

chapter 10 |

Idea #6: Write Menus That Mean Something



Write a Heading as an Object You Will Reuse Many Times **236**

Write Each Menu So It Offers a Meaningful Structure **241**

Offer Multiple Routes to the Same Information **250**

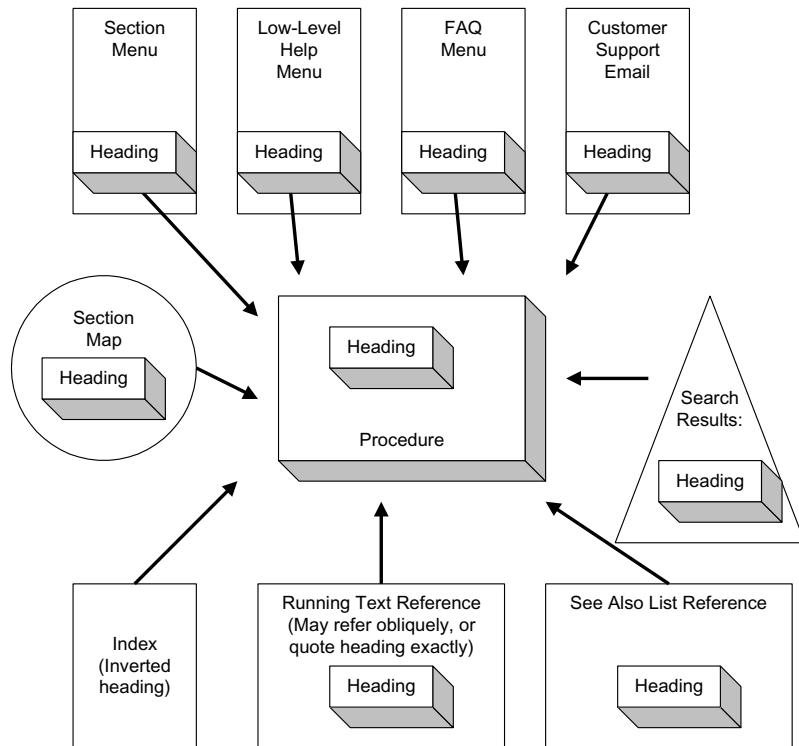
Write and Display Several Levels at Once **254**

When Users Arrive at the Target, Make Success Obvious **260**

Confirm the Location by Showing the Position of This

Information Object in the Hierarchy **264**

Write a Heading as an Object You Will Reuse Many Times



BACKGROUND |

A heading must be reusable

A heading does more than describe the content right below it. The heading may appear in many other locations—in a menu at the start of a section, in a FAQ menu, inside running text as a link, in search results, and in other menu-like objects. If the heading is also the title of a page, it appears at the top of the window as well.

Plan to use the same heading over and over—as a single object without modification—in almost every location.

*At the day of judgment, we shall
not be asked what we have read,
but what we have done.*

—Thomas à Kempis,
Imitation of Christ

It is reassuring to users to see an item such as Business and Financial Services and, after it has been selected, a screen that is titled Business and Financial Services. (Shneiderman, 1992)

Avoid making people wonder: “Did I land at the page I wanted, or did I make a mistake? Is this the same section I visited before, or is it subtly different?”

Headline text has to stand on its own and make sense when the rest of the content is unavailable. (Nielsen, 1999f)

One exception occurs when you are embedding the heading inside running text, where you lead up to its link, giving some of the context. The full text of your heading may look pretty awkward in this situation. So trim from the end, if you must adjust it. (People expect the beginning text to be the same in both locations).

Generally, though, write so the heading does double duty, acting as the beginning of the article, and—without change—as an isolated advertisement for the contents of that article (as in a menu or search list).

In every circumstance, the heading answers the question: what is this article about?

Write longer headings

Brevity is not a virtue in headings. The purpose of a menu is to reveal all the choices open to a user, but extremely terse headings may be impenetrable, or so general as to be ambiguous. If your team has spent three weeks trying to come up with one-word names for departments, and you keep forgetting the distinction, well, what will your guests think?

Our menus have to explain what a given function does, not just where to invoke it. Because of this, it behooves us to be more verbose in our menu-item text. (Cooper, 1995)

Make the heading fully expressive of the content, so users can distinguish this section from others like it in a menu or a search list. And if you have a department that posts new articles every week, go beyond the department title to describe this week's column in some detail.

Promote topics, articles, guests, or features specifically and dynamically (for example, "This week, Jon Stamos on Freudianism in TVTalk") as opposed to generically promoting a section of content (for example "See stars in TVTalk"). (Keeker, 1997)

The menu item (a.k.a, the heading) should be distinctive, specific, and long enough to be clear, but not any longer.

Explain what the article is about using terms that a guest might use. No puns, insider jokes, or metaphors—just the gist of the content. Teasing headlines may get people to click and go, only to find the page is nothing like what they expected. As a result, people grow leery of any heading that might mean several different things, or may glance at its subject sideways.

If possible start off with a keyword, so someone skimming through a search list can spot your article under that topic. Of course, struggling to express the content of the article fully, while distinguishing one heading from another, may make it difficult to put an important, information-carrying word first. No one said writing headings would be easy. But the hard work is worth it because guests rely so heavily on the headings when trying to understand your overall structure, predict content, and make efficient choices.

