easy, commonly used words and phrases make people understand more effectively*¹²

When the web started there were a lot of web pages and they all looked different. People had patience to try to understand them. Times changed. Use of words has to be understandable for everybody and people will not spend more time than they have to on a certain page.

Another question is arising. How does the functional architecture of the website cater for easy reading? The English language has various indexes of understanding. Most of it works with word length and their count in the sentence. The Index of readability comes in the English language from the hypothesis that shorter words have an Anglo-Saxon base. Well, shorter sentences would be easier to understand than broader

11 Frank I. Luntz, Words that Work: It's Not what You Say, It's what People Hear, page 52

12 Jonathan Price and Lisa Price, Hot Text, page 92

sentences. Writing of short, straight forwarded sentences is recommended as the message will be conveyed quicker.

This consideration of the web page is from a typographic point of view closer to the newspaper or magazine layout than a book composition.

Approaching the User

J. Redish describes how to approach user in text. She suggests using a direct way of talking to the user. Use “you” which is according to her much closer to the visitor as he can see himself in the text. The information than becomes inviting and personal. Using of he, she, her, him, his or hers does not work that well. This could minimise the risk that content can only be for one selected gender. If a female is reading an article where the writer is talking to her as a he; then she could be than disappointed and move over to a different web site. Interestingly if you are an organization it is good to let people know that you are a person as well and the use of we or our; is appropriate. Blogs where users usually talk about themselves or their own experience using I is also acceptable.

If writing for the web is like conversation than the use of the active voice is important. This is helps readers on the web to grab the information quickly and easily Various experts in the field recommend not using jokes as not everybody will laugh and avoid the use of riddles and puns as not everybody will understand.

Hot text mentioned that people are getting much more easily through text which is written in active voice. *'People habitually think in in terms of characters carrying out actions that affect objects or other people.'*¹³

Use of the passive voice is according to this research harder to read and does not fully affect the reader as it is not directed to him. For example a line of text that works on the web would be for example: The football player kicks the ball rather than: the ball was kicked by football player.

Check your final work

Gina Trapani, founding editor of Lifehacker (lifehacker.com) states: “ *Finding a mentor or editor is a huge think. Yo have to find someone who is both honest and interested in your subject*”¹⁴

No matter how many times you go through your final copy, there will be always besomething you missed. It could be a spelling mistake, grammatical mistake or a thousand other things which will undervalue your sites credibility and hardly persuades the user.

Credibility

There is one very important element which does influence users. It is the credibility of web pages. If a user for example is buying something or financially subscribing to some organization they need to have the feeling, that this site is the one to choose. The credibility of a web page does not rely only on words but also on who is providing the information and why is this information provided. The Navigation and visual aspects of a

13 Jonathan Price and Lisa Price, Hot text, page 218

14 Net Magazine, Create outstanding copy, issue 176, page 42

site are important too. If for example the web page has well written text but the visuals are too flashy or distracting that will not help to build the web pages credibility and probably will distract the user.

Irene Hammerich and Claire Harrison in *Developing on-line content* mentioned other textual aspects such as: *Avoid marketing language, present information as factual, relevant, accurate and up to date.*¹⁵

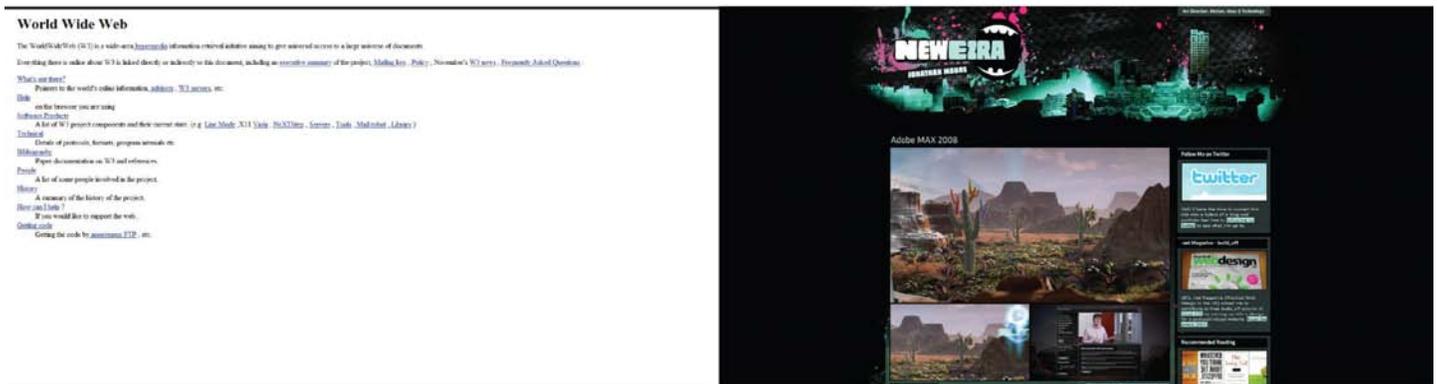
She also mentioned that it is good to avoid convoluted syntax which makes it difficult for the user to sort fact from fiction. All aspects of functional architecture such as design, usability, clean text presentation and no spelling and grammatical mistakes play an essential role in the users overall experience.

