

How to Use the Guidelines

Successful use of the *Guidelines* depends on how they are disseminated and used within an organization. Simply providing the *Guidelines* to designers and managers may not be enough to spur the adoption and use of these guidelines.

The *Guidelines* offer benefits to four key audiences:

- **Designers**

The *Guidelines* provide a clear sense of the range of issues that designers—especially those new to the field—need to consider when planning and designing a Web site. Applying the *Guidelines* will help to reduce the negative impacts of ‘opinion-driven’ design, and referring to evidence-based guidance can reduce the clashes resulting from differences of opinion between design team members.

- **Usability Specialists**

The *Guidelines* will help usability specialists evaluate the designs of Web sites. For example, usability specialists can use the *Guidelines* as a checklist to aid them during their review of Web sites. They also can create customized checklists that focus on the ‘Relative Importance’ and ‘Strength of Evidence’ scales associated with each guideline. For example, a usability specialist can create a checklist that only focuses on the top 25 most important issues related to the success of a Web site.

- **Managers**

The *Guidelines* will provide managers with a good overview and deep understanding of the wide range of usability and Web design issues that designers may encounter when creating Web sites. The *Guidelines* also provide managers with a ‘standard of usability’ for their designers. Managers can request that designers follow relevant portions of the *Guidelines* and can use the *Guidelines* to set priorities. For example, during timeframes that require rapid design, managers can identify guidelines deemed most important to the success of a Web site—as defined by the ‘Relative Importance’ score associated with each guideline—and require designers to focus on implementing those selected guidelines.

- **Researchers**

Researchers involved in evaluating Web design and Web process issues can use this set of *Guidelines* to determine where new research is needed. Researchers can use the sources of evidence provided for each guideline to assess the research that has been

conducted, and to determine the need for additional research to increase the validity of the previous findings, or to challenge these findings. Perhaps more importantly, researchers also can use the *Guidelines* and their sources to formulate new and important research questions.

Options for Implementing the *Guidelines*

There are a variety of ways to use the *Guidelines* in Web site development efforts. Users can read the book from beginning to end to become familiar with all of the guidelines. The book also can be used as a reference to answer specific Web site design questions. The *Guidelines* can be customized to fit most organizations' needs. The customization process can be approached in several ways:

- Encourage key stakeholders and/or decision makers to review the full set of guidelines and identify key guidelines that meet their Web design needs. For example, an organization may be developing portal Web sites that focus exclusively on linking to other Web sites (as opposed to linking to content within its own Web site). Therefore, it may focus more on selecting guidelines from the 'designing links' and 'navigation' chapters and less from the content-related chapters.
- Selected guidelines can be merged with existing standards and guidelines currently used within an organization. This may reduce the number of documents or online tools that designers must reference, and improve the adoption and use of existing standards and the *Guidelines*.
- The 'Relative Importance' and 'Strength of Evidence' scales can be used to prioritize which guidelines to implement. For example, on page 205 of this book, the guidelines are listed in order of relative importance. Using this list, designers can focus on implementing the 25 or 50 most important guidelines. In turn, the 'Strength of Evidence' ratings on page 210 can be used to determine the guidelines in which a designer can place the greatest confidence. Conversely, the guidelines with the lowest 'Strength of Evidence' ratings could indicate where more time should be devoted during usability testing. To help readers customize these guidelines to meet their organization's needs, an electronic copy of the *Guidelines* is posted at <http://usability.gov/>.
- Finally, Ben Shneiderman, Ph.D., suggests four ways to enhance the application of the *Guidelines*: education, enforcement, exemption, and enhancement. Please read his foreword to consider other ways to successfully implement the *Guidelines*.

Considerations Before Using the Guidelines

The guidelines are intended to improve the design and usability of information-based Web sites, but also can be applied across the wide spectrum of Web sites. When using the guidelines, it is helpful to remember that:

- Within each chapter of this book, the guidelines are ordered according to their 'Relative Importance' ratings. That is, the most important guidelines are toward the beginning of a chapter and the less important ones are toward the end.
- Readers may have a tendency to think that guidelines with one or two bullets on the 'Relative Importance' scale are not important. However, it is crucial to note that all guidelines in this book were rated as at least 'somewhat important' by the review team, otherwise they would not have been selected for inclusion in the book. Therefore, a guideline with one or two bullets is still important, just relatively less so than a guideline with four or five bullets.
- The guidelines may not be applicable to all audiences and contexts. For example, they may not apply to Web sites used by audiences with low literacy skills that have special terminology and layout needs. In general, these guidelines apply to English language Web sites designed for adults who are between 18 and 75 years of age.
- The guidelines may not adequately consider the experience of the designer. For example, a designer may have specialized knowledge about designing for a particular audience or context. These guidelines are adaptable and are not fixed rules.
- The guidelines may not reflect all evidence from all disciplines related to Web design and usability. Considerable effort has been made to include research from a variety of fields including human factors, cognitive psychology, computer science, usability, and technical communication. However, other disciplines may have valuable research that is not reflected in the guidelines.
- Some 'Strength of Evidence' ratings are low because there is a lack of research for that particular issue. The 'Strength of Evidence' scale used to rate each guideline was designed to put a high value on research-based evidence, but also to acknowledge experience-based evidence including expert opinions. Low 'Strength of Evidence' ratings should encourage the research of issues that are not currently investigated.