

Make your web site easy to read and use.

In a double-blind usability study, Jakob Nielsen examined how proficient readers and less literate readers used a commercial web site. He found a significant increase in all major areas of usability *after* the web site was adapted for less literate readers.¹ But it wasn't only the less literate users who benefited: Users of *all* literacy levels were able to complete their tasks faster, with greater success, and at a higher level of satisfaction. Making web sites easier for less proficient readers means easier for *all* readers. And, it is not hard to do. This article explains how.

Language

Use language that is simple and direct. Write as if you were speaking. And imagine the person you are speaking to does not have expertise in your field. The average American reads comfortably at the 5th-7th grade range so make sure your text is around the 5th-7th grade range so more people will be able to use your web site.²

Organization

Put the most important information at the top. Most readers spend only a few seconds on a page. Typically they read *only* headings and subheads. Get your reader to spend more time with your material by putting the key messages in the headings, in easy-to-understand language.

Divide large blocks of text into smaller chunks. Clear subheads followed by short paragraphs work best. This lets the user quickly find what they want.

Use fewer words, shorter sentences, and familiar language. Proficient readers can visually capture larger chunks of words all at once. But marginal readers often read word by word. Their reading is less automatic. And it is harder for them to decode, contextualize, and remember the text.³ Keep your text lean: too much information repels users.

Group related information together. Users can get lost and frustrated with too many cross-references or links.

Layout

- A simple layout, with ample white space and intuitively placed text works best. Be sure to test it on standard displays *and* mobile devices.
- *Always use sans serif font!* It stands up better to web display and degrades less at smaller font sizes.
- Use black or a dark-colored font on a white or light background for maximum legibility.
- Visual cues, like bold or color can guide your user to the most important areas.
- Left-aligned text is easiest to read.
- Use style sheets for consistent appearance and predictable positions on each page.
- Avoid animation. Moving, blinking, scrolling, or auto-updating objects and pages may cause problems for users with visual, cognitive, or physical disabilities. These features also increase your load time, which will boost your bounce rate.

Navigation

Set up 4 clearly defined areas:

- ① *Left nav* links to other areas of your site. A Site Help that tolerates spelling mistakes is best.
- ② *Right nav* shows where you are now and what else is in the current section. The current topic is "grayed out."
- ③ *Breadcrumbs* at the top of the page show where you are now and how you got there.
- ④ A Table of Contents at the start of each section lets you quickly see if this is the page you need. Links take you to the right spot fast.



Testing

Recruit typical users to test your site. They will help you identify areas that need tweaking, and ultimately give you a measure of confidence that your site is accessible.

Mobile Devices

Internet access via mobile devices, such as cell phones, PDA's, and iPods is on the rise. Design and test your site so it works in large *and* small formats. That means:

- Make scrolling easy,
- Use images and layout that keep file sizes small, and
- Make your text columns short and narrow.

Resources

Use "Bobby" to test for accessibility problems, including language, layout, and navigation:
<http://bobby.watchfire.com>

Download this article at:
www.transcend.net/library.htm

For more information on Readability and Plain Language call Transcend: **(530) 756-5834**

1 Jakob Nielsen's web site: www.uesit.com/alertbox/20050314.html

2 For more information on Readability, see Maria's latest Readability manual at: www.lulu.com/content/2269690

3 For more information on how we learn to read, see Maryanne Wolf's *Proust and the Squid*.