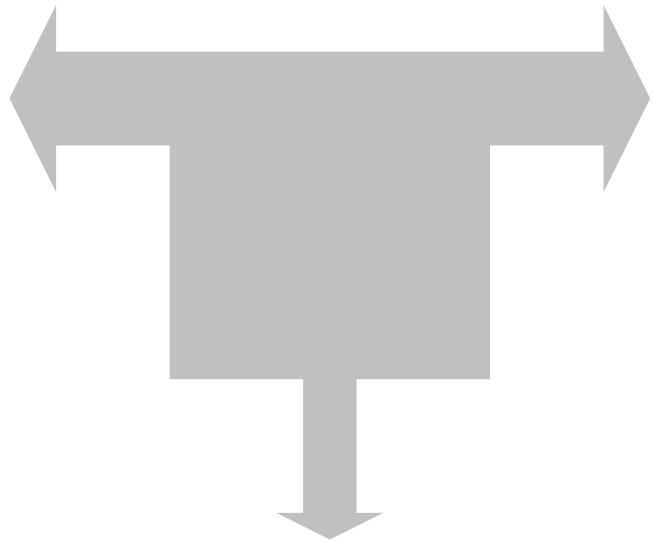# Provide Depth and Breadth through Plentiful Links to Related Information within Your Site

BACKGROUND

In everything, no matter what it may be, uniformity is undesirable. Leaving something incomplete makes it interesting, and gives one the feeling that there is room for growth.

—Yoshida Kenko

Be generous—offer more information

Gather the key ideas on the first page about a topic. Then, to satisfy a range of audience needs, provide links to background, context, and amplification. Take visitors to other pages with information such as:

- **Examples** that tell a story, showing what someone wanted, what they did, and what the results were.
- **Scenarios** in which users can imagine applying your ideas, products, or services to their own situation.
- **Tutorials** in which the user does some simple work you provide, just to learn the concepts or procedures.
- **Case studies** showing how your product or service worked for a particular customer.

- **White papers** summarizing an industry with examples and research.
- **Full reports** on the ideas you have just summarized (complete proposal, full manual, developer notes).
- **Background information** (history, archives, specs, company personnel).
- **Low-decibel information** "of interest to a minority of readers (that) can be made available through a link without penalizing those readers who don't want it." (Nielsen, 1999f)
- **See-also information** (lists of related topics) because "Users rarely land directly at the desired page, especially when using a search engine." (Nielsen, 2000a)
- **Shortcuts** "to important nodes located deeper in the hierarchy." (Farkas and Farkas, 2000)
- **Spur-of-the-moment**, one-of-a-kind links to related topics.

All but the last item should be used systematically, that is, over and over, on every similar topic.

Essentially, you summarize your conclusions on your first page and then use links to take people to the details. In some ways writing like this is easier because you don't have to wonder how much to cover, worrying that you may be cheating the reader with too little information or overwhelming the unwilling reader with too much.

> The combination of **concise summaries** and **great detail** is one of the ways that a Web document can be much better than a paper document. (Bricklin, 1998)

Plan, don't improvise

Whatever links you create to supplement a particular type of information, offer those links on every page of that type.

Once people have used that set of links to details about one product, they expect to find the same kind of links on every product page. If you play this hit or miss, you disappoint users. Planning ahead lets you be consistent: Think, "every time I write this kind of article, I plan to include this set of links."

Be wide and shallow

Reporting on many years of research, user interface guru Ben Shneiderman says, "The evidence is strong that breadth should be preferred over depth" (1998).

Does your site have enough information for each **niche audience**?

> Your site should have enough breadth to be relevant to more than a niche audience. (Microsoft, 2000)

Add plenty of major topics at the top levels, so people can make more accurate choices right away, rather than going down a series of stairs, only to discover that the target is not what they sought.

Then offer extra details if users want them. Your page ought to offer plenty of information, and if that's enough, fine. But if users want more info, the links give that to them.

Most people have difficulty recalling more than three or four levels when they drill down, down, down. Result: they may feel lost if you take them down ten or twelve levels.

If you are going to offer half a dozen links from each major topic, display all those links at once, rather than forcing people to go down a level to another page to see one other link, following that down to see another link, and so on. That's building unnecessary basements.

Don't break up a coherent story

When Apple was first creating hypertext, using the earliest versions of HyperCard and Guide, Jonathan went overboard on chopping manuals into tiny pieces. His model was the index card that Bill Atkinson was using as the metaphor for HyperCard, a hypertext program that was still being developed back then. Plus, Jonathan hated scrolling, so he wanted a bunch of very short segments. He figured all these different pages would live on a hard disk, so download times would not be a problem.

Now that we are serving up pages on the Web, where some people face very slow download times, we've learned to live with scrolling pages that contain a lot of text—five, ten, twenty index cards worth.

Electronic links connect lexias "external" to a work—say, commentary on it by another author or parallel or contrast texts—as well as within it and thereby create text that is experienced as nonlinear, or, more properly, as multilinear or multisequential.

