

Web Style Guide

Rider University

NOTE: This was reflective of conditions at time of its writing. It is presented here as a Sample of Jim Alexander's work, and is not intended to represent current Rider University policy.

James Alexander Jr.

University Web Content Manager

Office of Public Relations

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Writing Web Content: Tailor it to the media

“How often do you land on a site, do very little, gain very little, and leave? The practice is quite common. The very nature of the web reinforces such behavior. Most web users are extremely impatient.

“While gazing at our monitors, our fingers rest on the trigger. In the blink of an eye and the click of the mouse, we’re gone. Watch me read a book or magazine, and then watch me on the Web. It’s hard to believe that I’m the same person. On the Web, I’m in control....”

-- Laura Wonnacott, “Site Savvy,” InfoWorld July 3, 2000

Note: This is the full version of the Web Style Guide, which includes extensive explanations and references to authoritative sources. Those who merely wish to see “how to do it” may consult a highly abbreviated thumbnail sheet containing key points, available from the Web Content Office, or at <http://www.rider.edu/newsite/websgsumm.html>.

Preface

Several thousand visitors consult Rider University's web site each day. It is an important means of communication in this fast, competitive, electronic world.

Web sites are not all the same –they appropriately reflect their owner's mission. As an institution of higher education, we pursue recognition as the premier career preparation university in the region. The primary goal of the Rider web site is thus to communicate information about who we are and to pursue respect for our activities, accomplishments and needs. This is especially important as we pursue qualified students as well as support from the greater community.

The Web is still new, but the habits of Web surfers are now receiving professional study. Traditional understanding of human interaction with print media is being found to be only partly applicable. Staring at a monitor, with mouse at hand, web visitors are an increasingly impatient lot. With many sites from which to choose, they move on quickly when they can't find what they want. The novelty of the medium is wearing off. Many are becoming jaded as they confront sites that are increasingly commercial and which do not meet their information needs. As they move through a web site such as ours, they form an impression that transcends the detailed content of a given page. They sense who we are. They often scan rapidly rather than reading deeply.

It is thus appropriate that as the Rider University Web site grows, the Web Content Manager is charged with enhancing the presentation, quality and coherence of the site. Key to this effort is the updating of content and the recognition of the need for user-responsive design rather than just presenting organizationally based pages. It is, after all, the visiting audience that is the primary object of our web communication.

As part of a new toolkit that includes standard software, training, templates, and consultation, it is appropriate that the successful model of the University's Graphic Standards Manual be applied to the process. Thus, this Web Style Guide provides design standards for the University web pages that will enhance our communication and marketing, while providing continued respect for the expression of professional and academic content. In addition, it will foster an improved functionality that is crucial in meeting our visitors' information needs.

Introduction

Preparation of web pages can be a challenging task. As software has evolved, the mechanics have become somewhat easier, but this has also made it possible to include features that don't always work well or express the desired Rider message in a coherent, audience-oriented, competitive manner. Our goal is to communicate content effectively and project an image that merits respect.

This Guide recognizes that a wide variety of users will be viewing our site, with a corresponding variety of hardware, software, settings, and perceptions. Thus, we seek to serve a wide range of viewers while eschewing the pursuit of cutting edge features that might exclude or discourage desired viewers, or which might work well locally on our high-speed Ethernet but not on typical home connections.

We are mindful that as the Web becomes more of a routine information utility, the novelty and splash that characterized many early page design efforts are wearing thin in the face of surfers' dissatisfaction when they cannot find the desired information.

Modifications to the Guide

From the time the printing press was invented, it took hundreds of years for the print document conventions we take for granted to evolve to acceptance. The Internet is in its infancy, and we are just beginning to understand how viewers actually traverse the World Wide Web. Design standards that reflect the changing nature of this electronic medium, and the monitored human response to it, are yet emerging. There is, however, a sufficient body of information available to provide the basis for much of the advice contained herein.

Given that the medium is yet evolving, the latest and governing text of this Guide will be found on the Rider web site at <http://www.rider.edu/newsite>.

