

Write and Display Several Levels at Once

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Imaging Software	Delacroix Look				
Imaging Hardware	Goya Look				
OCR Solutions	Hals Look				
White Papers	Manet Look				
Press Releases	Monet Look				
Recent Awards	Picasso Blue Look				
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Partners	Pissarro Look				
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	Renoir Look				

BACKGROUND |

Organize your guest's impressions

In the Impressions home page, the user clicked Graphic Tools, and the second level menu appeared. On that, the user clicked the Monet look, and the third level appeared. When the user chose Composition, the fourth column appeared with some of Monet's most famous paintings. Simply by clicking around, a user can unveil the entire contents of the site, gradually unfolding columns to find out what lies beneath what. Without going anywhere the guest can explore the complete structure.

Using every spatial and visual hint at our disposal, we should arrange the menus from left to right in some meaningful order. (Cooper, 1995)

Don't hide top-level menus

In the bad old days, every time a user chose an item on one menu, the menu disappeared. The user went to another menu. Then, when the user chose something on that menu, it too disappeared.

In the early days of online help, we regularly confused our users by snatching one menu away to display another. After puzzling people for six months, our team stumbled on the idea of displaying submenus on the same page as the main menu. What a concept!

Immediately the people we were testing sighed with relief. They no longer had to try to remember where they had been. If they happened to guess wrong about a particular top-level item, they could just back up and try another one. The penalty for guessing went way down.

To help users' short-term memory, menus should not require users to remember information from a previous menu or screen in order to make a selection on the current menu. If that information is needed, the system should present the information wherever it is needed, not just on the original screen. (Mandel, 1997)

We've come to accept the convention that a main menu will remain visible at the top of every page, so people can navigate quickly (and soak up the basic structure of the site). By extending the menu system in columns from one side to the other, in sequence, you can help people remember where they have come from, which also helps them figure out where they are going.

Don't try cascading more than one level where people have to slither over from one column to the next, without slipping off. Most people fail to navigate more than one level of these slippery submenus.

There is no expedient to which a man will not go to avoid the real labor of thinking.

—Thomas Alva Edison,
Placard in his factories

Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is the probable reason why so few engage in it.

—Henry Ford

The recognition of structure gives the mind its ability to find meaning.

—Suzanne Langer

A work has form in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence.

—Kenneth Burke

Let users perceive stability

Bruce Tognazzini, former user interface czar at Apple and Sun, liked to say that people hated go-to's. Whenever the background of a page dramatically changes, people register that as going to a new location. Once they perceive more than the magic number of seven (plus or minus two) locations, their short-term memory bursts, and they no longer feel confident that, if asked, they could recite the exact sequence they have traversed.

They begin to feel lost in hyperspace. For example, once, when Jonathan was testing an early version of a help system, a woman ran from the room retching. She threw up some more, and then came back and told him that she felt so disoriented by his hypertext that she had begun to feel woozy, as if she were sitting in a rowboat in a heavy swell. She had lost her bearings.