Don't make people think and don't make people wander

We can see that the written word in the functional architecture of a website can enhance the users experience and give useful information as well as the fact that writing for the web as a new and evolving medium is different than from writing for print.

Writing for the web is one thing but what is more important design or the written word. What is the actual connection between those two? As mentioned in this dissertation already, written content is vital for grabbing users attention and to get to them information needed. But without good use of functional architecture which leads the user easily to what they are after, there would be no way of finding the desired information. Usability is a very important part together with visual impact. Negligence of visual impact together with functional architecture (usability) could make it hard or even impossible to convey the message. It is crucial to make all important elements on the web page visible that is what in essence good functional architecture delivers.

Take for example the first web page ever created in 1991 by Tim Berners-Lee amazing feat no doubt but something is missing. That page would not attract many people today. Imagine if all pages looked similar with no visual identity what so ever. That would be just a mess. This is a clear example that just text is not enough as this web page would look child like today. That also does not mean that text is not important. But to differentiate one web page from another page it has to have its own visual style.



13 First web page ever created

14 www.neweira.com

15 Irene Hammerich & Claire Harrison, *Developing online content*, page 115

Written text, attachment, audio's, videos, animations, flash movies, interactive maps, pdfs., pod casts etc are formats which are a necessary part of every modern web page. It is necessary to choose which one of those to use if not all of them. When thinking about the format, two considerations come to mind. What format will be the most effective with your readers, and secondly what format will be easiest to maintain and keep up to date. There are still a lot of designers who might think that design rules. But a web page which does not deliver useful information is pointless. Style matters and writing for the web is more about message itself and how efficiently that is expressed. Words could stand alone on a page and the user would still get the message, but if the site is more complex the visual impact and usability need to work hand in hand to deliver the message.

As Bronwyn Jones [Copywriter from Apple] states; *I am still amazed when people view written content as an afterthought to visual design. On the web, more than in any other medium, written word and the image work hand in hand. Even if your site is quite graphical and employs very little written text, you have textual elements, links and page titles. But beyond page view, you have to consider what is your site saying, both visually and textually. Style matters to both writing and visual design. Ignore that, and you'll produce something that misses the mark, no matter how pretty it is.*¹⁶

The Web space could be better placed if more Graphic and Web Designers paid the same amount of attention to written word as they do to design. Until that day the majority of sites on the web will be poorly designed non- functional pages that serve little else use than the personal benefit of their designers. However all of these different sites can be seen as strands in the nets D.N.A that can help us form a better understanding of functional architecture and how best to incorporate it

To conclude:

This dissertation has raised the question about the importance of writing on the web and texts relation ship with the web user. We have discussed the basic elements to be aware off when designing from the inside. Writers, Graphics and Web designers should work together as importance of visual impact, usability and written copy work hand in hand. It is mentioned all the time and especially in the design field that "less is more". In one way Jacob Nielsen [see footnote 1] is right and wrong. Written word is important, but there is a growing mass of people such as creative artists, who shape the visual future of web design and they do not need written word to be first. On the other hand to convey a message successfully in the written form on the web, it is crucial to work on the word craft. This is probably the most important aspect of functional architecture. The headings must stand out so that users get to the paragraphs. Paragraphs have to be short and informative. The conclusion starts the paragraph and the most important pieces of information have to immediately grab the users' attention. Paragraphs often have to work as another point of access for more text which is hidden under direct links. Links work in the same way as headings. For us to click, the site has to be interesting and catching. When constructing word-craft it is important to use short words that are easily understandable by the average user and are easily digestible. A good web page (especially one that is text rich) must be conversational. Use of gender specification is not recommended as well as the use of a passive voice as it can distract users. Always let somebody check your final copy for

16 Net magazine, Create outstanding web copy, issue 176, page 43

any kind of mistakes that could be overlooked. In the end, web pages have to have the genuine feel of credibility.

The web as a new medium has its own approach and things that work for print do not work the same way as on the web. Users scan and skim content as they search for information quickly. Web space is about information principally. Web pages are the main tool to convey those messages and try to make a statement in that massive space. The better the web page communicates in all means the better the users experience will be. The User can then achieve his goal effectively and rapidly and therefore will return again and again.

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