Confirm the Location by Showing the Position of This Informative Object in the Hierarchy

Graphic Software		Home	Order
Monet Look			
Composition: *Bridge at Bougival*		Previous/Next	
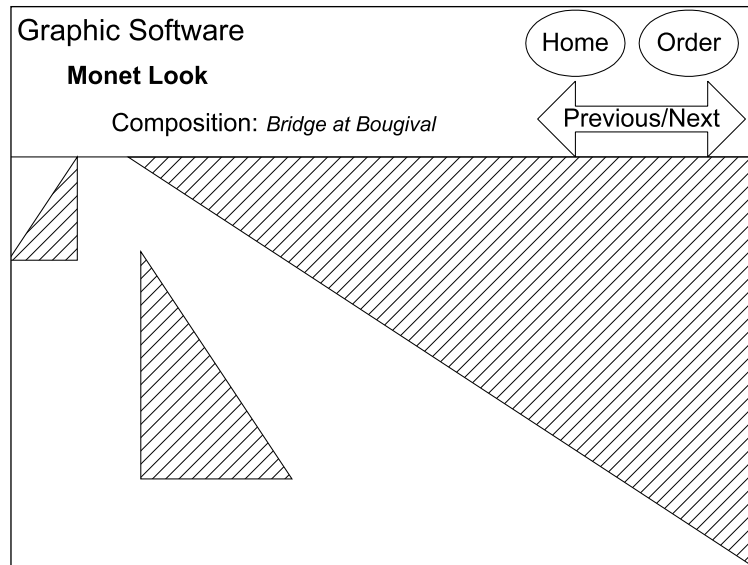
BACKGROUND

You are here

What's the most smudged, worn, stared-at part of the maps displayed in museums, subways, or parks? Right—You are here!

Reading anything goes better when you know where you are in the larger framework—deep in the book, say, or just starting the introduction, or glancing at an appendix way at the back. From that context, you know how to interpret the material. You can fit it into your mental model of the document.

Online, of course, you see no front and back covers, and you do not know how far "in" you are. When most users dive into a site, they lose their bearings quickly, and even a carefully built hierarchy is, in their minds, a mess. Don't assume that users perceive the way a site is organized or the place a particular page has within that organization.

> Start your design with a good understanding of the structure of the information space and communicate this structure explicitly to the user. (Nielsen, 1996)

Tell people what branch of the hierarchy they have landed in. Yes, they may have navigated down the menu system to this page, in which case they really ought to know (but they don't). Or they jumped in from Mars, in which case they have no way to know what area this page lives in.

And within that branch, give people a clue how far down they have gone.

Another reason people want to know where they are is to return later. Without a fairly clear picture of the place this page occupies in the structure of the site, people fear they may never see it again. Yes, they can always bookmark the page, but, hey, that requires an effort on their part, and they may still not be sure the page is worth "bookmarking" when their attention is being drawn away to another page, and another.

Leave a trail of breadcrumbs

Show the path that leads from the home page down your primary menu system to this page. Show at least the first dozen characters of the title of each page beginning with Home, coming all the way down here. Each higher-level title should be hot, so a user can jump back.

- Home/Gourmet/Truffles/French Specialties
- Home/Beauty/Skincare/Moisturizers

The trail of breadcrumbs can help users understand where they are in the structure, if they care to figure it out. (Not everyone cares).

> A breadcrumb navigation list has the benefit of being extremely simple and taking up minimal space on the page, leaving most of the precious pixels for content. (Nielsen, 1999f)

When you show the choices made, from the top level to this level, users know at a glance how they got here—or how they

would have gotten here if they had walked down the staircases from the top level, rather than making a hyper-jump here. That list reinforces their sense of knowing where they are, of navigating through a stable structure.

Highlight the page within a table of contents

If your design always shows a table of contents at the top or side of the page, negotiate to have each page highlighted in the table of contents. Perhaps the table of contents expands a section containing the page and boldfaces the page title. Argue for any device that reveals the main levels of the site.

> Show users where they are. Provide users with a way to know where they are in the context of your site. (Apple, 1999)

Headers help

In a book, a header is the text that appears at the top of every page, indicating the chapter you are in. To programmers, a header is the information at the front of an electronic file, with information such as date, author, and file format; and to HTML jockeys, a header is the HEAD area containing information for programs such as the browser and search engines' spiders. To users of a Web site, though, a header is that thing that appears at the top of every page, along with the main menu and logo.

Headers tell users what the section is about. Appearing on several pages in the same section, they reinforce the title and the major headings, orienting users.