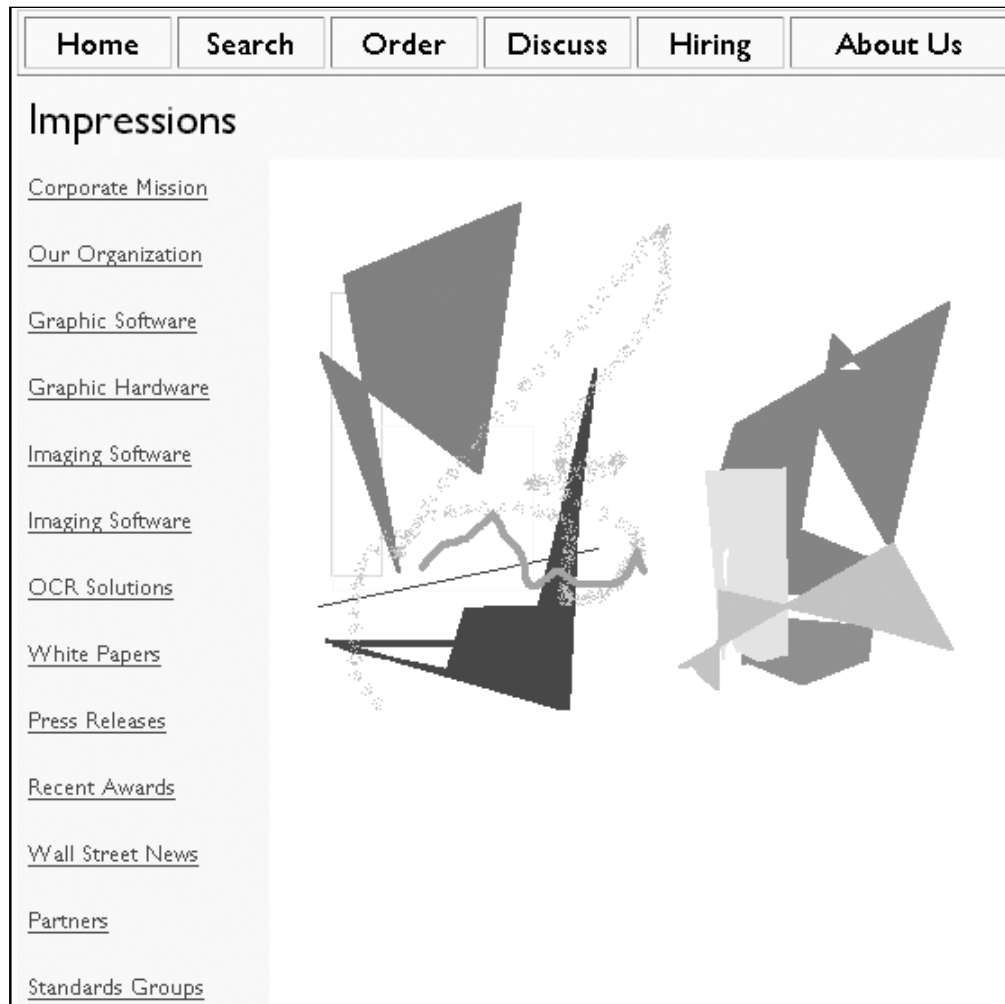
When the background stays put, people feel that they have not gone anywhere. Remember those cartoons where Roadrunner zips across the desert in front of mountains? If you look carefully at the individual frames of animation, the mountains stay put, but Roadrunner moves an eighth of an inch from cel to cel. So we feel like we are standing still watching, without changing our position, as Roadrunner goes by.

Similarly, if you keep the main menu steady on the left, and simply expand to the right, most people perceive the scene as stable. They do not feel they have gone anywhere. Result: their inner ear stays calm. That's what Tog calls "perceived stability."

EXAMPLES

Before

The original site showed only one menu at a time—tedious.

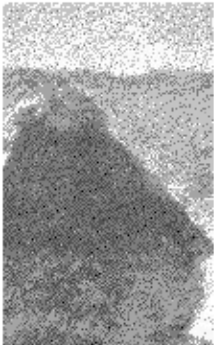


After

The site puts the first level menu on the left side, and when the users choose a topic, opens that topic's second level menu on the right, and so on. Because the background does not change from click to click, the user receives the illusion of staying put.

Home	Search	Order	Discuss	Hiring	About Us
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Impressions

Corporate Mission Our Organization Graphic Software Graphic Hardware Imaging Software Imaging Software OCR Solutions White Papers Press Releases Recent Awards Wall Street News Partners Standards Groups	Bacon Look Bonnard Look Cezanne Look Degas Look Delacroix Look Goya Look Hals Look Manet Look Monet Look Picasso Blue Look Picasso Late Look Pissarro Look Rembrandt Look Renoir Look	 Brushwork Buildup Composition Subject Matter	Artist's Floating Studio Boulevard des Capucines Breakup of the Ice Floes Bridge at Bougival Camille on Deathbed Cap d'Antibes Cathedral de Rouen I-6 Charing Cross Bridge Green Reflections Thames: Parliament Torrent, Creuse Sunset Seine, Winter Water Lilies (1908) Water Lilies at Twilight Water Lilies Series Waterloo Bridge Women in the Garden Yacht Races
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AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

If your guests like guesswork, hide the menus and make them figure out the path. Otherwise, keep the main menu steady and reveal the others gradually.

TO LEARN

Best to show the whole structure, or as much of it as you can, to organize understanding in advance, and build long-term memories.

TO ACT

This method assures faster and more accurate navigation.

TO BE AWARE

The mind likes structure. Even if you are trying to still the mind, revealing your structure gives it less to chatter about.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

The less you confuse them, the more they can listen to you, and swap opinions.

See: Cooper (1995), Mandel (1997), Norman (1991), Tognazzini (1992).

For your review only.

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

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