Make the heading complete on its own, too. Do not depend on some higher-level heading as if it were the beginning of a sentence, completed by this heading. Guests may never have seen that higher-level heading.

Compare your heading with others in its menu

Because people may encounter your heading in a menu before they read the page, edit the heading in the context of the other items on that menu.

Precise knowledge is the only true knowledge, and he who does not teach exactly, does not teach at all.

—Henry Ward Beecher

Thought is subversive and revolutionary, destructive and terrible; thought is merciless to privilege, established institutions, and comfortable habit.

—Bertrand Russell

Group together items that refer to the same thing, and then write each heading so a user can tell the difference between each item in the set. In this way, you help users compare, contrast, and choose.

Ensure that items are distinct from one another.
(Shneiderman, 1992)

To show that several headings refer to the same kind of topic (a procedure, say, or a product description), write all these headings in the same grammatical form. Consistency makes people more successful in spotting what the items have in common, and then making a choice.

EXAMPLES

Before

Introduction

Boolean Conditionals

Organizing

Ordering

Outlining

Structuring

Estimation Fundamentals

Pre-submission Circulation

Follow-ups on Comments

Submission Process

After

Introducing the Unified Process

Writing IF, THEN, and ELSE Statements

Organizing Your Time in a Plan

Putting Sections of a Document in Order

Creating an Outline for your Document

What Goes on When You Structure a Document

1. Starting your Estimate

2. Getting In-House Feedback on your Estimate

3. Revising the Estimate

4. Submitting Your Estimate to the Client

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

When people want to be entertained with double meanings, “punny” headings may amuse. But remember that many guests use search engines to discover your page, and a terse, joking, or abstract heading may repel.

TO LEARN

No jokes, please. We’re in school. Flat-footed titles and headings work best.

TO ACT

Make the heading indicate that you are going to tell people how to do something. Use an infinitive, or gerund—*To do*, or *Doing*.

TO BE AWARE

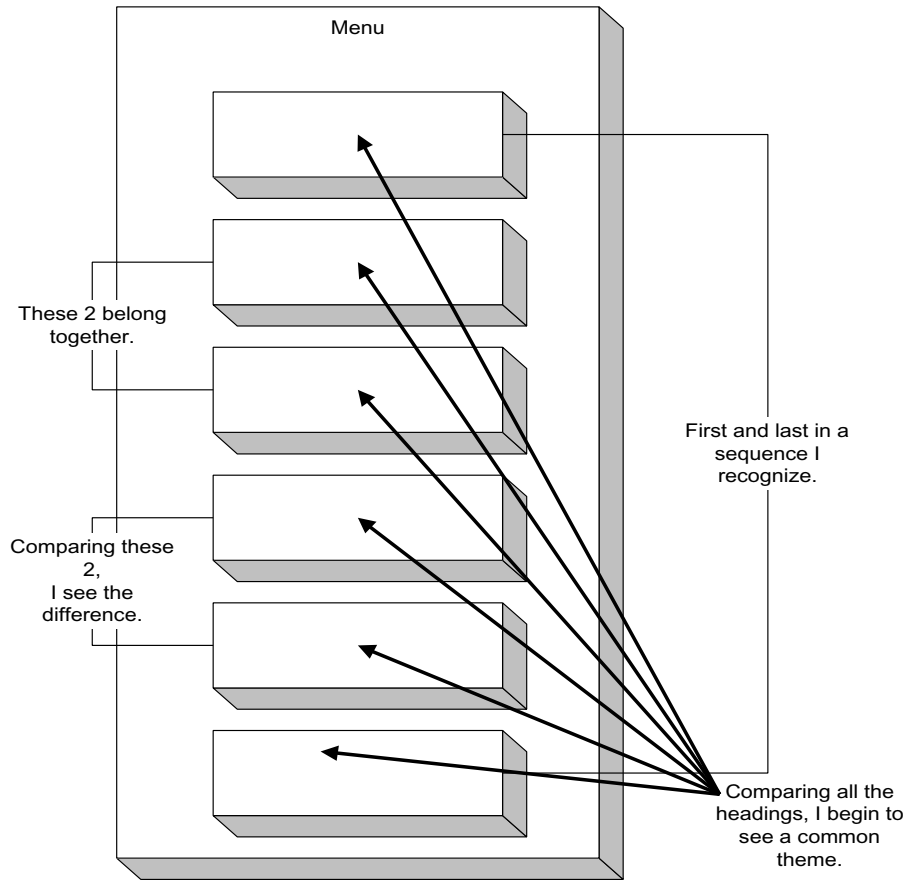
You can’t avoid multiple overtones, and deliberate ambiguity, so ignore the guideline.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

Straightforward, consistent headings and titles reassure your readers.

See: Conklin (1987), Cooper (1995), Farkas and Farkas (2000), Keeker (1997), Mandel (1997), Nielsen (1999f), Raskin (2000), Shneiderman (1992), Shneiderman and Kearsley (1989).

Write Each Menu So It Offers a Meaningful Structure



BACKGROUND |

People learn by discovering structure

Guests rarely try consciously to figure out the way you have organized your site. But as they look through a menu, trying to understand just enough of the structure to be able to carry out their tasks, people do ask some questions, implicitly, under their breath:

- Why are all of these topics put together in a single menu?
- What do these topics have in common?