Keeping It in Perspective

This guide presents a number of web site characteristics. Impressions of what works often do not hold up under examination. In approaching the task of designing a page, bear several thoughts in mind, and you will be ahead of the competition:

- “Build it and they will come!” does NOT apply to most web pages. There are millions of web sites, and virtually every organization has one. The initial fascination with putting your thing on the web is being replaced with a more sober recognition that quality and effectiveness of communication count.
- “I finally learned how to do it, so I now have to use it” is a trap. Hundreds of books and software packages are sold with the emphasis on teaching technical presentation methods. Few tell you whether you should use these methods. Avoiding the “gratuitous use of leading edge technology” is a mark of maturity.
- “It works for advertisers” is not a model for a university’s web site. Techniques involved in selling commercial products have a downside. A company that can make money if half of one percent of viewers click on a blinking ad to make a purchase is also irritating many more viewers, and does not engender the respect that a university seeks, nor communicate substantive information effectively.
- “Let’s use the Web like a TV presentation” is self-defeating. The bandwidth restraints do not allow it. Firms who employ professional graphics specialists with large backup staffs will always be able to assemble more impressive “cartoon” presentations. That’s not who we are. We should focus on our strengths and our identity.
- “Young people need pictures!” A presentation at the recent Human Factors and the Web conference, by researchers from the University of Michigan and the University of North Texas (see <http://www.pantos.org/ts/papers/wkutw/>) describes their recent study of children using the web, aged 12 and 16. Ninety-four percent exhibited banner blindness and ignored graphical promotions, even when they contained a direct link to the information they were trying to find. One kid said “oh, I saw that graphic, but it looked like an ad, so I ignored it.” Adult tests are revealing similar responses.

Page Classification and Templates

For purposes of planning, the Rider web site is classified into several categories, Templates as authorized are available at www.rider.edu/newsite. The general page categories may be described as:

University Home Page

This is the page that most, but not all, visitors typically use to enter our site. (Some users have bookmarked particular pages or are entering from search engines or external links.) Hence, while the Home Page sets the general look for the web site, this look is carried through to “lower” levels to facilitate University identification and ease of navigation.

The Web Content Manager maintains the University Home Page, making use of a design that presents essential navigational, marketing, visual appearance, and informational content. Included are the Rider University name and logo, with appropriate use of the University colors. The design is similar to the format for lower pages discussed below, with appropriate adjustments, including the use of Audience Buttons described below. It is desirable for the look and feel of the Home Page to carry over to lower pages.

To be effective, the Home Page aims to fit on a typical single monitor screen, with little if any need to scroll down or laterally on a 640 x 480 pixel resolution setting. Home pages that are overwhelmed with links and features are not effective and represent the maxim “more is less.” Thus, the goal of the home page is to present a “feel” for the institution, a sense of timeliness, present only the most critical factual information, and facilitate the movement of the visitor to pages where the content they are seeking resides.

Various departments may maintain main or top pages, but there is only one University Home Page. It will change periodically to maintain a fresh appearance, but this will be achieved mainly by changing the main picture or replacement of significant announcement information. Fundamental changes in design and look will be limited, in recognition that many other pages need to be in synch with this look.

Lower Pages and Template

Lower pages need to present the same look and feel as the Home Page, furthering the coherence of the University’s presentation, avoiding visitor disorientation, and facilitating content attainment. A template for these pages is available. This template may change periodically in reflection of Home Page design changes or technical evolution, but changes will be held to a minimum to avoid disruption of continuity.

Within the template, text and limited, carefully selected images may be entered in the content area only, consistent with the general look of this level. No modifications of the fixed portions are authorized. The background color is white - - background colors and wallpaper images are not permitted. The template is designed to be centered on the screen, a feature that should not be changed. Content and design are at discretion of the author, subject only to general University requirements, and to any special formats intended to facilitate easy visitor perusal of the site. Authors are requested to observe the current 600 pixel width of the template, and to observe elements discussed elsewhere in this Guide.

Audience Portal Pages

While the original Rider web site, like many others, was constructed, and is still maintained, along internal organizational lines, this does not always facilitate the finding of information by the public. Hence, the concept of Audience Buttons has recently evolved to supplement the organizational ones. By selecting a button on the home page that represents who the person is, the visitor can be presented with a special Audience Portal Page that provides a list of links likely to be of most relevant interest, regardless of what department the pages may reside in.

