



National Technology Assistance Project

Legal Aid Society of Orange County

Technology Assistance for the Poverty Law Community

Gabrielle Hammond, Project Director

ph: 310-319-2084 • fax: 310-531-7357

Mindy Cherng, Training Coordinator

ph: 714-571-5268 • fax: 714-571-5270

Usability and Literacy Issues in Website Content Development

Mindy Cherng, **National Technology Assistance Project**

“If you build it, they will come.” While most web developers follow this mantra when designing websites, a more important question to gauge success is: *“Will they come back?”*

Building a website and designing the navigational back-end is only a small piece of the tremendous amount of work that goes into a successful, finished product. This article addresses the second stage of website development – ensuring content on the site is usable. One of the most important factors in attracting users and encouraging their return to a website is to make the content understandable and easy to use.

1) Defining the User:

There are several key issues that need to be identified in order to make content as relevant as possible for the intended audience. First and foremost, content must be relevant to its audience. A successful site will – in the planning stages -- identify the target user. Is the website going to be used by legal service advocates and/or pro bono volunteers? Or is the target user the broader public audience made up of potential clients? Identifying the user allows the developer to determine the possible problems with site usability and literacy that a user might encounter with the navigation and understanding of the website content.

2) Usability Issues in Site Navigation:

Secondly, websites should be designed ultimately with the end user’s desires in mind. Remember that users go to a website searching for specific information. That knowledge should influence the final website product in terms of the design and navigation. In the process of assessing the design and development of a website, the target “users” should be defined, and their level of expertise with technology (computer use) and their reason for visiting a website should be determined and incorporated in the development process.

The user's ability to navigate the website and retrieve information should be considered as it relates to the following issues:

- Users' familiarity with using a computer.
- The ease of learning the navigation of the website
- The overall design of a website
- The layout of the content

When designing websites, there are some useful guidelines to follow in order to improve the navigation of content. (The following contain highlights taken from the article *Top 10 Usability Recommendations for Statewide Websites* by Susan Feinberg and Lisa Colpoys.)

- Chunk larger content into smaller pieces to minimize scrolling. Use subheadings and a table of contents. Especially pertinent for public websites.
- Use a consistent layout throughout the sublevel pages for all categories.
- If the website has search capabilities, make the search engine robust and text based and not query based.
- Provide users with tips on how to change their search to get results rather than just displaying a "no results" message.
- For advocate websites, use a search engine interface that resembles a familiar program, either Lexis Nexis or Westlaw.
- When users are going to an offsite website, make the new website pop up in a new window and alert users when they are leaving the website and include instructions on how to return to the original website.
- Make the homepage navigation simple and display each sublevel area with a description.

3) Literacy Level of Users:

According to [Transcend Translations](http://www.transcend.net) (www.transcend.net), the average native English-speaking American reads at the 5th grade level. About 50 % of Americans are unable to read at the 8th grade level and 20 % are functionally illiterate – which means that they read below the 4th grade level. Prior to posting content on the website, it is important to determine the true level of literacy of your client users. Therefore, it is important to write at an appropriate grade level. The grade level of the content can be determined from the standard readability tools available in Microsoft Word and Corel WordPerfect. There are over 200 readability instruments that are used to gage readability. "The research shows that there is virtually not a significant difference. [Using the Word or WordPerfect tools] allows for collaboration between [content creators and editors] because it is so widely available," suggested Maria Mindlin, CEO of Transcend Translations. Posting legal content must strike a balance between exact legal accuracy and the content's ability to be understood. Before posting client side information, spend some time editing the legal content so that the material can be fully comprehended by the user. Again, if the content is perfectly accurate but unapproachable by the audience, it remains inaccessible.

Some important rules for readability are: (The following is a synopsis taken from the article *Strategies for Maintaining a Readable Website while Relying on Outside Sources for Content* by Susan J. Sokol.)

- Short words, short sentences, short paragraphs, and short titles in writing content
- Make formatting changes to highlight important points: Adding bullets, heading, making the font larger or varying the font size, adding bold and underline, and breaking up paragraphs
- Develop a written guide which contains the basic readability standards for the original content creators (i.e., 5th grade reading level, short sentences)
 - In the guide, include specific rule, with details and exceptions.
- Be flexible in the use of the guide and be will to accept that certain areas of law might be written at a higher reading level.
- Post materials in variety of formats and styles (i.e. basic fact sheet and a more detailed booklet on same topic).
- Effective titling and use of summaries when describing content

4) Useful Resources

Finally, do not try to reinvent the wheel. In addition to the tips and suggestions of the articles that have been highlighted thus far, there is an abundance of resources available on the web. Kathleen Caldwell, in *Low Literacy Resources*, suggest the following sites:

- Plain English Network: Writing User-Friendly Documents
<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/handbook/index.htm>
- Transcend Readability Tutorial
<http://www.transcend.net/low-lit/index.htm>
- Jacob Neilson's website <http://www.useit.com> Author of **Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity**.