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Plain English Campaign: Tips for clear websites

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## Tips for clear websites

This is only a basic guide. If you have any suggestions, corrections or improvements, please contact us. You can contact us at:

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# Introduction

This guide assumes you have some basic knowledge of how web pages work. However, it does not go into detail about HTML (the coding used to write web pages). It aims to provide guidelines rather than instructions.

The golden rule of good websites is to decide what you want your site to do, and then use technology to achieve this goal.

A website is a means of communication, not a way of showing off your technical ability.

When someone visits your site, it should immediately be clear:

- who the site belongs to;
- what purpose the site serves; and
- how to contact the people behind the site.

If, for your contact details, you are tempted to put only an email address and no phone number or postal address, remember that:

- you may be asked for these details regularly through emails, so you will waste your time replying; and
- giving a phone number and address will not only reassure visitors that you are a genuine organisation, it will also make you appear more approachable.

The way you organise your site will depend on its content. If its content can be divided into logical groups, divide your site into different sections. For example, a high-street shop could have:

- news (press releases, archives, updates);
- online shopping;
- store information (local branches, opening hours); and
- other information (financial reports, contact details, legal information).

No matter how you organise your site, try to make sure that:

- the structure of your site is as logical as possible; and
- there is a guide to the site, or a 'site map', for people who can't find what they are looking for.

Remember that people may not always enter your site at the home page (the 'front' page that people get when they type your website address). For example, they may be following a link from one website to a specific page on your site, or they may have found a specific page through a search engine.

This means it is a good idea for every page on your site to have a clear link to:

- your home page;
- basic information about your organisation or subject;
- a guide to pages on the site (a 'site map'); and
- contact information for you or your organisation.

A good guideline that many web designers follow is that you should be able to get from any page on your site to any other page on the site with no more than three clicks on your mouse.

One site that shows it is possible to present a huge amount of information in a way that is easy to navigate is the BBC News site.

If you are creating a site from scratch, it may help to plan it on paper first. It can be a lot harder to rearrange your pages once your site is up and running.

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## Page design

Remember that most web designers and graphic designers work on screens that are larger than those used by most other people.

If you decide to set the width of your pages, try to avoid making it more than 800 pixels wide.

Anything larger than this will mean that many people will have to scroll from left to right and back again as they read down the page.

Try to imagine whether people visiting your site are likely to print off pages. If there is a page that is likely to be printed off, try to set the width of the page so that it can be printed on A4 paper without chopping any of the page off.

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## Browsers

A browser is the program that people use to view your web pages. Most people will be using either Internet Explorer (which comes with Windows) or Netscape Navigator. However, these can display pages very differently. And both programs are updated every so often, so older versions may also vary.

There is no easy answer to the problem of catering for different browsers. The best bet is to try your web pages on as many different browsers as possible. If there is a feature on your website that doesn't work on a particular browser, or on older editions, you will have to decide how important that feature is to you, and how many people will be losing out if they cannot use it.

If you already have a website up and running, you should be getting 'access log' reports from your internet company. These can show what proportion of your visitors use a particular browser.

Another tip is to check your pages on a machine using America Online (AOL). This is a popular way of getting access to the internet, but it has a few quirks that can affect how people see and use your site.

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## Frames

Using frames on your site has advantages and disadvantages. It can be useful if you have a straightforward site with distinct sections. Many sites like this use a frame on the left of the screen as a menu, and put the various pages in a bigger frame on the right of the screen.

Frames can cause problems with computers that run older browsers. Frames can also cause problems if you are relying on a search engine for people to find your site.

If you do use frames, remember that you cannot rely on people being able to use the 'back' and 'forward' buttons on their browser.

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## Colours

Although you can use colour to make pages more attractive, be wary of overdoing things.

You can often achieve a very effective design with just black, white and one or two other colours. If you use a consistent colour scheme throughout the site, it can give it a more professional look.

If your design software allows it, stick to what are called 'Web Safe' colours. These colours are virtually guaranteed to look the same on all computers. This can avoid any confusion, for example when your corporate logo suddenly appears in a different colour on an Apple Macintosh.

Take particular care in using blue text. Many people will see this as a link to another page, so it may cause confusion.

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## Text

For sections of text, it is best to stick to a familiar, common font. There is no right or wrong choice, but you need to bear a few things in mind.

- What works well on paper will not always work the same on screen. This is because on paper you are looking at the ink, while on screen you are looking at shining light.
- It can be difficult to control the exact size your text appears at on every screen. However, as a general guideline, a line of text (whether in a column or across the whole screen) should not run to more than 70 characters.
- If your design software allows it, use what is called a 'font group' or 'font face' command. This lets you choose a main font, but also lets you set a list of alternatives in case a person visiting your site does not have your main font available on their screen.
- Try to avoid using underlining for emphasis. This is because many visitors will see this as a link and become confused
- When you use pieces of text as a link, try to avoid just using the words 'click here'. This is because people with poor eyesight often use a screen reader, which converts the text on a website to speech. When somebody uses a screen reader to choose one of the links on your page, they will only hear the words used for the link. Just hearing 'click here' will not give any idea what the link is for.

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## Pictures

If you are using pictures for decoration rather than information, use thumbnails. These are small copies of a picture that a person can click on to then see a full-sized copy.

Using thumbnails saves people from having to wait for unwanted images to download.

Always remember to include an 'Alt Description tag' with the picture. This is a piece of text that appears in place of the picture if a person has their computer set to not show pictures.

It also allows people who are using screen readers to know what the picture shows.

Make sure the resolution of the image is no more than 72 dots per inch (dpi). This is all that is needed for computer screens. Any setting greater than this will make the page needlessly slow to download. You can change the resolution in most graphics programs. You can also get special 'optimisation' programs which will automatically alter your picture to the best settings for using on the web.

If your design package allows it, make sure to set the height and width of the image. This means that when the page loads, the computer will leave a space for the image and load the text first. People can then start reading the page without having to wait for the image to load.

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## Animations and sound

Be very wary of animation or sound that is there purely to show off rather than for a practical reason. Whether there is a practical reason will depend on the content of your site – a graphic design studio's site is far more suitable for animation than a financial-news site.

Many websites now use a 'splash page'. This is a page that appears when somebody goes to your site. It displays a large image or animation and then takes you to the home page (the heart of your site). This is useful if you want to create a particular image or impression, but it is a bad idea if the page takes a long time to load.

Remember that most web designers have better computers and faster connections to the internet than many people visiting your site will have. What takes a couple of seconds to load on your computer can cause a frustrating wait for many people. In particular, animations using a technology called 'Flash' can cause problems, as at the moment many internet users do not have this technology. It is relatively simple for people to download software to allow 'Flash' animations to run. But people get extremely frustrated when they have to download software and see how clever your animation is before they can even get onto your site.

Be very wary of using too many animations unless you are sure the people your site is aimed at will have up-to-date computers and browsers. And if you do use an animated 'splash page', **always** give people the opportunity to skip past the animation and go straight to the rest of your site.

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## **The final rule – hiring professional and freelance designers**

If you do hire outside help for your site, remember to follow one golden rule. The designer is there to produce what you have asked for, not to use your site to show off what they can do!

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