> Use highly visible page headers to provide location feedback. (Microsoft, 2000)

> Button bars can also display location information much the way running chapter headers do in printed books. (Lynch and Horton, 1997)

Remember that moving through hyperspace is like walking through a foreign town peeking through a bandanna over the eyes. Peripheral vision is limited, so users rely heavily on text in breadcrumbs, tables of contents, or headers for orientation.

> Going down any path involves uncertainty. It's important to have road signs along the way to let people know when they're on the right track and when they need to change paths. (Keeker, 1997)

EXAMPLES

Before

`HOME  SEARCH  BUY`

- New

Departments:

Breakout Product Wins Big

- Products

Geneva
Lucerne
Zermatt
Zurich

- Solutions

Agriculture
Air Freight
Automobile
Construction
Electronics
Financial Services
Publishing
Steel

- Alliances

Open Docs
XML Init

- Support & Services

                            Standard
                            Premiere
                            Repair

- About Us

                            Our People
                            Our Press Releases

After

                         HOME   MAP   INDEX   SEARCH   BUY

WHAT'S NEW   PRODUCTS   **SOLUTIONS**   ALLIANCES   SUPPORT   ABOUT US

SOLUTIONS

Agriculture...

Air Freight...

Automobile...

Construction...

Electronics...

Financial Services...

Publishing...

Steel...

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...	How well does this guideline apply?
TO HAVE FUN	Only the programmer and game player enjoy the complex challenge of getting lost.
TO LEARN	Knowing where you are in an intellectual structure helps you learn.
TO ACT	To move the world, we need a place to put our feet. In your writing, clear the ground and put up a signpost, welcoming visitors.
TO BE AWARE	The mind uses the experience of the body moving through space as a model for even the most intellectual activities. Forgive the senses and cater to them by telling people where they are.
TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE	If you forget to show people where they are in your structure, they consider you thoughtless or rude.

See: Apple (1999), Black & Elder (1997), Bransford and Johnson (1972), Farkas and Farkas (2000), Keeker (1997), Lynch and Horton (1997), Microsoft (2000), Nielsen (1996, 1999f), Omanson et al (1998), Siegel (1996).

POST |

Express your own idea on:
HotText@yahoogroups.com

Subscribe:
HotText-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

Unsubscribe:
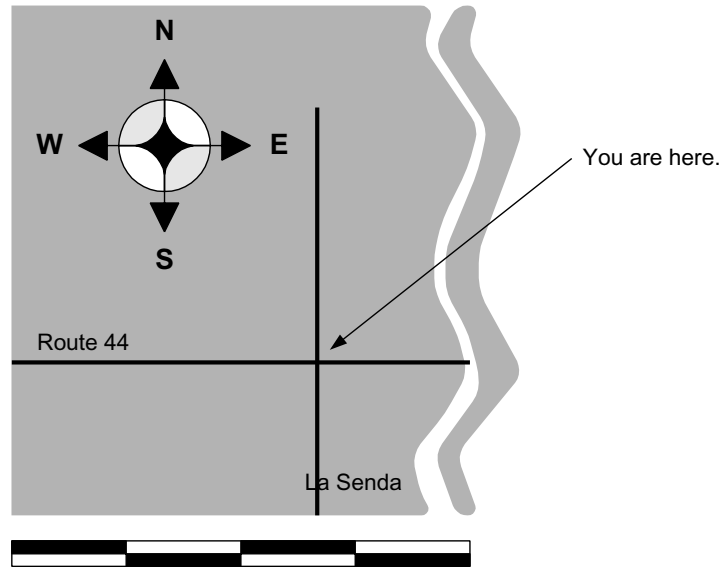HotText-unsubscribe@yahoogroups.com

Visit:
http://www.WebWritingThatWorks.com

My Idea:

Post to HotText@yahoogroups.com

Show Where We Are

You are here.

Route 44

La Senda

BACKGROUND |

A hypertextual essay in the computer is always a dialogue between the writer and his or her readers, and the reader has to share the responsibility for the outcome.

—Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space*

You are here

When people land on your page, they may be arriving after navigating a series of menus, leaping from a list of search results, or simply jumping helter-skelter from some other location on the site. They do not know where they are in your structure, and, generally, they do not make any conscious effort to figure that out. So you have to work hard to give them context.

If your interface allows, signal the location in the main menu.

> Show the users where they are. One way to do this is to highlight the current location in a table of contents that shows the main levels of your site. (Apple, 1997)

Or display breadcrumbs—a list of the pages the users would see

if they actually came down from the home page all the way to this one, using menus.

Of course, that may not be the exact path a user took coming here, but the breadcrumbs show the location of the page within the site's hierarchy. Showing how the page is nested within the site helps users interpret the page better. "You don't just know that you are looking at product 354, you also know that it belongs to the widget product family." (Nielsen, 2000a)

Plus, each item in the trail is hot, so a user can zip back up the structure using these links.

