

Content Design

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It is a well-known fact that users don't read text on the web—they scan, ruthlessly ignoring passages that don't seem to contain the content of interest. Jakob Nielsen identified several reasons why users scan text online:

- reading from a computer screen is tiring for the eyes and slower than reading from paper;
- users have a really short attention span on the net: so many sites, so little time;
- surfers who find themselves pausing to read a long article feel unproductive because they are not constantly clicking on things;
- users are not willing to invest the time to see if a passage is useful to them: if they can't quickly determine its usefulness they move on.¹

The ramification? If a page does not deliver the goods quickly, the users will leave. Some sooner than others. The solution? Create bite-sized written content and present it for easy at-a-glance consumption.

Tips for creating bite-sized, scannable written content

- › **Omit unnecessary words.** Concise writing is powerful and easy to read. However, do not prune your existing copy just to add more to the same page. Instead, trim the copy to reduce the amount of text on the page. In the process of editing you'll be left with only the most important content—exactly what interests your reader.
- › **Split up long sentences.** Long sentences present a challenge for attention-deficient web users because reading them requires a long period of concentration. Make them short. They keep the reader focused.
- › **Avoid parenthetical comments.** Parenthetical expressions like explanations or digressions are commonly used in printed media, but most online writing simply does not require that kind of in-depth insight. If a passage is placed in parentheses or footnotes offline, it is probably not important enough to even be included online.

¹ Jakob Nielsen, "Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity" (New Riders, 2000), p. 106.

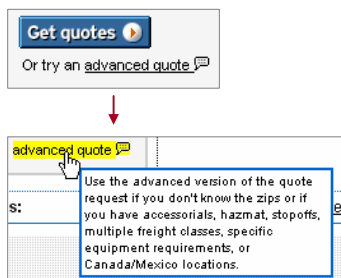
More tips for concise writing.

Cut filler phrases like “the question as to whether” (replace with *whether*) or “at this point in time” (replace with *now*);

Avoid redundant phrases like “end result”, “important essentials”, or “free gift”;

Don’t begin sentences with “there is” or “it is”. Start sentences with a noun or a verb instead. This not only strengthens the sentence, but also makes it shorter.

- › **Use sentence fragments when appropriate**, letting the reader use context to complete the sentence. Using sentence fragments can often cut down on unnecessary words. An example? There’s one in this paragraph.
- › **Keep to one topic per paragraph and one idea per sentence.** When reading a paragraph, readers will often skip the rest of it as soon as they decide that they got the main idea.
- › **Keep paragraphs short, making the first and last sentence of each paragraph especially salient.** When trying to quickly get the gist of a long paragraph a person will read the first and last sentences, because the topic sentence—a sentence that contains the main idea of the paragraph—usually comes at the beginning or the end of the paragraph.
- › **Place the main clause at the beginning of a sentence.** Reserving the main clause until the end of a sentence is a useful technique for creating suspense, but the suspense of waiting for a web page to load is quite enough for most web users. Deliver the goods up front. The following example keeps the reader guessing about the main point of the sentence until the end: “Because it creates suspense, it is sometimes a useful technique to reserve the main clause until the end of a sentence.” Arrrh!
- › **Use bulleted lists.** They’re easier and quicker to scan than regular paragraphs. I will discuss bulleted lists in much more detail later in this chapter.
- › **Use the interactive properties of the medium to show additional content on demand.** By hiding less important pieces of content you can let the reader focus on what’s important. For example, footnotes are widely used in books because there is no other way to include a short snippet of related, but less important information (except for an often awkward parenthetical comment like this). One particularly nifty implementation is hoverpopups—little areas of text that pop up when a mouse is hovered over a piece of content. Here’s how to implement them:

**Hoverpopups at transportation.com:**

- a callout icon is used to indicate a link that has a hover popup;
- the entire link, rather than just the callout, is linked. This makes it easy to hit with the mouse.