*It must be possible somehow
to read the structure to find
good paths.*

—Furnas,
Effective View Navigation

- Would the topic I am looking for belong in this menu?
- What information lies behind this item, or that one?
- How are these two topics different?
- Why are these topics grouped together?
- Why do the topics appear in this particular sequence?
- Does this menu really contain everything about the topic I think it describes?
- Which item might contain the information I am after?

As your menu items respond to these questions, in unspoken dialogue, guests begin to form a fuzzy mental model of the menu's structure.

And, visiting several menus, guests begin to sense the structure of the site as a whole. Learning is, in part, a process of uncovering patterns in the material. Menus make those patterns visible—if you write the items well.

Humans are driven to seek out structure and pattern. By implication, readers will learn the “flow” of your site—but only if you let them. (Sullivan, 1998)

You will understand your material better if you try out various methods of organizing the items on a menu, to uncover new and deeper meanings. Consider several alternate structures before freezing your structure, using some or all of these tactics:

- **Move** topics around considering whether the new structure reveals more about the individual objects and their relationship. (Maybe these items should appear down here.)
- **Eliminate duplicate** or redundant topics. (Oh, this is the same as that!)
- **Annotate** topics, writing preliminary drafts and notes. (Oh, this is what lies behind this phrase. This is what the link leads to.)
- **Add** a topic that was missing or **delete** one that is unnecessary or irrelevant. (Oh, now I see that if we cover x, we must also cover y).

- **Replace** a topic with its components. (Now I see that that term really covered three different subjects, each of which belongs at this level).
- **Divide** a topic into components, putting them on a sub-menu. (Oh, so these are the pieces of that.)
- **Create** a new topic to serve as a menu item leading to a group of subtopics. (Yes, these all go together somehow, and I think this new menu item is the name of their group.)
- **Disassemble** a set of subtopics. (Now I see that these really are not related, and should be parceled out among other topics).
- **Promote** a subtopic or **demote** a topic. (Oh, this is less important than I thought, but this subtopic is actually just as important as other topics on the main menu, and ought to go there).
- **Group** related topics. (Now I see these do belong together).
- **Sequence** activities that take place one after the other. (Oh, these should be in order!)
- **Extend a range** to include items that don't have a natural sequence or grouping. (Oh, this is a lot more common than that, and both are more common than this other thing).
- **Rewrite** to emphasize similarity and difference. (Yes, these items all have to do with the same subject, so the language ought to indicate that.)
- **Verify** that similar topics have similar subtopics. (Well, if Topic A has three subtopics, shouldn't its mate, Topic B, too?)
- **Confirm completeness.** (I'm pretty sure now that I have not left anything out.)

Without knowing the force of words, it is impossible to know human beings.

—Confucius

Building a menu is a process of constant reorganizing. Of course, the effort is like making an outline, which most people fear and hate. But making an outline electronically, as a tool for others to use to understand and navigate your structure, makes sense. Remember, the guest chews your structure to taste your meaning, so you must chop, cook, and serve your material with full attention.

Help people find their way

“Wayfinding” involves picking up cues about your location, putting those together with information you already have, and building up a conceptual model of the structure you are moving through, so you can choose the right path to take next. Menus can either help or hinder this process.

Situational awareness ...[is the] continuous extraction of environmental information, integration of this information with previous knowledge to form a coherent mental picture, and the use of that picture in directing further perception and anticipating future events.
(Whitaker, 1998)

Moving through physical space, we take an egocentric point of view (“I am moving”), and take one step after another (“I go forward, then turn left”). As we go, we build an internal map, using our understanding of our current location, the distance we have traveled, the directions we have turned, the amount of time that has passed during our trip, the relationship between the places we see along the way, and a sense of the unrolling sequence of scenes—navigation takes quite a bit of thinking, all by itself. The clearer this evolving conceptual map becomes, the better it serves to orient and help us as we collect and organize information that we pick up along the way.

Like a physical map, a menu helps guide a guest through your site. The guest has a more-or-less conscious destination in mind, and uses one menu to select a path, then follows that path to another menu, and so on—through a structure that is hard to visualize, often inconsistent, fragmented, and unpredictable.

Knowing an environment is a dynamic process in which the current state of information is constantly being updated, supplemented, and reassigned salience depending on the short- and long-run purposes that activate a person’s thoughts and actions.
(Golledge, 1999a)

In completing one discovery we never fail to get an imperfect knowledge of others of which we could have no idea before, so that we cannot solve one doubt without creating several new ones.

—Joseph Priestley,
*Experiments and Observations
on Different Kinds of Air*

In an unfamiliar territory like your site, a newly arrived guest will often take the first path that looks promising, following a zigzag route through your material without bothering to analyze the structure you have built.

When stumped or curious, the guest may ponder your menus a little more thoughtfully. The menus offer a bird's eye view of the content, somewhat like a physical map, but unfortunately Web menus are usually expressed in text, rather than a two-dimensional image with representations of landmarks, routes, neighborhoods, and boundaries.