—George P. Landow,
Hypertext, The Convergence
of Contemporary Critical
Theory and Technology

Don't break up a coherent page just because you think you ought to have more links. Having to jump from page to page just to read another paragraph gets tedious pretty fast.

> Hypertext should not be used to segment a long linear story into multiple pages. (Nielsen, 1999f)

Remember: you're creating links to additional material, not carving up a single article just to have a bunch of links.

Be cautious with links within a page

Many users think that every link takes them to another page. When they click a link that takes them down the same page, as in a FAQ, they report being puzzled, because when they scroll up or down, they encounter text they already read "on that other page."

If you have a sophisticated audience, internal links won't be a problem. But if you have relative newbies, you can be sure they will be confused by links down to anchors within the page, even if you include all the usual apparatus, such as arrows pointing up, and buttons marked **Go to Top**. "Top of what?" they ask.

EXAMPLES

Before
How to use our electronic library

We have organized our electronic library catalog around authors, titles, and subjects—just like the card catalogs of old. To find one or more books, here's what you do. You choose a category, such as author, words in a title, exact title, or subject, by clicking one of the items offered in the Category List. In a moment you see a new screen, asking for a little additional detail about the kind of books you are after.

After
How to use our electronic library

We have organized our electronic library catalog around authors, titles, and subjects—just like the card catalogs of old. To find one or more books, here's what you do.

1. You choose a category, such as author, words in a title, exact title, or subject, by clicking one of the items offered in the <u>Category List</u>.

In a moment you see a new screen, asking

In the <u>Detail screen</u>, you type in the text that you hope will lead you to the books you are after.

You click the giant red Search button. If you are lucky, you get a list of authors, titles, or subjects that might be relevant like that in our <u>Sample Results</u>. If you aren't so lucky, you're told that the catalog doesn't have anything with that text as part of an author's name, title, or subject. So you have to try again.

for a little additional detail about the kind of books you are after.

2. In the <u>Detail screen</u>, you type in the text that you hope will lead you to the books you are after.

3. You click the giant red Search button.

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If you aren't so lucky, you're told that the catalog doesn't have anything with that text as part of an author's name, title, or subject. So you have to try again.

Before

Here are some examples of the way you might use our genealogy information.

If you are interested in locating people who have been researching your family, or some branch of your family, you can find e-mail addresses and Web sites in our database of surnames.

Just want to check up on a specific ancestor or line, when you know where they lived? You can use our services to check out Church and Parish Records, Town and City Records, County Records, State and Province Records.

For dates, addresses, and incomes, we have a full set of the Census Archives.

After

Wondering where to start?

Here are some examples of the way you might use our genealogy information.

If you are interested in locating **people who have been researching your family**, or some branch of your family, you can find e-mail addresses and Web sites in our database of <u>Surnames</u>.

Just want to check up on a **specific ancestor or line**, when you know where they lived? Check out <u>Church and Parish Records</u>, <u>Town and City Records</u>, <u>County Records</u>, <u>State and Province Records</u>.

To get dates, addresses, and incomes, visit the <u>Census Archives</u>.

Before
Case Study: Using our Photo Exchange

Geraldine took some wonderful pictures on her vacation, and brought them to her local photo shop for development. They told her that if she wanted, she could have her pictures posted on the World Wide Web in her own Photo Exchange page, and have prints made on paper.

- That way, she could send the images to her relatives along with her e-mail.
- Plus she could just tell people her personal address for a Web site within the Photo Exchange, and they could go there to view the entire set of pictures.
- And she could describe the pictures for visitors by adding captions.
- If she only wanted certain people to visit, she could also protect her site by creating a password.

Geraldine agreed. In one week, she had her prints in hand, and the pictures were up on the Web. She e-mailed everyone with one picture, and the address of her site on Photo Exchange. Her family got to see the <u>whole tour</u>, including tourist sites, their car, and their motels.

Her Mom said it was like a slide show at her own pace.

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AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...	How well does this guideline apply?
TO HAVE FUN	Links to discussions, controversy, pro and con, all add value to your opinion piece. Add audio, animation, and video clips, too.
TO LEARN	Keep your hierarchy clear, letting students focus on your main message before offering them the supplementary materials. In general, move your links to the end of sections, so people get the full details before leaving.
TO ACT	Embedding links allows people to backtrack, jump ahead, and carry out the task they just couldn't figure out before.
TO BE AWARE	You want people to immerse themselves in your ideas, no? But unfold gradually, with secondary links.
TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE	Politeness suggests that you allow people to decide whether or not to look at the secondary information. Don't pour it on them all at once.

See: Ameritech (1997), Apple (1997), Berners-Lee (1998), Bricklin (1998), Farkas and Farkas (2000), Gagne & Briggs (1979), Horton (1990), Levine (1997), Microsoft (2000), Nielsen & Morkes (1997), Nielsen (1999f, 2000a), Reigeluth et al (1980), Robinson & Knirk (1984), Sheetz et al (1988), Shneiderman (1998), Sun (2000).

For your review only.

Excerpt from *Hot Text: Web Writing that Works*. (New Riders).