- *Put a marker next to the piece of content about which you want to include more information.* Short phrases like “more info” or “what’s this?” work well because they (a) indicate that there’s more info available about the item and (b) are large enough to comfortably hit with a mouse pointer. If the piece of content is text, you can link it, as transportation.com did, and add a callout icon to indicate that it has a popup (image on the left).
- *Display the note in a popup when the user’s mouse pointer hovers over the mark.* Keep the note very brief, requiring an average person no more than 5 seconds to read. This way the reader will still remember what he was reading in the main copy once he’s done reading the hoverpopup.

Content presentation tips

- › **Present the headline and page summary before revealing more detail.**
Taking advantage of this inverted pyramid writing style is essential for presenting web copy, because it lets the readers can get the gist of the page contents quickly. If they are interested in getting more details, they'll just keep reading. This is especially useful for pages that contain a lot of text like news stories or product information sheets.
- › **Lay out the page to organize content and create a strong visual hierarchy.**
Described by Robin Williams in "The Non-Designer's Design Book," the following four principles are especially useful in laying out text content:²
 - *Contrast.* If two elements are not exactly the same, then make them really different using size, color, position, white space, etc. For example, the heading for this subsection is in a bold sans-serif font, whereas the body text is in a roman serif several points smaller.
 - *Repetition.* Repeat certain element attributes like size, font, or color to develop organization and strengthen unity on the page. For example, the bullets in this book not only let you quickly locate the next item, but also relate the items, indicating that they are a part of the same group.
 - *Alignment.* Nothing should be placed on a page arbitrarily, but aligned with something else on the page. This helps visually connect related items, and make the entire page a single cohesive unit. Notice the alignment of the bullets again.
 - *Proximity.* Items related logically belong together visually. A simple example is also on this page: the leading for each bullet is less than the paragraph spacing between the bullets. This makes it easier to see where one bullet ends and another begins.
- › **If the information can be displayed in a table, then do it.** A user can quickly navigate to the cells containing useful information by scanning the column and row titles. More on tables later in this chapter.
- › **If it is better displayed in a plot or a diagram, then do that.** When used appropriately graphs are capable of delivering memorable messages quickly. The information density³ presented by a well-conceived chart is much higher than that of plain text.
- › **Guide the reader's eye across the page and provide places for it to "rest."**
Readers' eyes naturally gravitate toward headlines, rules, links, white space,

Design hierarchy is the order in which a viewer "receives" interface elements based on how prominent they are to the viewer.

Information hierarchy bases this order on the importance to the viewer of information-bearing elements. You can think of it as the "intended" way for the user to read the content.

The goal of information design is to make sure that both hierarchies are in sync, guiding the viewer through the content.

Designing page templates without knowing what content they will hold often results in a disconnect between the design and information hierarchy.

² Robin Williams, "The Non-Designer's Design Book," (Peachpit, 1994), pp. 15, 27, 43, 53.

³ Edward Tufte used the term information density to describe the amount of information a graphic contains expressed in bits or bytes.

More tips for better readability.

Keep the contrast between text and background high.

Avoid textured backgrounds, especially is the texture elements are similar in size to the text letters.

Make text user-resizable by using relative text size units in your style sheets. This puts the user in control by letting them choose how big they want it.

small graphics adjacent to text, etc. Alignment can also affect eye movement, as our eyes tend to follow lines, even the imaginary ones created by rows or columns of carefully aligned elements. Reading long, blocky paragraphs is tiring because there's no place for the reader's eyes to stop and "rest" as they "run" over the text.

- › **Keep lines of text short.** This minimizes the distance the reader's eye has to "travel" to start reading a new line. It also decreases the amount of time required to read the complete line, making the reader feel like they're getting through the material faster—a good thing with rushing readers.
- › **Increase leading (line spacing).** This lets the reader's eye track a line of text easier.
- › **Left-justify text.** This creates a consistent place for the readers' eyes to return to start reading a new line.
- › **Do not use all caps for body copy.** Besides being considered "rude shouting," words in all caps are also more difficult (and therefore slower) to read than mixed case text. This is because we read by recognizing both the shapes of individual letters and the shapes of entire words. The more unique a shape looks, the faster we can identify the shape and connect it with a word in our mind. The shapes of words in all uppercase letters aren't very unique: they all look like long RECTANGLES! They're more difficult to recognize, identify, and read.
- › **Do not use underlined or blue text except to label a link.** Since so many sites choose not to use the default link colors, web users have come to see anything that is underlined as a potential link. Some sites don't underline links, but keep the default link color (i.e. dell.com), so using blue text for emphasis runs a risk of confusing users as well.
- › **Avoid italicized text,** because it is more difficult to read than regular text due to the blocky appearance of slanted lines at lower resolutions.
- › **Avoid multi-column layouts.** In a long scrolling document it is more difficult to find the beginning of the next column when it is off the screen.
- › **Do not animate text if you want people to be able to read it.** Moving text is difficult to read and can "smear" on laptop and flat panel screens to the point of becoming unreadable. Moving text also makes it difficult to concentrate on other content. I have seen users scroll a web page to hide moving or blinking content or even place their hand over it, because they couldn't focus on the rest of the page.

