IW:LEARN Web Style Guide

http://www.iwlearn.net/website-guidelines

(2nd Draft rev2)

GEF/IW:LEARN
June 12, 2009

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

Purpose of this guide

The purpose of this guide is to provide the Global Environment Facility (GEF) International Waters (IW) projects with consistent guidance in the design and redesign of websites for their projects.

How can this guide help me?

The web is a constantly evolving medium that requires a fair amount of effort in studying and evaluating all the advantages and disadvantages of various implementation techniques.
This guide is intended to summarise and focus on the key points of building websites so that you will be able to make an informed decision on how to build your International Waters (IW) project website.

It will cover a broad range of subjects that are important in modern web building and keep you informed of do's and do not's as well as offer a starting point for your project.

Why should I use this guide?

It is hoped that by reading this guide not only will you learn modern web knowledge but to be able to use this knowledge to implement an IW project website that will provide a level of consistency between related IW project sites. However, the key purpose is to facilitate the website administrators website building efforts, such as:

- Making content preparation easier by providing content writing guidelines
- Improving access to information (navigation)
- Providing consistency in the use of terms (taxonomies / semantics) to describe reports and other project outputs (this also improves SEO – Search Engine Optimization)
- Providing guidance on the use of metadata, especially keywords (controlled vocabularies) to enhance the "find-ability" of information
- Establishing a similar "look and feel" within the project site and across project sites in the IW focal area.

What is this entire "Web 2.0" techno-babble all about?

This is a term coined by Darcy DiNucci in 1999 in her article "Fragmented Future".

For most people who have surfed the web in the late 90s the web surfing experience use to be a very simple click and view content approach. You clicked on a hyper link and you read the contents of the page. But that was it. It was rather a static experience.

Darcy DiNucci in her 1999 article saw the beginnings of a change in web development that was very insightful at the time. She wrote: "The Web we know now, which loads into a browser

window in essentially static screenfuls, is only an embryo of the Web to come. The first glimmerings of Web 2.0 are beginning to appear, and we are just starting to see how that embryo might develop. ... The Web will be understood not as screenfuls of text and graphics but as a transport mechanism,".

Wikipedia describes Web 2.0 with the following sentence: '"**Web 2.0**" refers to what is perceived as a second generation of web development and web design'.

Another way to analogize this is that the web used to be like a newspaper. You could read the content and see pictures but that was pretty much it. There was no interactivity, nor any feedback.

Modern websites (not necessarily Web 2.0) have recently begun to realize the potential of the web medium by providing additional mechanisms of accessing information and ways to interact with the content that you are reading. From a static website, you can now interact with the page and search through content instantly without refreshing the browser (a big issue in usability before these features were available). With advancements in client-side browser scripting techniques the user can perform many types of interactions that would normally require you to submit your choices and refresh the browser before getting your results taking several seconds if not on some occasions almost a minute or more.

For example, a holiday website would offer options to select your destination, number of passengers and budget which you would have to submit and wait a few seconds for the page to refresh. With the Web 2.0 advancements you can select your options like a normal desktop program and use slider bars to set your budget, a popup calendar to pick your flight dates and just wait a short moment for your search to appear.

The new IW:LEARN website (www.iwlearn.net) and GEF IW Website toolkit for instance employ web 2.0 feature to allow its users to arrange the home page to suit their own interest (e.g. news on top, project map on the left, jobs listings and announcement in the center of the home page). Other Web 2.0 features employed include dynamic updates of content from other project websites (e.g. upcoming events, updates and so on) in addition to streaming video. The project database and project map (see www.iwlearn.net/iw-projects) interact with the user dynamically to filter information about projects by region, agency involved, basin and so on.

Web 2.0 is also more than just a usability feature. There is a large trend towards social networking and collaborative working. The latter more relevant to this guide as IW projects require a collaborative effort to achieve the maximum potential.

Social or collaborative websites and tools form part of the Web 2.0 movement. A need to publish news in summarized form can be facilitated by a technique called Really Simple Syndication (RSS/ATOM) to whoever is interested in subscribing. It is considered a must have by most modern websites.