Because users are in virtual space, aided only by verbal lists, finding their way around an unfamiliar Web site can be more challenging than exploring a strange city at night. If you want to help these visitors, you must think of each menu as a set of well-lit street signs. The challenge is to organize and write those signs so that visitors can find their way while moving at high speed.

Menus add value

Menus, like tables of contents, site maps, and even indexes, can provide a meaningful structure of objects—a value beyond the simple offer of choices. Write headings to reveal the meaning you see in that structure.

Help viewers understand the nature of the relationships you use, e.g., use hierarchies or heterarchies of information that embody clear, logical structures. Because viewers become easily bored, disinterested, or irritated with lists of unordered items or links, and have difficulty finding specific information in random lists, create useful organizational structures to support scanning and locating information. (Ameritech, 1998)

Search results and see-also lists do not show any particular structure, because they are assembled “out of order.” Your menu reveals more, because you have actually worked on the structure. Let each heading show some of your reasoning about its relationship to the

other items on the menu.

You have organized your menu items in an order that adds meaning and value to the individual sections whose headings appear at the same level in a menu. Write individual headings so that:

- One heading bounces off another, illuminating both.
- Users begin to perceive why certain headings are grouped together.
- Users sense a certain sequence, from the early headings to the last.
- Users begin to get a sense of what this whole section is about.
- Users get a hunch about where the information they want may lie.
- Users form a mental map of the order of topics, a map they will use when they begin navigating the material.

Group and sequence menu items

When experimenters show people a random assortment of objects on a tray and then hide the tray, most people have difficulty remembering more than nine objects. But when the experimenters put the objects into groups, people remember them much more accurately.

Grouping helps people spot the organization of your menu, find what they want, and recall the organization more accurately later.

The screen layout and organization of menus allow users to assign meanings to the groupings and make both the menus and the individual choices more memorable. (Mandel, 1997)

Group sets of headings that serve the same purpose (five how-to's), describe the same kind of object (seven types of music) or answer the same kind of question (troubleshooting your printer). If the subject matter has common or standard categories, use those to group headings. Doing so reduces the amount of thinking people have to do as they use your menu, because they quickly grok the rationale behind each group, reducing even a long menu to a few groups.

If you throw a handful of marbles on the floor, you will find it difficult to view at once more than six, or seven at most, without confusion.

—Sir William Hamilton

Break up groups visually, too. Then the menu is easier to read.

Don't let menus just run on with a dozen submenu items without offering the eye and the brain some grouping clues. (Minasi, 1994)

Then order items within each group and create a recognizable order out of the groups. One way to organize items or groups is to create a range from familiar to unfamiliar, from general to specific, from most commonly used to least, from first to last. Only use alphabetic or numeric order when you have a very long list of items that have no other obvious organizing feature. According to Don Norman's research (1991), these orderings are only slightly more helpful than purely random order. Of course, to hint at your order, you may need to tinker with some of the headings again—more rewriting.

Watch your hierarchy

Grouping headings into menus, submenus, and sub-submenus creates a hierarchy. In general a hierarchy helps people store incoming information and remember it, because people organize the information in their long-term memories (LTM) in hierarchies.

Chunking or grouping information items facilitates the reader in building these LTM frameworks and decreases attentional demands because readers can perceive the text structure more easily. (Spyridakis, 2000)

So, when you group information items at various levels and provide cues in your writing as to why you organized the items in this way, people begin to understand the underlying information structure.

But remember, not too deep. In any area, two or three levels work best, with four to eight choices on each level. According to Don Norman's research, this menu structure results in faster, more accurate performance, compared with more levels containing fewer items at each level. Alan Cooper, who started life as a computer jock,

Experience is a good teacher, but she sends in terrific bills.

—Minna Antrim,
Naked Truth and Veiled

points out that computer geeks tend to find hierarchies logical and familiar, but most users do not. So, write each heading to indicate why you are putting it together with its neighbors.

Of course, the tradeoff between depth and breadth may be a distraction from the main challenge, which is revealing the menu organization to your users, while reducing the number of pages they have to go through and the number of choices they have to make.

Think of each menu as a jungle gym that users are climbing over. Build it, sand it, and open it up so they can climb quickly, and surely. If you get lazy, your guests will skin their knees.

EXAMPLES

Before

Setup Procedures

- Powering on the monitor
- Powering on the hard disk drive
- Powering on the computer
- Powering on the CD-ROM drive
- Making the connection with the local network
- Attaching cables to computer
- Locating the power cable
- Attaching the power cable
- Finding the right spot to place the computer
- Using an extension cord, power bar, and surge suppressor

After

Setup Procedures

Before you Start

Finding the right spot to place the computer

Using an extension cord, power bar, and surge suppressor

Hooking Things Up

Attaching cables to computer

Locating the power cable

Attaching the power cable

Turning on the Power

1. Powering on the monitor
2. Powering on the hard disk drive
3. Powering on the CD-ROM drive
4. Powering on the computer

Getting on Your Network

Making the connection with the local network

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

How well does this guideline apply?

TO HAVE FUN

Only game players like confusing, long menus, because of the challenge.

TO LEARN

Hey, grouping and hierarchies foster long-term memory. Enough said.

TO ACT

Organizing menus in a meaningful way speeds people on their way.