Travel Alerts

- › Travel Information Center
- › Eye on the Sky with Rally Caparas
- › Travel Tips From A to Z with Amy Ziff

Changing font color mid-sentence at travelocity.com makes these bullets more difficult to scan. Underlined text is already less readable without the change in chroma (hue) and value (lightness). Not a major flaw, but why push it?

Example: writing for scannability

Below is paragraph from one of my client's sites. The company name and numbers have been changed.

Original:

As of December 31, 2000, we managed a total of \$18 billion in corporate bonds for both John Doe's General Account and third-party institutional investors. As an asset manager for third-party accounts, we have 12 portfolios, serving more than 40 investors, which totaled approximately \$2.6 billion. Each third-party portfolio is fully integrated into our core investment process.

Can the information in this paragraph be presented in a more easily digestible form? You bet.

Revised:

Total assets under management:	\$18 billion in corporate bonds (as of December 31, 2000)
Third-party accounts:*	\$2.6 billion (12 portfolios, 43 investors)

*Each third-party portfolio is fully integrated into our core investment process.

The only piece of information missing in the revised version is the name of the account where John Doe keeps non-third-party bonds—a trivial fact that adds no real value.

The revised version:

- eliminates a lot of extra words (necessary to create complete sentences) by breaking up the sentences and presenting information in an easy-to-scan five-cell table. Labels and data are aligned to each other eliminating the need for borders.
- takes fewer eye shifts to absorb all the information, and provides a place for the eyes to “rest.” Can you feel your eye gravitating to the area between the colons and dollar signs? Alignment is at work here too.
- increases line spacing, helping the reader's eye follow each line better.
- makes the data stronger and more precise by revising these weak statements:
 - more than 40 investors. The number of investors has been changed to reflect a more precise figure, improving credibility of the data and the company.
 - approximately \$2.6 billion. “Approximately” is omitted. When a large number is specified using only two significant figures, it is clearly an approximation.

Only the third sentence of this paragraph made its way into the rewritten version intact in a form of a footnote. In general, you should not use footnotes on web pages, because most web pages don't fit entirely on the screen. This means that the readers have to scroll to the bottom of the page

to find the footnote, and then scroll up to find the spot where they left off. The exception is when the footnote is placed so close to the point in the body text from which it is referenced that it becomes hard to miss.⁴ In this example, the footnote is also rendered in smaller type, pointing to its reduced importance.

Common types of useless written content

Instructions are sometimes placed at the top of a page to explain the obvious: “Please take a moment to fill out the following form” or “Below you will find the fields to enter you name, address...” And sometimes they’re used to compensate for poorly laid out content and forms. The irony is that few people read instructions, but try to figure out how things work by trial and error. This is why a good design with no instructions is always better than a poor design with excellent instructions. If you must use instructions, make them brief, put them close enough to their object to be noticed, and keep them out of the way of the more important content.

Gobbledygook is the pompous, self-promotional babble used to impress the customer: “Our products have won this many awards...” or “Get ready for the ultimate in...” In reality, gobbledygook offers little value to the customer and actually hurts credibility by ignoring the customers’ need for useful information.

Welcome to our new look! We've changed our colors, updated and streamlined our content, and improved navigation so you can find your favorite features fast. Lost? Go to our new **site-wide index**.