Collaborative tools can help you work together to discuss, track and manage your work – a popular but commercial collaborative project management tool is called "BaseCamp" produced

by a company called 37Signals. They identified that most project tools were overly bloated and intentionally shrunk down the feature set to a very simple tool. You could message other users, create TODO list, set milestones and create a central "writeboard" (a richtext document) that could be accessed or edited by anyone you chose.
It is up to the individual website administrators on how best to use the available technologies and techniques to best make use of this.

Understanding the web

All these features obviously cannot be used without some understanding. Web administrators need to check against their target audience and their technical ability of being able to understand and make the best use of the available technologies and user interfaces.

[more to add…]

2. Getting started

Understand your objectives

Knowing what you want to communicate is just as important as deciding on what you want your website to look like and what colours you think might look good. Without this in hand you will very quickly find out that putting together your website will get tricky rather soon.

Plan what you want to convey in short bullet points. The structure you create at this point might be usable later on when decided how you want to structure the navigation of the website (see section X).

Know your target audience

Understanding your audience and targeting the information correctly will greatly increase the number of repeat visitors and at the same promote the information larger number of people. IW Project websites aim to server four key groups:

- the interested public, often people in the area where the project activity takes place
- the water resources community - globally, regionally, and locally
- other IW focal area project personnel who want to learn from your project's experience
- GEF management and that of partner agencies interested in news and progress being made.

Decide what tools you are going to use

Another important factor when deciding to start up your own website is to pick the right tools for the job.

There are a multitude of software packages and services you can use in order to build your website, and you must weight these options against your internal expertise along with time and budgets.

IW:LEARN has produced a toolkit that includes a CMS called "Plone" which is readily available to use and this guide will use examples from this toolkit to illustrate how you can build your website. The toolkit is a living resource that is based on feedback from IW project managers. It was designed to allow a project to create, update and manage a project website with little or no programming or ICT knowledge. The toolkit includes essential tools for a project website including usage statics gathering and reports, interactive chat/forum, news feeds, intranet/workspaces and photo/video galleries.

[more to add…]

How do I increase awareness of my website?

There are a few ways in which you can promote awareness of your website in the community and outside. This guide will explain some of the common and simple options available in later sections of the guide based on modifications you can make to the website itself.

[Insert examples of basic marketing]

The most practiced technique among web professionals is generally called "Search Engine Optimization (SEO)".

As an alternative, you could approach 3rd party agencies that offer SEO services and some may even guarantee top search rankings. Obviously these services come with a price and the "guaranteed" label may apply techniques that would infringe on Google strict regulations on SEO against their search engine – usually ending up in getting blacklisted off the Google search engine.

It would be better to follow a few simple steps or read Google Webmaster guidelines.

As Google mentions in one of its SEO guidelines: "No one can guarantee a #1 ranking on Google."

3. Accessibility and Usability

What is Accessibility?

An accessible compliant website allows users who are disabled (either visually or physically impaired) to access the website with convenience. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) kicked started the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) in order to address accessibility issues and promote a set of standards that will educate developers into building websites that cater for these individuals.

In addition, over the last few years accessibility has become a political issue with disabled groups petitioning for laws that make it mandatory for website owners to make their websites accessible to everyone.

An example of these laws put into action was for a legal case known as "Maguire vs. SOCOG", in connection to the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

[more to add…]

Examples of providing accessibility features:

- Contrasting colours
- Access keys
- Tab Indexes
- Table-less layouts (to aid linear readability of content)
- Semantic use of W3C markup tags for web readers

What is Usability?

In a nutshell "usability" means is to have something "human-centred" designed or as Jakob Nielsen defined a '"quality attribute" that assesses how easy user interfaces are to use'. Have you ever come across a television set and, for the life of you could not figure out how to reach tune it in?

Websites are no different than TVs and web users are no different from the TV owners either.

Why is it important?
This leads back to some of the fundamental principles of this guide. To enable your users to access your website and it's content intuitively. If your users cannot find the information they want, they leave. If they get lost, they leave. There's no manual for your users to work your website. Therefore, it's imperative you get this right the first time otherwise you website may end up a wasted effort.

OK, well how do I use this knowledge?

Read up on material related to improving your website usability and accessibility (see Appendix [X] for further information). Think as the user and build your website with that thought in mind.