TO BE AWARE

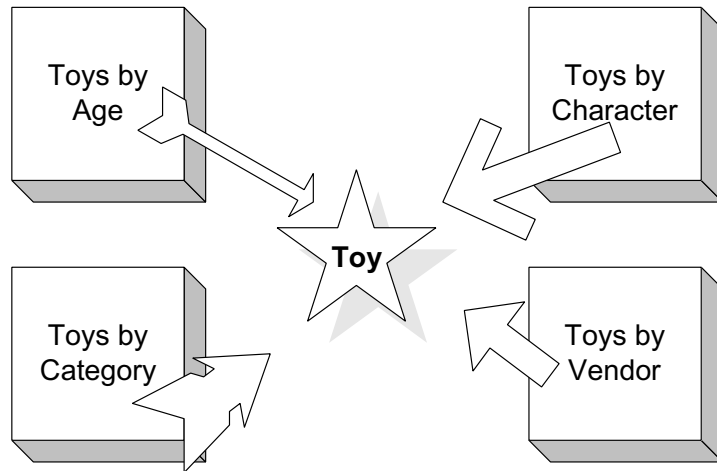
Why not be aware of your guests' needs?

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

The more time you spend sanding your menu items, the smoother the ride.

See: Abeleto (1999), Ameritech (1998), Apple (1987), Cooper (1995, 1999), Farkas and Farkas (2000), Golledge (1999a), Gregory (1987), Hix & Hartson (1993), Keeker (1997), Krug (2000), Larson & Czerwinski (1998), Lynch (1960), Lynch (2000), MacEachren (1992), Mandel (1994, 1997), McKoon (1977), Miller (1956), Minasi (1994), Norman (1991), Price (1999), Spyridakis (2000), Sullivan (1998), Thinus-Blanc and Gaunet (1999), Whitaker (1998).

Offer Multiple Routes to the Same Information



BACKGROUND |

1, 2, 3, many menus

To encourage guests to follow their own trail of association, offer multiple menus leading down to the same low-level items. Reuse the same heading in each of these menus. In an online music site, for example, you might let guests browse menus showing different types of music, new items, imports, customer favorites, and highlighted specials. The same CD—a new rap album that is already popular with customers—might appear at the bottom of several different menu chains.

When people come to your site with different purposes, tasks, and mindsets, you can support them by putting the same heading in multiple menus. In a way, these menus offer different perspectives on your content. Following separate branches of your hierarchy, users converge on a single node, so write the heading and text so they appear to belong to each branch.

Write nodes in converging branches in a modular style so that they fit the context of both branches. (Farkas and Farkas, 2000)

The more access mechanisms the better.

—Hoffman, *Enabling Extremely Rapid Navigation in Your Web or Document*

See Also

Some users come to your page out of desperation, because the heading seemed close to the right topic, even though not exactly right. These guests hope you will point to the right info. For these people for whom your page is close-but-no-cigar, make up shortcut lists and suggestions of See Also links.

Shortcuts minimize the time and effort users spend navigating, allowing users to bypass the site's hierarchy. (IBM, 1999)

Multiple menus, multiple perspectives

Offering several different menus gives people a chance to follow the paths that make sense to them.

Provide different site paths to facilitate different shopping strategies. (IBM, 1999)

In this way, you are also offering people different representations of the information and different ways to think about it, so they can follow the model that comes closest to their current concern.

The more you personalize information, the more menus get made up on the fly, to match a guest's profile.

You need to stop thinking of your Web pages as static files on a server and more like a collection of scripts and intelligent content that can figure out how to display itself correctly. (Veen, 2001)

EXAMPLES

Before

Binary Stars
Black Holes
Clusters of Galaxies
Colliding Galaxies
Dark Nebulae
Elliptical Galaxies
Emission Nebulae
Galaxies
Individual Stars
Milky Way
Nebulae
Neutron Stars
Nurseries
Open Clusters
Planetary Nebulae
Reflection Nebulae
Spiral Galaxies
Stars
Sun
Supernova Remnants
White Dwarfs

Before

Two ways to find a music CD:

Browse by genre
Search

After

Stars
 Binary Stars
 Black Holes
 Individual Stars
 Neutron Stars
 Nurseries
 Open Clusters
 Sun
 White Dwarfs
Galaxies
 Colliding Galaxies
 Elliptical Galaxies
 Galaxy Clusters
 Milky Way
 Spiral Galaxies
Nebulae
 Dark Nebulae
 Emission Nebulae
 Planetary Nebulae
 Reflection Nebulae

After

10 Ways to find a music CD:

Top 50
New Releases
Advance Orders
Genres
Artists and Groups
Composers
Labels
Gift Ideas
Seasonal Sounds
Search

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

Multiple menus offer even more fun.

TO LEARN

Yes, you can tailor menus to different learning styles, backgrounds, and interests.

TO ACT

Good, because not everyone conceives of the task in the same way.

TO BE AWARE

Everyone is on an individual path, no?

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

Offering multiple menus is like lending your ear. You're listening to your guests.

See: Bushell (1995), Farkas and Farkas (2000), IBM (1999), NCSA (1996), Veen (2001).