A short-lived welcome message at epicurious.com (some time in 2002).
That's nice. Who cares?!

Introductions make the site’s owners feel good about themselves, but carry no useful information at all. A typical example is “Welcome to our site...blah, blah, blah.” Here’s one from epicurious.com:

Sometimes introductions are not only useless, but downright silly. Found on the boo.com home page: “hello... we’ve an eyeful of fresh sights for you!”

⁴ Footnotes in books are more usable, because you can easily find the end of the page and remember the approximate spot in the body text where you stopped. There is no scrolling. See?

Designing lists, tables, and charts

Even though lists, tables, and charts look different, they share a common trait: they all deliver content faster than plain, linear text.

Designing lists

› Always place a short clarifying opener sentence above the list. When trying to figure out what the bulleted list is about, the reader will look to the list opener for a quick explanation. The opening sentence also tells what characteristic is shared by all of the items in the list. Think of the opener and the entire list that follows as one long sentence broken up for easy scanning. So you can't skip the opener. You should also:

- use a colon to set the opening sentence and the list apart;
- keep the opener short. Consider this example:

Original:

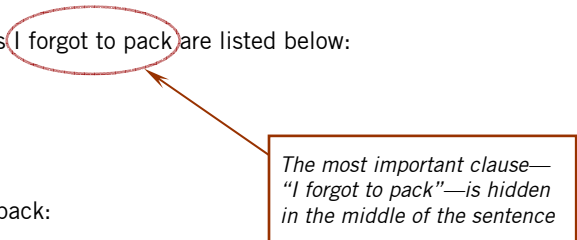
The clothes I forgot to pack are listed below:

- pants;
- shirt;
- shoes.

Revised:

I forgot to pack:

- pants;
- shirt;
- shoes.



*The most important clause—
“I forgot to pack”—is hidden
in the middle of the sentence*

It is clear that the things listed are clothes. It is clear that they're listed, and that they're below.

- use the linking power of the colon to omit even more words (see the example below);
- place a meaningful word at the end of the opening sentence, just before the colon. For example, you should avoid words like “below” or “following,” since they just add clutter. The opener+list format also creates enough context to let you skip linking verbs:

Original: “The major points discussed were:”

Revised: “The major points discussed:”

Dumping “were” puts a more meaningful word at the most visible spot in the opener—next to the colon. You can omit verbs like “were,” thereby creating a sentence fragment, because the colon and the general context sufficiently relate the opener and the items that follow.

A sample bulleted list from petsmart.com.

Increasing leading between list items and lining the bullet up with first line of each item goes a long way toward improving this list:

Original:

- Health Care**
- [Dental, Eye & Ear Care](#)
 - [First Aid Kits & Medical Supplies](#)
 - [Flea & Tick Products](#)
 - [Medications](#)
 - [Vitamins & Supplements](#)



Revised:

- Health Care**
- [Dental, Eye & Ear Care](#)
 - [First Aid Kits & Medical Supplies](#)
 - [Flea & Tick Products](#)
 - [Medications](#)
 - [Vitamins & Supplements](#)

- › **Make sure that all items in a list are related.** To test this try to create a really long run-on sentence using the opener and all the bullets. If an item feels out of place in the sentence, it probably does not belong in the list.
- › **If the list item is longer than one sentence, start it with a short summary or an introductory sentence.** Make this sentence stand out to make the list of bullets easier to scan. Using boldface for emphasis is best. This bullet is an example.
- › **Keep to one idea per list item.** Having more than idea or unit of information per list item defeats the purpose of splitting up a set of ideas into a list.
- › **Make it easy to tell where one item ends and another begins,** especially if the text of the list items wraps. Preceding each item in a list with a consistent bullet or icon makes it clear where a new item begins, as does extra line spacing. An example from petsmart.com on the left illustrates this.
- › **Use bullet design to differentiate groups of list items.** You can group and nest bulleted lists by using different bullet icons and indentation.

Designing tables

Tables are a great way to display a set of items that share the same set of attributes. Unlike the one-dimensional, linear text, a table creates a two-dimensional matrix, greatly speeding up access to information: the user can quickly navigate around a table by scanning the column and row titles.