User testing works test, therefore find a few colleagues or even better friends (a maximumof 5 people will suffice) who know nothing of your project and have them test your website. Get feedback. Structure your feedback as a form so that you can interpret their feedback consistently.

From the feedback you receive you will be able to tweak your website and add those improvements that would make it easier to use. Don't wait until your website is finished either. Test as soon as you have a working prototype and make your changes early on.

4. Navigation

Design for your user

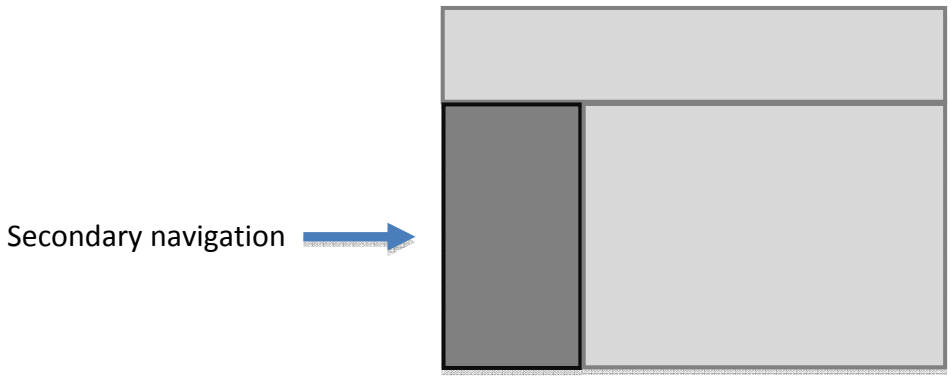
Creating good navigation is one of the most important tasks a web designer or administrator can do. If your users do not know how to find your content then the most resourceful or beautiful website will be rather ineffective. Keep it visible.

Think as the user. Imagine yourself wanting to find information. What makes sense to you? What would help you find information more easily and quickly?

Consider for a moment that you have a page containing a news article. Would it not be useful if you had access to cross-referenced links at the bottom of the page?

[more to add / cite visual examples …]

In addition, keep in mind people's reading habits. For English language based websites text is read left to right. Therefore it makes sense for secondary navigation to sit on the left in a 2 or 3 column layout.



Some suggestions:

- Let your users know where they are. Consider using Breadcrumb navigation:

  Home > About us

- Be consistent in your navigation
  In most cases you may be using a Content Management System, but it doesn't hurt to remind you to be consistent in how you organize your links such as:

  Home | *About us* | *Events* | *Contact us*

  and then on another page:

  Home | *Contact us* | *About us* | *Events*

- Organize your content within reach (Bear in mind the 3-click rule[1])
  Generally, if you can reach your content within a few clicks then you have the beginnings of a useable website. Nothing pleases a user than being able to access the content they want quickly.

- Consider the type of navigation for your content: Hierarchical, Global or Local
  With content rich websites, the structure will most likely be hierarchical, however there may be certain pages of content with global navigation links may be used such as: Homepage, About us, Sitemap and Contact us.
  Local navigations works well with FAQ (Frequent Asked Questions) type content, which link from within the same document and allow users to quickly get to the content.

- Try to anticipate how a user who has never seen your website will view the information
- Bear in mind that not everyone would enter the website through the homepage. Make sure that whatever page you start from – your user can find his/her way easily.
- Ensure your primary navigation links stand out. Use different styles or even images (sparingly).
- For larger sites, is there a search tool? (e.g. Allow searching of project the website?)

Links and labelling

Be obvious and be direct. Label your links with common terminology that is understood in the IW network of projects. Use consistent naming conventions and keep them short, descriptive

[1] ***The 3-click rule***
A general rule of thumb for website usability recommends requiring no more than three clicks to get to any level of information in your site

and intuitive. Colour can be applied to your links, but don't go crazy. Again, keep things consistent across your site and bear in mind certain users such as those who are colour-impaired. Small things like consistently using underlines and contrasting colours for links will help them and normal users what are links and what are not.

Some suggestions:

- Give your links meaningful titles and context.
  "Click here" vs "Please visit our activity pages and workshop pages"
- In some cases links can have the HTML attribute "title" added which the W3C describes the title attribute that "clearly and accurately describes the target of the link"

Discovery and filenames

One of the most useful things you can do to improve your website is to have user-friendly URLs. Aside from making your content easier to view from a URL perspective and easier to type in, it also has a couple of good side effects.