Write and Display Several Levels at Once

Impressions--the Graphic Solution			
		<input type="text" value="Search"/> <input type="text" value="Order"/>	
Corporate Mission	Bacon Look	Brushwork	Artist's Floating Studio
Our Organization	Bonnard Look	Buildup	Boulevard des Capucines
Graphic Tools	Cezanne Look	Composition	Breakup of the Ice Floes
Graphic Hardware	Degas Look	Subject Matter	Bridge at Bougival
Imaging Software	Delacroix Look		Camille on Deathbed
Imaging Hardware	Goya Look		Cap d'Antibes
OCR Solutions	Hals Look		Cathedral de Rouen 1-6
White Papers	Manet Look		Charing Cross Bridge
Press Releases	Monet Look		Green Reflections
Recent Awards	Picasso Blue Look		Thames:Parliament
Wall Street News	Picasso Late Look		Torrent, Creuse
Partners	Pissarro Look		Sunset Seine, Winter
Standards Groups	Rembrandt Look		Water Lilies (1908)
	Renoir Look	Water Lilies at Twilight	
		Water Lilies Series	
		Waterloo Bridge	
		Women in the Garden	
		Yacht Races	

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)

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

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.

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 hyper-text that she had begun to feel woozy, as if she were sitting in a rowboat in a heavy swell. She had lost her bearings.

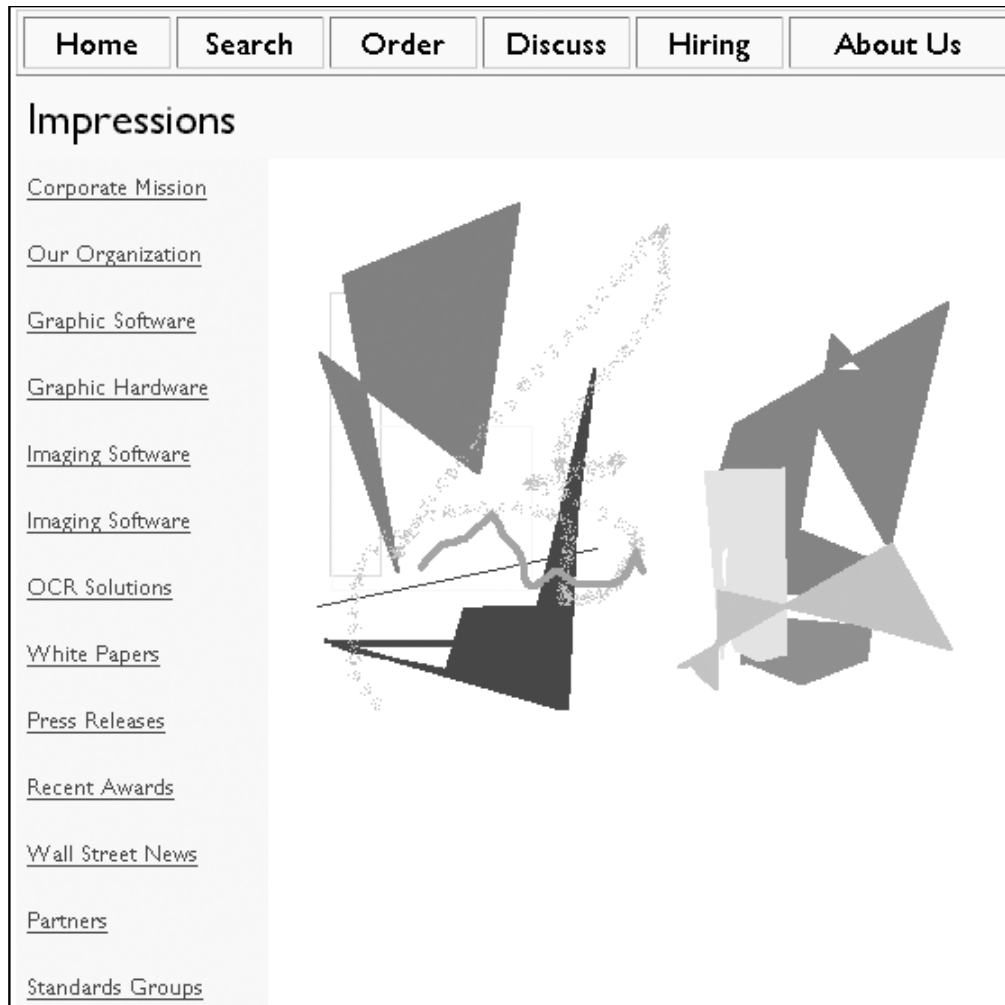
When the background stays put, people feel that they have not gone anywhere. Remember those cartoons where Roadrunner zips across the desert in front of mountains? If you look carefully at the individual frames of animation, the mountains stay put, but Roadrunner moves an eighth of an inch from cel to 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