- › **Sort and group table rows and columns,** and make the sorting and grouping criteria clear. For example, the lack of default sorting at getconnected.com makes plan listing pages less navigable.

The plans list tables at [getconnected.com](#) have an excellent sort tool: there's a sort button for every column that looks depressed when the column is sorted. But why is there no default sort column: the plans are displayed in random order when the table first loads. Why not sort by price, or by number of included minutes? Sorting by something is always better than not sorting at all. The fact that a sorting facility is provided does not excuse [getconnected.com](#) from helping the user here.

Compare up to 5 plans side-by-side in detail!									
Provider	Plan	Promo	Monthly Fee	Minutes	Long Distance	See Phones	How to Buy		
Sort	Sort	Sort	Sort	Sort	Sort		Sort	Sort	Sort
	Digital Advantage \$39.99		\$39.99	400	Included	Phones		Add to Cart	Details
	Regional Advantage \$29.99		\$29.99	120	Included	Phones		Add to Cart	Details
	Digital One Rate \$59.99		\$59.99	450	Included	Phones		Add to Cart	Details
	Free & Clear Long Distance 3000		\$29.99	200	Included	Phones		Add to Cart	Details
	Free & Clear Long Distance 4000		\$39.99	350	Included	Phones		Add to Cart	Details
	Wireless \$19.99		\$19.99	60	\$0.15/min	Phones		Add to Cart	Details

- › **Create tables that work even when column titles are not visible.** Unless you use the two development nightmares called frames and DHTML, the column titles will scroll out of view on long pages. Here are some tips to make your tables less dependent on the column titles:
 - *Make the formatting of data pieces reveal their type.* For example, instead of placing the units (\$, lb., etc.) into the column header, include them together with the values in the table cells.
 - *Don't use symbols if you can spell them out.* For example, if you have a table listing items for sale and one of the pieces of data you want to display is their stock status, you can put the words “in stock” or “out of stock” directly into the cells rather than calling the column “in stock” and placing cryptic checkmarks into the table cells. In the plans listing pages example from getconnected.com (previous page), the promo icon could be spelled out. Why make the user learn your symbols?
 - *Keep the number of columns low, and the types of data in the table diverse.* That way even if the column titles are out of view the user can still differentiate between the different pieces of data in a single row based on their formatting and values. The getconnected.com plans listings do well here: there are few columns and the data types are all different.
 - *Differentiate between columns of same-type data.* This is especially important if the data ranges are similar and/or the columns are next to each other. For example, if you have three columns—one for retail price, one for regular price, and one for sale price—you can use a text color, size, or weight to differentiate the three. Just don't use color, size, and weight all at once!
- › **Minimize chartjunk.** Make the actual information stand out by making colors/treatments for dividers, highlighting, and other non-information-carrying elements subtle. Keep the number of these elements to a minimum. For example, use text alignment instead of vertical lines to divide a table into columns. Increase row height and/or use row highlighting instead of horizontal rules to separate table rows.
- › **Increase data density by adding color.** Use the lightness and saturation of color to convey information. In the table on the next page, color is used to indicate whether a camera feature is better or worse than the competition. A viewer can quickly zero in on the features that are different and make a decision about the overall feature set of a camera by simply estimating how many green and red cells it has. The only drawback here is with the choice of colors: red/green is the most common type of colorblindness.
- › **Keep text horizontal.** Rotated or vertical text is much slower to read. The reader must mentally rotate slanted text back to horizontal to read it, and read vertical text letter by letter.

Chartjunk – a term used by Edward Tufte to describe the parts of a chart, plot, or diagram that carry no data. Chartjunk includes things like grid lines, shading, borders, as well as gratuitous decoration of data (for example 3D treatments for two-dimensional data). The designer's goal is to reduce the visual noise created by these elements by eliminating some and reducing the visual impact of others. This lets the actual information stand out.

Digicam comparison at dpreview.com.
Color shading makes it easier to notice
differentiating features.

Features / Specifications comparison

Better than the competition

Worse than the competition

For anyone who's confused the highlighting of what I think is 'better' or 'worse' is my own personal opinion, your mileage may vary.