No Up buttons

Every time we have tested an Up button, taking people up one level, the users cry out in agony. They become surly and suspicious. Only programmers get the idea.

Ordinary people, having never seen the next level up, wonder why this strange Up arrow takes them there. Many users develop a superstitious dread of the Up button, and refuse to go near it.

Branding gives context

Identify your site on **every page**—that's a minimum.

Make sure that visitors can see, from a quick glance, that they are still on the same site.

Lost in hyperspace

Knowing where I am within the overall structure of a site, or part of a site, helps me understand what I am looking at. I don't feel so lost, and I can build a conceptual model of your site.

But most sites prevent users from understanding their location within the structure because:

- The site has been **poorly organized**, growing like tumbleweeds over time.
- The **page design hides** any evidence of the larger structure, and the position of this page within that structure.
- The **browser** doesn't have any mechanism for displaying structure.
- Users get so **frustrated** that they refuse to take the time to study the site's structure.

There are three rules for writing the novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.

—W. Somerset Maugham

| 157

Consider a clickable map

Consider having a picture, to supplement the text version of your site map. Make a diagram showing how you have organized your site. Just don't make this too complicated. When artists get carried away trying to represent every department as a different building in a perspective drawing of a town, many users find the drawing hard to interpret because they wonder how much meaning to read into the color of the walls or the arrangement along the streets (is this a sequence I have to follow?). Go for simple blocks arranged in a single hierarchy.

> Image maps with organizing layouts can help the reader understand and use the document's structure. (Bricklin, 1998)
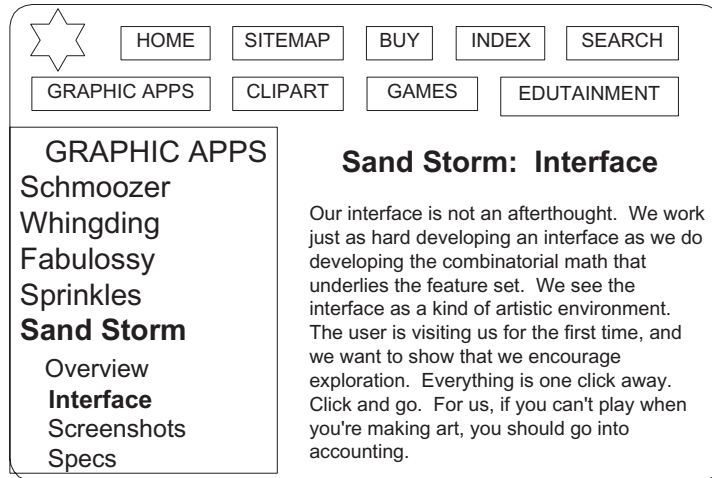
...we must abandon conceptual systems founded upon ideas of center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity, and replace them with ones of multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks.

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

EXAMPLES

Before

> ### About our Interface
>
> Our interface is not an afterthought. We work just as hard developing an interface as we do developing the combinatorial math that underlies the feature set. We see the interface as a kind of artistic environment. The user is visiting us for the first time, and we want to show that we encourage exploration. Everything is one click away. Click and go. For us, if you can't play when you're making art, you should go into accounting.

After

GRAPHIC APPS | CLIPART | GAMES | EDUTAINMENT

HOME | SITEMAP | BUY | INDEX | SEARCH

GRAPHIC APPS
Schmoozer
Whingding
Fabulossy
Sprinkles
Sand Storm

Overview
Interface
Screenshots
Specs

Sand Storm: Interface

Our interface is not an afterthought. We work just as hard developing an interface as we do developing the combinatorial math that underlies the feature set. We see the interface as a kind of artistic environment. The user is visiting us for the first time, and we want to show that we encourage exploration. Everything is one click away. Click and go. For us, if you can't play when you're making art, you should go into accounting.