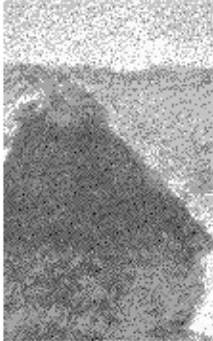
Before

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
<h3>Impressions</h3>					
Corporate Mission	Bacon Look		Artist's Floating Studio		
Our Organization	Bonnard Look		Boulevard des Capucines		
Graphic Software	Cezanne Look		Breakup of the Ice Floes		
Graphic Hardware	Degas Look		Bridge at Bougival		
Imaging Software	Delacroix Look		Camille on Deathbed		
Imaging Software	Goya Look		Cap d'Antibes		
Imaging Software	Hals Look		Cathedral de Rouen 1-6		
OCR Solutions	Manet Look		Charing Cross Bridge		
White Papers	Monet Look		Green Reflections		
Press Releases	Picasso Blue Look		Thames: Parliament		
Recent Awards	Picasso Late Look	Torrent, Creuse			
Wall Street News	Pissarro Look	Sunset Seine, Winter			
Partners	Rembandt Look	Water Lilies (1908)			
Standards Groups	Renoir Look	Water Lilies at Twilight			
		Water Lilies Series			
		Waterloo Bridge			
		Women in the Garden			
		Yacht Races			

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

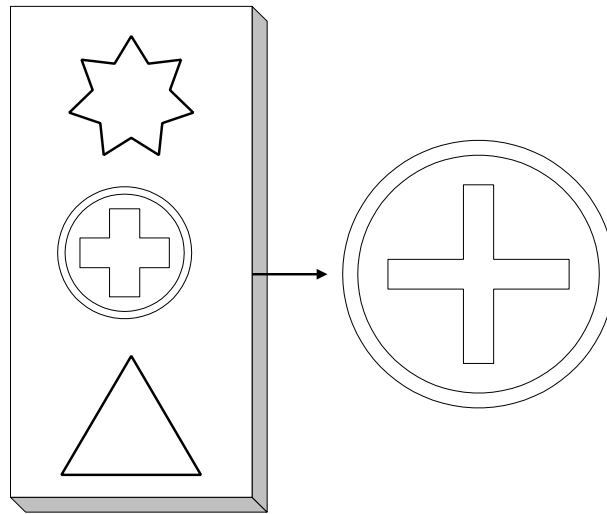
The mind likes structure. Even if you are trying to still the mind, revealing your structure gives it less to chatter about.

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).

When Users Arrive at the Target, Make Success Obvious



BACKGROUND |

Confirm that the link worked

How often have you clicked a link, gone to a page, and wondered, “Did I click the wrong thing? This doesn’t look like what I clicked.”

Bait-and-switch links tempt you to click, but dump you onto a page where the title has nothing to do with the linktext.

To defend themselves against this common practice, users scope out the target page before settling in for a good read. They look at:

- The **title** (“Is it the same text as the linktext?”)
- Any **headings** at the top of the page (“Same topic?”)
- Any **introductory text** (“Is this about what I am after?”)
- The **caption** under any prominent picture (“Forget the image. Does the text match my expectation?”)

Only after some or all of these confirm that the page is on topic, relevant, and interesting, will the user bother to read any more

The greatest torture in the world for most people is to think.

—Luther Burbank

text—or look at those gorgeous images.

To reassure users and confirm they reached the target page they were after:

- Make the title text match the original link—exactly.
- Make the title as descriptive as possible, moving keywords to the front, and assuming users will not see more than 65 characters.
- Make any headings near the top of the page echo the same theme as the title. Ditto for headers (the text that appears at the top of each page in a section).
- Write introductions to sum up the page accurately, to warn people off if the title itself confused them.
- Consider captions as major content and write for the arriving visitor (who may not have looked at the image), rather than an intrigued fan who has just spent thirty seconds looking at the image.

EXAMPLES

Before

Linktext: [Help](#)

Title: Frequently Asked Questions

Linktext: [Home Office Supplies](#)

Title: So You Need a Stapler?

Linktext: [Gardening Tips](#)

Title: Can You Dig This?

Heading: Shoveling and Hoeing

Caption on nearby image: Sun brings out the robins.

After

Linktext: [Help](#)

Title: Help

Linktext: [Home Office Supplies](#)