	Nikon Coolpix 5000	Olympus E-20	Sony DSC-F707
			
Street price	US\$ 1,000	US\$ 1,900	US\$ 1,000
Body	Metal alloy	Metal alloy	Metal alloy
Body design	Compact with flip-out LCD	SLR-like with tilting LCD	Split body, oversized lens
Ergonomics	Good, good hand grip	Excellent, just like an SLR	Odd at first but better with time
Lens zoom	3x optical, 28 - 85 mm	4x optical, 35 - 140 mm	5x optical, 38 - 190 mm
Lens aperture	F2.8 - F4.8	F2.0 - F2.4	F2.0 - F2.4
Lens thread	28 / 46 mm with adapter	62 mm	58 mm
CCD	2/3" 5.2 megapixel	2/3" 5.2 megapixel	2/3" 5.2 megapixel
CCD CFA	C Y G M	G R G B	G R G B
Max resolution	2560 x 1920	2560 x 1920	2560 x 1920
Aspect ratio	4:3 or 3:2	4:3	4:3 or 3:2
Lower Resolutions	1600 x 1200 1280 x 960 1024 x 768 640 x 480	1792 x 1344 1280 x 960 1024 x 768 640 x 480	2048 x 1536 1280 x 960 640 x 480
Image modes	TIFF, JPEG	RAW, TIFF, JPEG	TIFF, JPEG
JPEG modes	Fine, Normal, Basic	SHQ, HQ, SQ (programmable)	Fine, Standard
Digital Zoom	Up to x4.0 in x0.2 steps	None	Up to x2.0 (smooth steps)
Sensitivity	Auto, ISO 100, 200, 400, 800	Auto, ISO 80, 160, 320	Auto, ISO 100, 200, 400
AF mode	Single, Continuous	Single	Single
AF illumination lamp	No	Yes (IR)	Yes (laser)

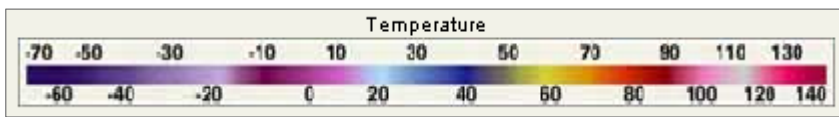
Designing charts

Our ability to use symbols to represent our world makes us unique, unlike any other being we know. But even though we have become adept at representing a great variety of objects using symbols, visual displays are still more natural and accurate. They engage our senses directly.

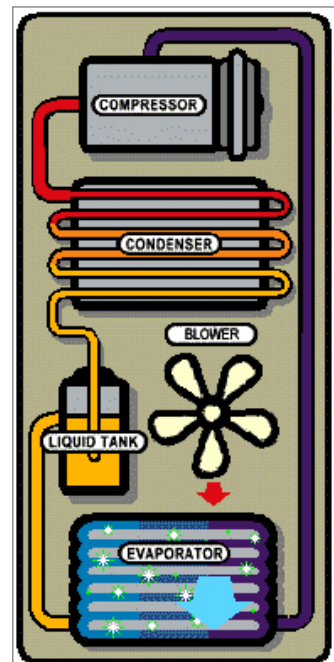
Well-designed charts and graphs can deliver a lot of information very quickly. Consider that all visual information that naturally exists in the world is graphical. It is only very recently that we started expressing images, feelings, and ideas using letters and numbers—arbitrary, unnatural symbols.

Few people have studied graphical display of information in greater detail than Edward Tufte. Many of the tips on the next page are inspired by his ideas.

- › **Make sure the chart has all required information to deliver a complete message.** A chart that stands on its own out of context is more user-friendly, because it does not make the reader look elsewhere for an explanation to make sense of it.
- › **Use direct labels to avoid legends** by attaching labels directly to parts of a graphic. If you must use a legend, make sure it does not contain extra information, as in the following example from weather.com. This particular scale was attached to a weather map with temperatures ranging from 50 to 70 degrees. Had other temperature ranges been excluded, the relevant part of the scale would get more space and be more usable.