But what makes a URL user-friendly?
Some of the characteristics are:

- Short
- Lowercase
- Descriptive
- Conventional
- Plain language.

Define short?
Short and simple is the key or rather concise.
Instead of:

example.com/research_documents/monitoring_and_evaluation/

Use:

example.com/docs/monitoring_eval/

Define lowercase?
Lowercase has a few benefits and actually related to convention.
Lowercase URLs are:

- Easier to type
- Easier to explain over conversation than have to utter "capital R and then capital E…"
- And easier to remember.

Define descriptive?
Descriptive URLs are much easier to remember, and if followed by convention – you might even able to guess the URL if you can't remember exactly.

For example: example.com/contactus/kenya/

Define conventional?
This refers to a consistency in URL naming. /docs/ always refers to documents and /contactus/ always refers to "contact us". Follow other website conventions, the chances are if you see it being used often enough you can be sure that most web users will be familiar with the the naming convention too. i.e. /faq/

Again, it's easier to remember.

Define plain language?
Keep away from technical jargon or strange abbreviations your audience will be unaware of. Always assume the lowest common denominator when naming your folders and files.

Be certain that your web users will know what "example.com/docs/mne/ops/" means.

Perhaps this would be easier "example.com/docs/monitoring/performance/"

Is there a tool to help make my entire site URLs user-friendly?
To use an example, the Plone CMS actually does the hard work for you taking away some of the file naming hassles you would normally have to do by hand. Built-in in the CMS is the support for user-friendly URLs. You can name your particular webpage as "John Doe Biography" under your "About us" section and you might expect the following to happen:

www.mysite.com/about/John Doe Biography.html

The Plone CMS will change your URL to the following:

www.mysite.com/about/john-doe-biography/

[more to add…
TODO:
- Deadlinks (404 pages)
- 301 redirects for moved content

]

5. Design & Layout

[more to add…]

6. Content

[more to add…]

7. Suggestions

Things to keep in mind

[more to add…]

Your web checklist

[more to add…]

What tool should I use?

[more to add…]

Optimize you website!

[more to add…]

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

[more to add…]

8. References

[more to add…]

9. Index

IW:LEARN WEB STYLE GUIDE

I. Introduction
- A. Purpose of the Guide
- B. Benefits
- C. Know your Audience
- D. Use of Check Lists
- E. How to use this guide

II. Accessibility (use of the website by handicapped - mainly standards)

II. Navigation (most important issue to us)
- A. User-centered Design
- B. Free standing pages
- C. Web page requirements
- D. Links & labeling
- E. Discovery and file names

III. Site Design
- A. Organizing information
- B. Site structure
- C. Site design themes
- D. Site elements

IV. Layout and Graphics
- A. Page Layout
  - 1.Visual hierarchy
  - 2.Consistency
  - 3.Page dimensions
  - 4.Page length
  - 5.Design grids
  - 6.Page headers and footers
  - 7.General design considerations

- B.Typography
  - 1.Characteristics of type
  - 2.Font and Point size
  - 3.Display type vs. Body text
  - 4.Alignment and spacing
  - 5.Legibility
  - 6.Type graphics

- C. Web Graphics
  1. Characteristics of web graphics
  2. Graphic file formats
  3. Image sizes

D. IW:LEARN, GEF, and other organization logos
E. Content file types
F. User Guidance
    1. HELP
    2. Error messages
    3. Success messages

V. Content
A. Editorial Style
    1. Audience
    2. Writing style for online documents
    3. Titles and subtitles
    4. Text formatting
    5. Use of Links
B. Multimedia
    1. Consider the user
    2. Design and multimedia elements
    3. Audio elements
    4. Slide shows
    5. Photographs and Gooding
    6. Photo galleries
    7. Video

VI. Metadata

VII. Other features of Web Sites
A. Electronic libraries
B. Google Maps and Google Earth
C. Real Simple Syndication (RSS)
D. Blogs
E. E-mail lists and their management

VIII. Guideline checklists

IX. References

X. Index