This effort features the following Audience Buttons:

- Prospective Students
- Current Students
- Faculty and Staff
- Alumni and Friends
- Visitors

Additional Audience Buttons are not currently contemplated, as this would tend to lead to more items than viewers will scan or a reversion to organizational buttons.

The Audience Portal Pages are primarily navigational in nature and will contain minimal text and many links to other Rider pages. Audience portal pages use the general university template, are maintained by the Web Content Manager, and are expected to include links to subject matter in many departments as relevant to the audience nature of the page. Some organizational entities or functions will be listed on several portal pages

Instructional Software Pages

Special instructional software provided by the Office of Information Technologies, such as Blackboard, provides standard formats. Appropriate Rider identification on these pages is provided by OIT. The use of these pages is governed by the inherent software limitations and OIT guidance. In any optional uses of such pages, instructors are requested to give consideration to relevant guidance provided in this Guide.

Note that the Center for Innovative Instruction is responsible for support for instructional computer and related applications.

Personal and Organization Home Pages

Personal home pages, including student home pages and student organization pages are not considered “official” University pages, and are not governed by the standards described herein. Authors are, however, requested to give consideration to relevant guidance provided in this Guide. Normal rights and

responsibilities of users of the Rider computer system do apply, and are available elsewhere on the Rider web site.

Browser Compatibility and Plug-Ins

Rider web pages should be designed to meet Level 4 compatibility with the two major browsers – Internet Explorer (currently used by 86% of surfers per one recent study) and Netscape Communicator (Navigator) (14%). Page Editors such as FrontPage 2000 allow compatibility levels to be set which will prevent inclusion of features requiring higher browser levels. While there are over one million users of WebTV, the browsers other than the two leaders are less than one percent of those surveyed.

Rider web pages should not require the user to obtain and install additional plugins to achieve functionality. Adobe Acrobat Reader (used in limited cases of formal document presentation – they involve large file size) and Real Player (for presentation subject to download constraints, free version 7) are the only exceptions. Where they are needed, cite the URL at which they may be obtained. Requiring a user to download special software is regarded as either distracting or offensive by many viewers, and should be avoided. Creation of parallel versions of pages adds to the server file burdens and the energies thus expended by the creator typically result in less attention to adequacy of information content. Focus on the message, not on the latest technical gimmicks!

Legal Requirements

Rider expects all users of its computer systems to respect legal requirements and to be sensitive (see next section) to the rights and feelings of others. Copyrighted or trademarked material should not be used on the Rider web site without formal permission of the owner, except for minimal usage that may be allowed under the fair-usage doctrine. While Rider does not routinely monitor pages for copyright infringement, under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act it is required to take action upon complaint, and further does not condone infringement. All content of the official Rider web site pages is copyrighted by the University, including design, content, coding, and certain trademarked features.

Authors and viewers may see further details on the Legal Notices page, reachable from the Home Page.

Privacy and Respect for Sensitivities

Rider respects and cherishes the privacy rights of individuals. Our web site should reflect this, and the Rights and Responsibilities of Rider Computer System Users reflects this.

The use of “cookies” or other devices to identify or track discrete viewers of pages on the Rider Web site is prohibited, except as follows:

- Cookies placed by OIT for purpose of counting hits on our site
- Other uses only as authorized by the Web Content Manager or the OIT Webmaster.

Care should be taken to avoid demeaning or offensive material; humorous elements should be sensitive, tasteful and consistent with the stature of the University.

Further, any information gathered about individual users, as a result of their having entered our site or voluntarily provided it, is to be treated with maximum respect for privacy and never for any non-Rider or commercial purpose.

Advertising and Commercial Links

Rider is a non-profit educational institution. Its web site must reflect this.

No advertising for private or non-Rider entities may be placed on the Rider web site. In the case of officially recognized sponsors of Rider activities, a modest graphic link to that entity may be placed on a Rider page, provided that it is accompanied by text that states the sponsorship relation and which does not endorse the product. The Web Content Manager should be consulted before this is done so that appropriate record may be made.

Sales made on the Rider site should be minor and limited to those incidental to the various functions and the University Store. Rider is not maintaining a shopping site. Prior consultation is requested.