Before

Original menu

Overview

Background

Problem Analysis

Requirements

Proposed Solution

     Design Phase

          Design Phase Deliverables

          Design Phase Schedule

     Implementation Phase

          Implementation Phase Deliverables

          Implementation Phase Schedule

     Maintenance Phase

          Maintenance Phase Deliverables

          Maintenance Phase Schedule

Conclusion

Specifications

After
(Revised menu as clickable image map)

Overview

Background

Problem Analysis

Requirements

Proposed Solution

Design Phase

Design Phase
Deliverables

Design Phase
Schedule

Implementation Phase

Implementation
Phase Deliverables

Implementation
Phase Schedule

Maintenance Phase

Maintenance Phase
Deliverables

Maintenance Phase
Schedule

Conclusion

Specifications
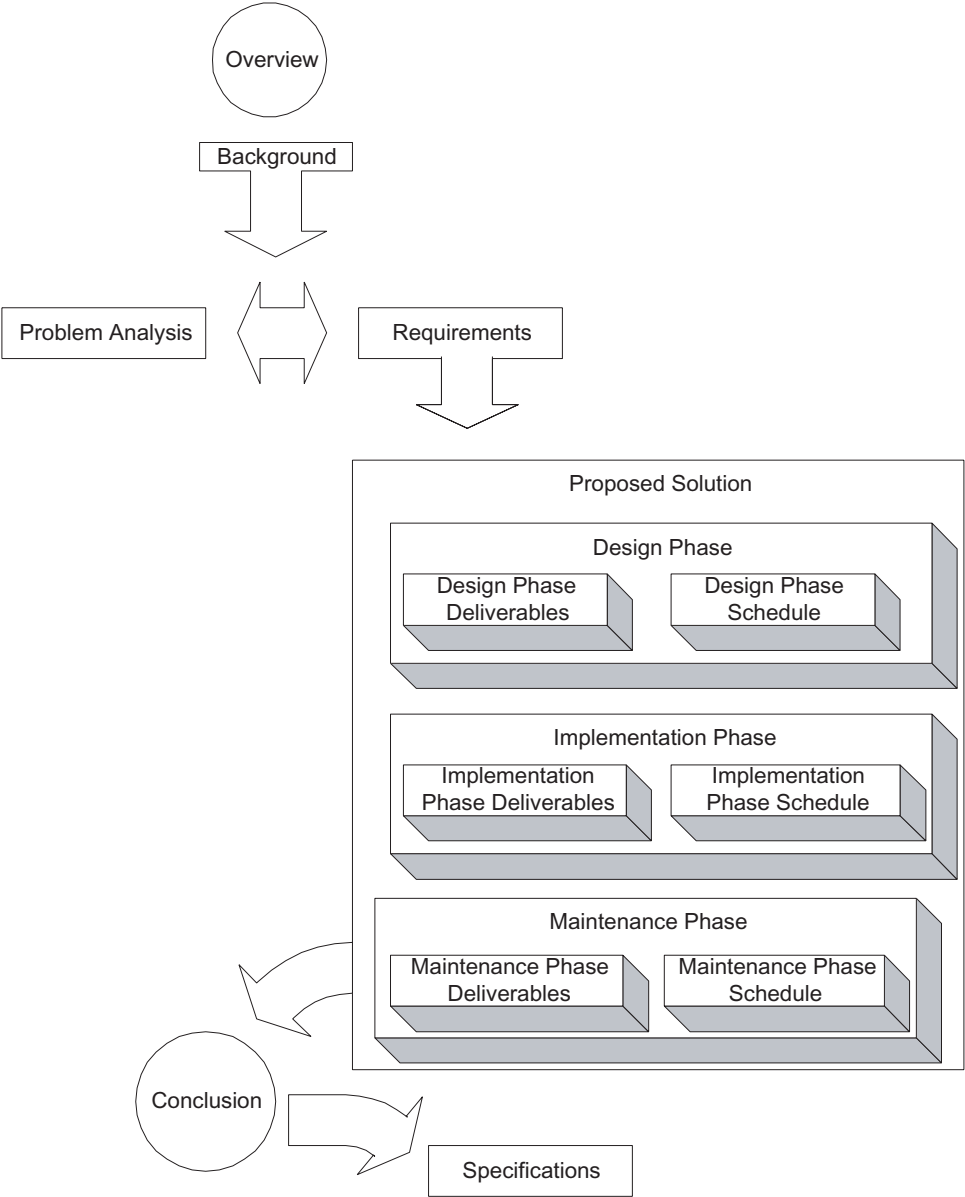
AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...	How well does this guideline apply?
TO HAVE FUN	Game players like the challenge of a confusing interface and deceptive organization. All others like to navigate with confidence—tell 'em where they are.
TO LEARN	The more clearly you outline your structure and the place each page occupies in that structure, the more quickly and solidly students will learn your model.
TO ACT	Very helpful. Think how many people get lost with their shopping carts, because they do not understand why they are moving from one page to another.
TO BE AWARE	Sure, even someone who is grounded likes to know where the feet are placed.
TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE	Yes, telling people where they stand inspires confidence.

See: Apple (1997), Bricklin (1998), Conklin (1987), Nielsen (1995, 1996, 1997b, 1997d, 2000a), Utting & Yankelovich (1989), Zimmerman (1997).

For your review only.

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