- › **Maximize data ink**—the ink devoted to the actual data, and **minimize chartjunk**—non-data elements that often do more to obscure the data than to help the viewer process it. One of the most common cases of chartjunk is gratuitous decoration of data. If a treatment does not add to the strength of a graphic's message it should be omitted. For example, giving two-dimensional data a 3D look only obscures the data and makes the whole thing more difficult for users to “process” because of an added dimension—a dimension that carries no useful information.
- › **Confine bright colors to small areas and keep background colors muted.** Bright, saturated colors are best used for emphasis. For example, to draw the viewer's attention to an error message.
- › **Use color to convey quantitative information.** Color is a natural quantifier. Geographical maps have used this property of color for many years to show relative elevation above and below the sea level. The air conditioning diagram on the right uses color to show the relative temperature of the air conditioning fluid. However, the disastrous example from weather.com above illustrates a point: don't use too many hues. The temperature scale in that example uses every color of the rainbow, some more than once. For example, the colors representing 100 and 120 degrees are the same and both temperatures are likely to be found on a single map. In general, use the fewest number of hues you can get away with.
- › **If a picture is not worth a thousand words, to hell with it.** Some data simply doesn't warrant a graphic. Use a table or a bulleted list instead. The chart example on the next page illustrates this.



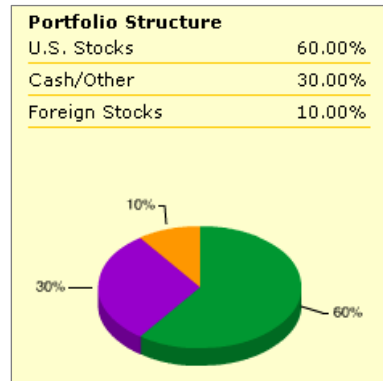
Steps of the air conditioning cycle:

- The COMPRESSOR sends high-pressure gas refrigerant to the condenser.
- The CONDENSER receives the high-pressure gas refrigerant from the compressor and condenses it to a high-pressure liquid.
- The LIQUID TANK receives the high-pressure liquid refrigerant from the condenser and serves as a reservoir, supplying liquid refrigerant as needed to the evaporator (or cooling module).
- High-pressure refrigerant released into the EVAPORATOR decompresses, creating a chilling effect. Low-pressure gas leaves the evaporator and returns to the compressor.
- The BLOWER takes warm cabin air, blows it through the chilled evaporator and back into the cabin.

Air conditioner diagram from Microsoft's carpoint.com. The five list items are unnecessarily far away from the objects they describe in the diagram. Why not label the steps of the A/C cycle directly by attaching the text in the bullets to the parts of the diagram which they describe? In addition, the whole graphic is so tall that when the diagram is visible, the bullets are not (falling below the fold) and vice versa.

Chart Example

Here is a chart from one of my clients' original mutual fund info pages.



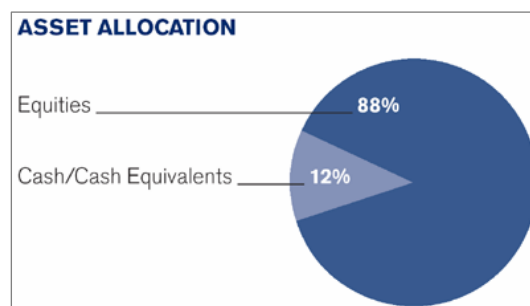
What's wrong with this chart:

The labels don't add any value to the pie chart—they just indicate the size of the pieces;

The chart has an unnecessary 3D treatment—a great example of chartjunk;

The chart is also an example of dressing up too few numbers—the chart itself is unnecessary. Nothing is gained by it. The table above it sufficiently presents the data.

The following chart is from the same client's new mutual fund info pages.



What's better in this chart:

The labels are clear;

The 3D treatment is gone;

The chart actually contains unique information not found anywhere else on the page.

What's not:

This is still a case of dressing up too few numbers. It is sufficiently clear to any except the most visual a decision-maker that 88% is much larger than 12%. A simple table would have sufficed here.

