

How to design for usability

Good web usability is defined as: easy to use, quick to learn, and providing an overall satisfying experience. A well-designed, usable site aims to enhance the user experience by elevating perceived efficiency, elegance, and clarity to a website.

Usability is a combination of factors including design, information architecture, accessibility, and support across various devices. Usability.gov (usability.gov/basics/index.html) provides a list of these important factors:

- *Ease of learning* How fast can a user who has never seen the user interface before learn it sufficiently well to accomplish basic tasks?
- *Efficiency of use* Once an experienced user has learned to use the system, how fast can he or she accomplish tasks?
- *Memorability* If a user has used the system before, can he or she remember enough to use it effectively the next time or does the user have to start over again learning everything?
- *Error frequency and severity* How often do users make errors while using the system, how serious are these errors, and how do users recover from these errors?
- *Subjective satisfaction* How much does the user like using the system?

Compare the two Coast Middle School examples shown in **Figure 1**. The before and after screenshots demonstrate the difference between poor web usability, and a subsequent site redesign that results in much-improved user experience.

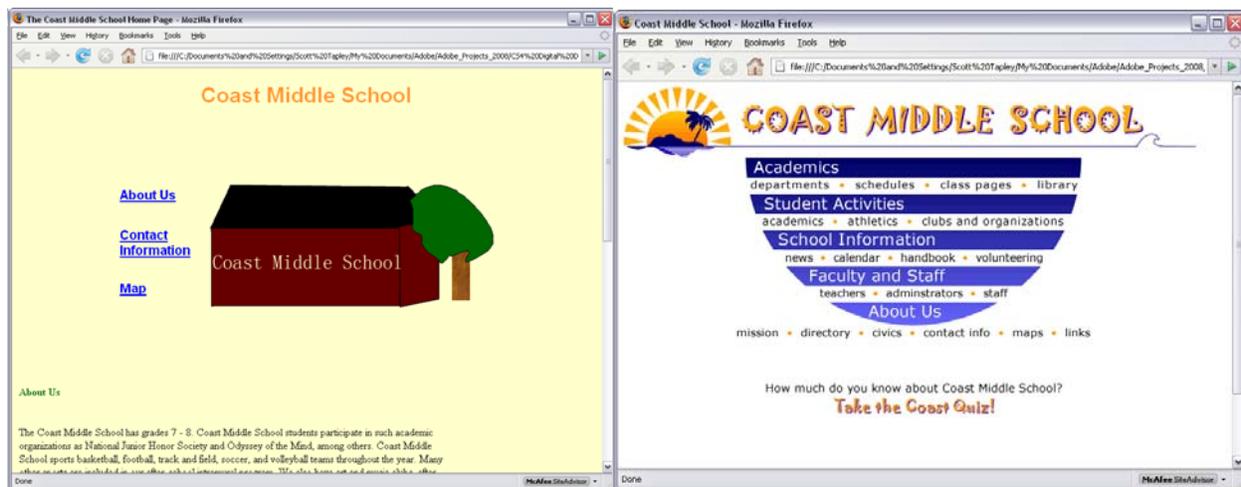


Figure 1 Examples poor web usability (left) and improved web usability (right)

Consider the following as you plan the content and navigation of your website project.

Content

How you organize content on a page highlights important features and elements of your site. Important elements might be higher in the page, larger in size, or in stronger colors. Include rough descriptions of navigation, copy layout, graphic allocation, key headers, and other elements that appear on a screen. Identifying common structures between pages helps visitors understand they are in the same site as they navigate from page to page.

- Will your page banner be on each page? If yes, is it in the same place? Is it the same size?
- What font will you use for titles or headings on your content pages?
- What color will you use for titles or headings on your content pages?

- What font will you use for descriptions on your content pages?
- What color will you use for descriptions?

Navigation

For visitors of your website to understand the content, you must provide clear navigation. Visitors need to know where they are in a site, where they need to go, and how to get back to where they came from. Having a consistent layout grid helps orient visitors and keeps them from feeling lost. Using consistent buttons, links, and graphics on each page maintains a sense of place. As visitors move from page to page, provide familiar visual cues and navigational aids.

- Where will you place the navigation bar on the page?
- What content will be on the navigation bar?
- Will the navigation bar be on every page?
- How will your navigation bar help visitors know which page they are on?

Resources

Get more information about web usability best practices from these resources:

- usability.gov is the primary government source for information on usability and user-centered design.
- www.useit.com website for leading web usability consultant, Jakob Nielsen.