Links to pages outside the Rider web site should generally be kept to a minimum, and only made where they are relevant and helpful to the page viewer. Be mindful that such links may become outdated, or the content on the other page might change in a manner not reflecting well on Rider.

Use of Logos and Standard Designs

Standard Rider University logos and designs are available at several central file locations:

A list of standard Rider University logos may be accessed from <http://www.rider.edu/newsite>. Rider staff and faculty may use such logos on their pages on the Rider Web site provided that they are not modified or distorted, their use does not inappropriately represent Rider official endorsement of subject matter that is personal or commercial in nature, and subject to the trademark and copyright rights of Rider University.

A number of other pictures and standard items such campus scenes are located in <http://www.rider.edu/images>.

Pictures may be placed on individual pages by citing the URL of the central file location. This process allows page viewers to enjoy a faster download because the images are likely to already be in their browser cache, but this works only if the exact file name and location is accurately cited. In the unlikely event that excessive or inappropriate use of a particular picture occurs, users may be requested to substitute other pictures.

<http://www.rider.edu/newsite> is a central location at which standard page templates may be obtained. The templates must not be altered as to look, location or functionality, and instructions pertaining to them must be observed. As with all other content of the Rider web site, the templates are covered by copyright. This page also provides access to current information on the web site, tools and policies.

Download Guideline – Maximum File Size

9 % of surfers still use a 14 K Modem

30 % are still at 28 or 33 K

Steadily increasing Web traffic continues to strain the network.

-- Nielsen/NetRatings, New York Times 6/29/2000

Web authorities point to the impatience of web surfers with download time. The ideal time is generally cited as ten seconds or less. Some highly successful web sites achieve faster download, generally through the absence of major graphics. After ten seconds, visitors may grow “antsy,” and by twenty seconds there is a likelihood that the mouse has clicked the visitor off to another site.

Viewers may wait longer if there is unique content that they are intent on obtaining, but in general they not only move on but also may retain a negative feeling about the site they left. One study of millions of hits showed surfers visiting over seventy pages an hour. While this may not be our experience, it demonstrates the need to get your message in front of the viewer quickly and succinctly.

Do not be lulled by the speed of Rider's on-campus Ethernet. It is much faster than most home connections. Further, the Rider site that you view on campus is being fed directly into our Ethernet, not having to contend with the traffic constraints of the outside Internet. Always put yourself in the outside viewer's position, in terms of download and content. Successful marketing requires understanding the customer.

While there are a number of technical factors at work, the generally accepted guideline for reasonable download time is measured as follows: add up the file size of all the images and other functionality on the page plus the HTML file that contains the page code. The total should not exceed 60 K -- 50K is often recommended -- and some experts even suggest much lower. Note: as the gradual increase in available bandwidth is evaluated, this standard may be raised to allow larger file size content per page. Care must be taken not to exclude a significant number of our "customers" simply to be on the cutting edge; those who are relatively on the "lagging edge" may be significant customers.

Although the prospect of placing CD-like presentations on the web is exciting, they do not lend themselves to the current bandwidth limitations of the Web. – paraphrased from Yale Web Style Guide.

If the total file size of a page is too large, consider whether all the images are necessary. Recent studies have found users (young and old) "blocking out" images, especially those that blink or are animated, because they assume they are intrusive advertising which is increasingly resented by many. The text portion of the page typically takes relatively little file size. "Chunking" a long page into several smaller ones may work but bear in mind this will require waiting for each successive page to download.

Further, a recent study ("Printed Page Beats PC Screen for Reading, Study Finds," New York Times August 10, 2000) showed that people do not read information on the monitor as well as on paper, and they do not comprehend nor remember it as well either. This is apparently a factor of the nature of monitor clarity as well as certain physical advantages of paper and other reading/browsing habits.

So, as a general practice, think twice before placing "books," "brochures" or "photo albums" on the web. It may give you a nice feeling, but there is little evidence that long documents get read on the web by many people. In fact, a general suggestion in contemplating page content is:

Do not place anything on the page that does not materially contribute to the page's message!

Or, as web usability expert Jakob Nielsen wrote: "Content is number one; you can build a snazzy site and promote the heck out of it, but if visitors

discover only sizzle, they'll leave faster than you can say cost amortization.”