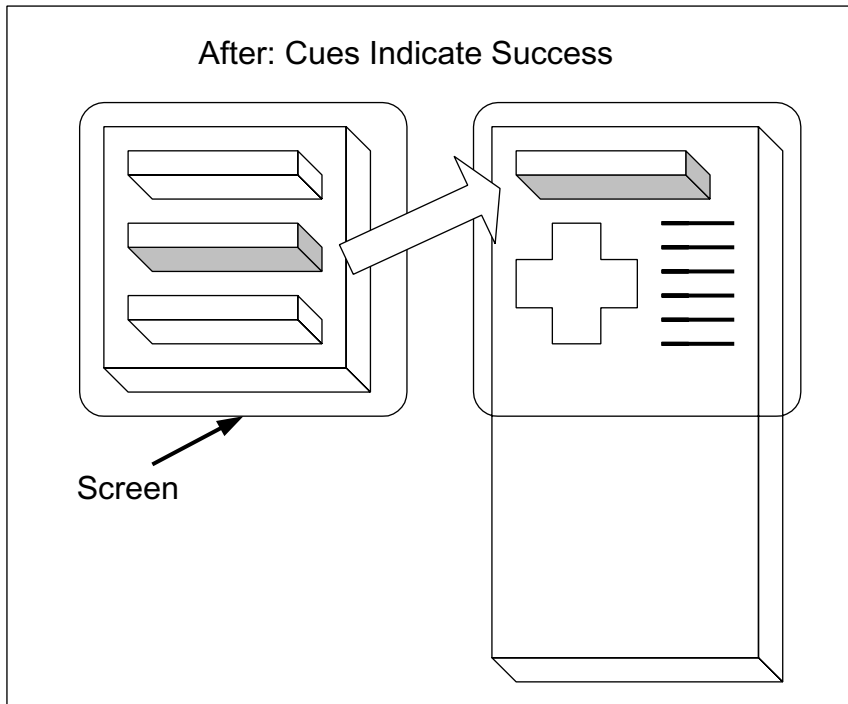
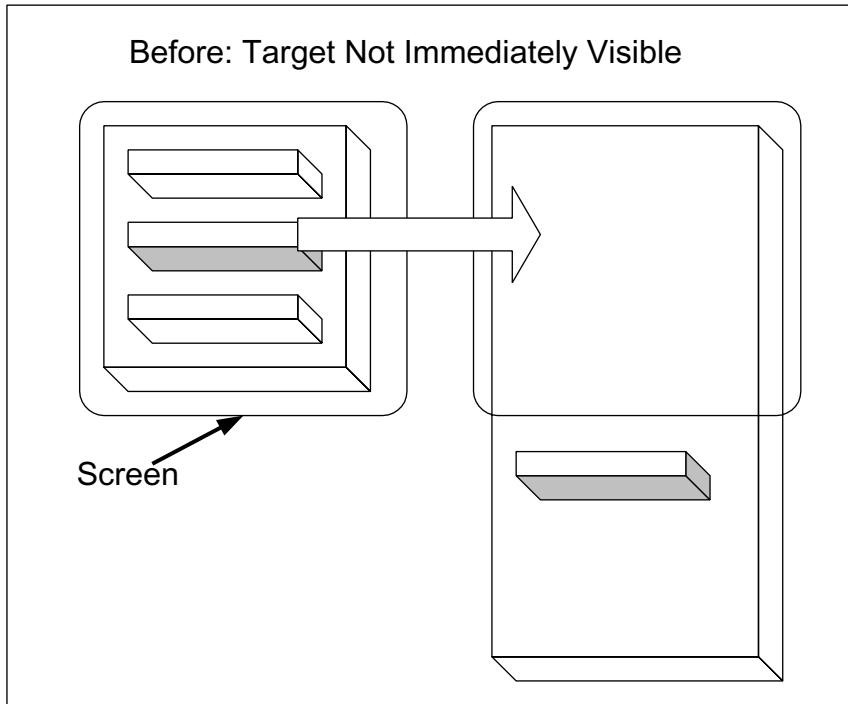
Title: Home Office Supplies

Linktext: [Getting a New Garden Shovel](#)

Title: Getting a New Garden Shovel

Heading: Choosing the Best Shovel for Your Soils and Seasons

Caption on nearby image: Sharp-edged and shiny, a new shovel signals the start of a new year of gardening.



AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

The misleading link, the confusing title, the heading that's not apropos, a skewed intro, and off-topic captions can be seen as intriguing, if your audience likes solving puzzles. If they just want to have fun, maybe not.

TO LEARN

Confirm arrival, to avoid distracting the learner.

TO ACT

Not following the guideline simply makes the user think and do more than expected, just to find out how to carry out the original task.
Not cool.

TO BE AWARE

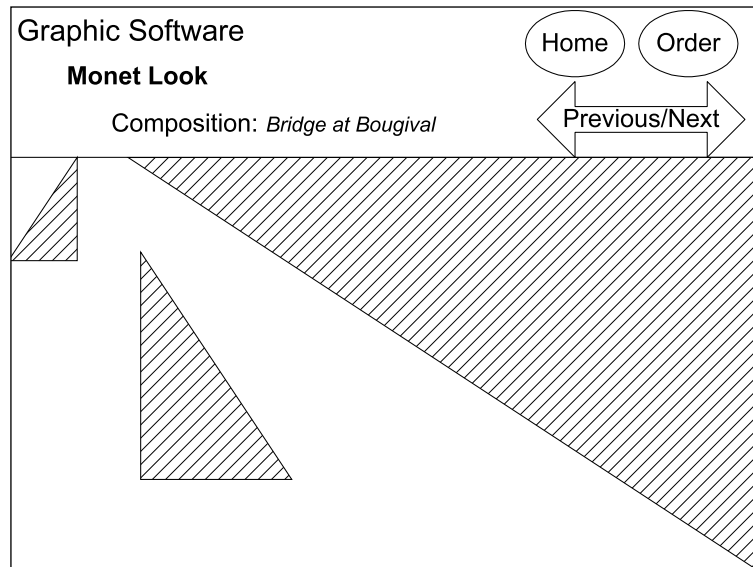
Be gentle, even if your prose seems plain. Confirm that your guest has arrived. Pour some tea.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

Don't get them angry at you with loused-up links and misleading pages.

See: Apple (1999), Berners-Lee (1995), Krug (2000), Lynch and Horton (1999), Microsoft (2000), Nielsen (2000b), Shneiderman (1992).

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



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 bread-crumbs, 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

- Products

- Solutions

- Alliances

Departments:

Breakout Product Wins Big

Geneva
 Lucerne
 Zermatt
 Zurich

Agriculture
 Air Freight
Automobile
 Construction
 Electronics
 Financial Services
 Publishing
 Steel

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...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

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