Content design topics

The liabilities of automatically changing content

I have seen sites, especially in the early days of the web, with scrolling stock tickers, or news items, or both. Other sites were more subtle, having news or other items change every few seconds or so. But no matter what form it takes, this automatically changing content ignores the most fundamental property of the interactive medium: *the user is in control*. The interaction is active, not passive. Traditional stock and news tickers scroll because the users can't change the display themselves. They work fine in one-way, passive environments of billboards or television, but have no place in the interactive environment of the web.

There are other problems with automatically changing content:

- users get anxious, because they don't know whether the item of interest will disappear before they can finish reading it.
- users simply don't have time to sit through a bunch of irrelevant pieces of content, waiting for the few that really interest them;
- implementations that don't allow users to click on the headline for more info are almost useless;
- implementations that let users flip through the list of items at their own pace using links like "next/previous" aren't much better: how can the users know if the next headline in the list will be useful to them.

Instead of using scrolling or fading text, present news headlines in static lists, grouped and sorted in a meaningful way. List a few headlines and include a link to see more in the same category. For stock prices, offer a lookup tool that accepts both the ticker symbol and the company name. Don't ask customers to use one tool to look up a company's stock symbol and then use another one to look up the stock's price.

"I" versus "You"

The current crop of web sites is divided between using first and second person address when referring to personalized site features like accounts and shopping carts. For example, some call these "Your Account" and "Your Shopping Cart," while others use "My Account" and "My Shopping Cart."

The argument in favor of the first person address is that it achieves greater intimacy between the site and the customer, whereas second person address distances the two. Some users may feel that the site is talking down to them if second person address is used.

On the other hand, a site that uses first person address may make customers feel like they're alone on the site, talking to themselves. Second person address establishes a dialogue, reassuring the user that there's somebody "behind" the site who's telling them that this is their cart and this is their order. This is closer to the experience a customer gets in a physical store. I sometimes ask about this as a part of the user testing "postmortem." Most users don't care, but those who do prefer "your" to "my." Therefore, my recommendation is to use the second person address.

Whichever approach you choose, be consistent. While it is obvious that you shouldn't say "My Account" and "Your Shopping Cart," you should also achieve consistency across different types of elements. For example, if you

just for you: [my catalog](#) | [my account](#)

Inconsistent use of first and second person address at bluefly.com. Whose catalog? Whose account?

use “My Account” then a facility to subscribe for special offers should be labeled “I want to subscribe to special offers” rather than “Do you want to subscribe to special offers?”

Achieving this consistency in the first person address often hurts clarity. For example, the following help message from Orbitz.com either shifts into passive voice or starts sounding silly when it is rewritten in the first person:

Original:

“If you forget your Orbitz password we’ll ask this question”

First person, Version 1:

“If I forget my Orbitz password I’ll be asked this question”

First person, Version 2:

“If I forget my Orbitz password they will ask me this question”

This is another reason why second person address is preferable.

Has the concept of a page as a unit of displayed amount of content become obsolete in electronic media?

Human civilizations have seen many devices of writing stuff down: from cave walls and clay plates in the really old days to scrolls of papyrus and books in the more recent times. Introduction of each device eliminated the limitations of the previous: unlike cave walls clay plates were portable, papyrus scrolls could fit a lot more content, and books allowed random access to content and easy bookmarking.

While the pages in a book are useful in indexing the contents, a page is an arbitrary unit that can fit a predefined amount of content. This means that many page breaks result in awkward interruptions in the flow of a passage. When pages are moved directly to the web, these interruptions are exacerbated by the fact that page “flipping” is so slow (especially over dial-up connections). The reader is likely to lose focus on the dialogue during the transitions and have to flip back to reestablish context.

Electronic displays have the potential to replace books for everyday use and eliminate the page break annoyance, allowing content to be split in logical places or not at all. However, dividing content into logical chunks can mean creating very long pages, easily exceeding the resolving power of today’s best display devices. This means that a complete work or even a section will have to be viewed a windowful at a time. So it looks like we have traded one unit of displayed amount of content—the page—for another—a windowful.

Is a windowful any better than a page? I think so. The major advantage is that there are no breaks in the flow of content because window contents can scroll smoothly, revealing new text line by line in an uninterrupted stream. However, it seems that as long as we insist of receiving information visually there will exist a unit of displayed amount of content.