Handicapped Accessibility

The Rider site should aid access to its pages for the visually impaired, some of whom use automated voice readers or other aids. In accordance with general prescriptions, the following design practices should be observed:

- Create Alternative Text Tags for pictures and images. Such a tag describes what the picture is, and should end with a period. This has several benefits. A viewer with images turned off will know what is there. A visually impaired person's automated reader will be able to convert it to sound. The tag may also provide a catchy interpretation of the intent of the picture.
- When images are used for menu selections, supplement these with text versions that can be comprehended as described above
- Font settings should reflect the need for clarity; pay particular attention to the discussion of fonts in the next section.
- Black text against a white background is the easiest to read.
- Avoid color backgrounds or background images that impair contrast with text.

General Page Design Features

A number of additional design considerations can make for a successful communication.

- **Page title** should always be: “Rider University – Your Department or Function.” Most search engines will use the Page Title for indexing purposes. This title also appears at the upper left location in the browser, and in bookmarks made of the page. Do not confuse the page title with the file name.
- **Page width** must not exceed 600 pixels. (This may be increased in the future as typical equipment and practices change.)
- **Page length** should not exceed the equivalent of three screens (1200 pixels). A number of viewers may not scroll all the way to the bottom. Navigation links should be within reasonable sight. “Back to Top” bookmarks on pages are helpful.
- **Place “headlines”** or key words near the top of the text area. As with newspapers, headlines make the impression, and web visitors tend to scan for key words rather than reading detailed content. Punch the key message through before they click away to another page. Focus on what

is relevant to the viewer in our institutional setting, not on what you might place if it were a personal page you were creating at home.

- **Images** should be sized, cropped and saved for web use (at 72 DPI), in an image editor such as Photoshop, Fireworks or Image Composer, before being inserted on the web page. The file size should not be bigger than the actual display size, as this causes unnecessary download time. Do not use your page editor to reduce the display size of an image by changing its height and width parameters; this does not reduce the file size.
- **Image use**, especially of an **animated** nature, should be limited as discussed in the Download Guideline section above. Many viewers resent blinking and revolving graphics and “tune them out” thinking they are ads. One regular picture is often enough to convey the feeling; remember that pictures consume screen space. If the purpose of the page is to present pictures, as in the Campus Tour section of the site, three modestly sized pictures is generally the maximum. Image width greater than 275 pixels is seldom justified, and smaller can be as effective and allow more per page.
- **Sounds** are seldom appropriate and should be avoided unless essential to the message. Do not use clicks, beeps, strange noises or the like; most music and sound bites are likewise inappropriate.
- Avoid page **background colors** or wallpapers that make for difficult text reading. We don’t recommend them. When used, they should be of a faint nature so as not to interfere with reading contrast, and must be set as the background of the content cell of the template, not as the page background, which would extend it outside of the discretionary content area.
- **Avoid unusual fonts** that may not be on viewers’ computers or which are hard to read. Avoid mixed use of fonts (two fonts per page is the limit) and font colors that do not contrast well against backgrounds. Arial (Helvetica and sans serif are alternatives) is in widespread use and presents a nice screen appearance. Times New Roman is easy to read for long amounts of text; note that browsers may over-ride font settings in some circumstances, and that Times New Roman is a common result.
- **Font size.** Never smaller than HTML font size 1 (8 point), nor larger than 5 (18 point). Use size 2 (10 point) or 3 (12 point) for most text; most paragraph and section headlines at 3 or 4 (14 point).
- **Avoid “screaming”** italics, solid caps, and too many exclamation marks.
- **Horizontal bars** -- Avoid excessive use. Some viewers think they are the bottom of the page upon seeing one, and stop scrolling. Use them only if needed to delineate a new section not otherwise apparent.
- **Frames.** These are useful tools for page authors, but present problems for viewers and should NOT be used. They are incompatible with the templates, are often difficult to bookmark and print out, lead to navigational confusion and inappropriate pages being “trapped” in somebody else’s frames.

- **Avoid proprietary features** that may impair maximum access or cause design burdens. Stay mainstream, with special regard not only for the average user, but also for the “lagging edge,” which can be an important part of target audience.
- Insert **META Tag** Key Words to help search engines only if you understand the process. The templates include general META tags for Rider University that you may supplement if desired with more specific words.
- **Tables.** HTML was originally designed for the universal flow of text, not for placement of graphics and page layouts. Tables are a useful tool to control placement of items on pages, as well as setting page width. The Page Templates are constructed as a table for this purpose. You may add additional tables within the content cell, but do not “nest” more than one additional table within the page, or some browsers will not be able to interpret them. Also, more often than not, not showing the table borders looks better than showing them – let the simplicity of the text position speak for itself.
- **Avoid visible page counters.** They may not work, may produce embarrassing data, and add to download time. Hit information is available from OIT.
- **Do not insert copyright notices.** They are included on the Home Page and in the templates. The entire web site is copyrighted.
- Always run **Spell Check!**
- Always **preview** your page in BOTH major browsers before you publish. They don’t always interpret the code the same or the way you intended the page to look. This is especially true in the use of tables to control page layout.

Page Editors

Authors may use any page editor they are comfortable with, or create pages in plain text HTML code, as with use of Notepad. In order to promote efficiency and ability to communicate “on the same wave length,” FrontPage 2000 is used and recommended by the Web Content Manager, and assistance rendered will not involve interpretation of the workings of other software packages.

Other Support

Rider University recognizes that creating good web pages that cumulatively make for an effective web site requires effort and resources. Several tools are being made available, in addition to this publication.

- Much of this material together with illustrations and amplification is covered as part of a training program ("Effective Web Content Design for Rider University) periodically presented by the Web Content Manager.
- Standard software – FrontPage 2000 – is available at nominal cost through a campus license.
- Training – classroom and computer-based -- on how to use page editing software such as FrontPage 2000 is available from the Office of Information Technologies.
- Members of a Web Advancement Group will be asked to be "champions" in promoting web progress in their respective areas.
- The Office of Information Technologies provides technical assistance in creating complex functional services and regarding the university's web servers and web accounts.
- Questions may be directed to the Web Content Manager, but extended page design services unfortunately cannot be handled on a broad scale.

Bibliography

Jakob Nielsen, Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity. Indianapolis: New Riders Publishing, 2000. Speaker and consultant, Nielsen is considered the guru of web usability design, placing heavy emphasis on designing sites that hold visitors and communicate information effectively. (His web site at www.useit.com serves as a clearinghouse for recent studies. See especially his “Top Ten Mistakes in Web Design” and references to other books and current empirical studies of web viewing habits and design practices.)

Patrick J. Lynch and Sarah Horton, Web Style Guide – Basic Design Principles for Creating Web Sites. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. Highly regarded, a bit more dry, features prescriptive design recommendations. Sections from this work are included on the Yale web site Style Guide (<http://info.med.yale.edu/caim/manual/contents.html>), which is also highly respected.

Robin Williams and John Tollett, The Non-Designer’s Web Book. Berkeley: Peachpit Press, 1998. Some product references are dated; excellent general advice. Illustrations of good and bad design.

Lois Rosenfeld and Peter Morville, Information Architecture for the World Wide Web. Sebastopol, CA: O’Reilly & Associates, 1998. A high-level reference, not for pages, but for the design of web sites, with emphasis on management of information content.

Jared M. Spool et al, Web Site Usability – A Designer’s Guide. Not so much a “how-to” as a revealing and surprising analysis of empirical observations of web users, with resulting design conclusions.

“All Things Web” at www.pantos.org/atw provides general advice regarding design, usability and download considerations. Although some measurements on the site are in the process of being updated, the author’s conclusions are relevant.

The Graphics, Visualization and Usability Center (www.gvu.gatech.edu/) at Georgia Tech conducts technical studies and has published ten major web usage surveys.

“Usability Matters,” at <http://webreview.com/pub/2000/03/10/feature/index3.html> by Claire Rowland, features discussion of effective design strategies.

Stanford Poynter Project. at Stanford University.
<http://www.poynter.org/eyetrack2000/index.htm> reports on a pioneering scrolling-screen eyetracking study that found users eyes focusing first on headlines, then on text rather than photos or graphics. Of those viewers who looked at ads or photos, eye fixation was only about one second.

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