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# 100 Do's and Don'ts in Web Design

*Styleguide by SpiderPro*

*version 1.1*

*free ebooks by spiderpro*



# General information

This styleguide is available at SpiderPro in the following versions:

- **Online HTML** <http://www.spiderpro.com/pr/prstgm001.html>
- **PDF** <http://www.spiderpro.com/ebooks/styleguide.pdf>
- **Zipped PDF** <http://www.spiderpro.com/ebooks/styleguide.zip>

The *100 Do's and don'ts in Web Design Styleguide* is free; just like all other information at SpiderPro.

You're allowed to distribute this ebook as long as you leave the original pdf-file intact and you don't charge anything for it.

I hope you'll find this styleguide useful

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# Content

## Do know your audience

It's important to know your audience.  
If you write for a site that sells toys you'll use other words, colors, images etc. compared to a site for online banking.  
Write and design with your visitors in mind. Don't get tempted to write for yourself.

## Do write about the subject

Write about the subject.  
Saying: *This page is about breeding goldfish* talks about the page.  
Instead, start right away with the subject. *Breeding goldfish is a popular hobby....*

## Do use short sentences

Use short sentences.  
The World Wide Web is fast. Your visitors want to get your info in a snap. So read and reread your text. Then cut out as many unnecessary words as possible.

## Do use correct spelling

OK, this one will turn against me....  
Use correct English or whatever language your site is written in. As a standard routine use a spelling checker but don't rely completely on it. Human proof reading is necessary.  
This can be difficult - especially if you're not native speaking English like your Dutch speaking author of this eBook.

## Don't use meaningless words

Do you have a cool site with hot subjects?  
Or a hot site with cool subjects?  
On some hype-sensitive sites these kind of words might be useful but on most sites you'd better refrain from meaningless words.

## Don't use jargon

Avoid jargon.  
That goes for Internet jargon but also for jargon for any other subject.  
Only if your site is focused on a selective group of specialists jargon might make sense.

## Don't write technical

Don't write technical. Your visitors don't care how you created your site and that you prefer Perl over TCL/TK (or the other way around).  
Instead write about your subject.

## Do use the first screen

Be sure to put important text on the first part of your page, the part that will show up first on a screen.

## Do present the issues right away

Your visitor wants to know immediately what she can find on your site. Keep that in mind when designing your site.  
Present the important issue(s) of your site on the first page.

## Do use a descriptive title

The text for the tag <TITLE> should be descriptive.  
The title shows up in the results of search engines. A descriptive title makes clear what people can expect on your site.  
The title is also shown in the history list of browsers.

## Do use small pages

The World Wide Web is not a book. People don't read it sequentially. They want to select a small piece of info and decide what info they want to read next.  
So you should provide small pages. Cut long pages in pieces and connect them through hyperlinks.

## Don't split topics

Try to write one topic at one page.  
If your page gets too large, try to rewrite the text in two minor topics. Avoid using pages that force people to read sequential. In that situation the links only interrupt the process of reading.

## Do use implicit text for your links

Phrases like *Click here* or *Check this link* distract from the content and are to be avoided.

Try to write your text in such a way that a link is a natural part of the sentence. Instead of

SpiderPro is perfect reading on a rainy afternoon  
Click here to visit it

try to write something like

On a rainy afternoon SpiderPro is perfect reading.

## Do comment on your links

Add value to your links by annotating them.  
You visited the linked site otherwise you wouldn't publish the link in the first place. Right? Share your knowledge and add a description.

## Do update your pages

Be sure to check your pages on a regular base and to update them if necessary.

## Do show date of update

You update your pages on a regular basis. Don't you?  
Make clear to your visitors how recent or (out-)dated your information is. Provide the date of the last update. And don't forget to change the date if you change a page...

## Do ask for feedback

You can learn from your visitors.  
Ask for their feedback and give them an e-mail address to reach you.

## Don't show any page under construction

Don't publish a page that's under construction.  
People will hate you if you do.  
If the page isn't finished, it's not ready to be published.  
In a sense most pages are always under construction because they are updated (more or less) frequently.

# Navigation

## Do use explicit addressing

Navigation should be clear. Links like **Back**, **Next**, **Previous**, or clickable images of arrows, do point in an unclear direction. What is 'Back'. The page your visitor came from? The preceding page in your own website? Make navigation clear by supplying links like **Chapter 12. The history of beekeeping**.

## Do check your links

OK, it's a cliché. But anyone who surfs the web will agree. Check your links frequently. Don't just check them to avoid 404 errors. You might find that an external link still works but that the content behind it has changed.

## Don't change links

Figure out a good addressing scheme and stick to it. People will create links to your site. Be sure not to break these links.

## Do always supply textual links

Supply textual links. Using only clickable images or image maps makes your site unusable for anybody that disables images.

## Do supply a link to home

In the rare case people get lost in your site, a link to home comes in handy. Supply such a link on each page.



## Do use navigational aids at the top and the bottom

Supply navigational aids at the top and the bottom of your page. If you do, people probably won't need to scroll to navigate.

## Do use a table of contents

Do use a table of contents, preferably as a menu. Without it your visitors will get lost.

## Do create a “what's new” page

Returning visitors are interested in the latest additions on your site.

Create a **What's new** page to supply that info.

## Do use short routes

Supply short routes to information. Avoid too many menus and submenus, instead use larger menus with more items. People will appreciate it getting to the desired info quickly.

## Do keep menu items related

Menu items should be related, don't mix them randomly. Try to share comparable items in one menu. You can use a larger menu for more itemgroups if you separate these groups in a clear way.

## Don't link to irrelevant pages

Use only hyperlinks within the context of your page. People will feel lost if you try to use too many links.

## Don't repeat links too often

You shouldn't repeat links in the text. I.e. you have a page about beekeeping and want to link it to a page that describes different kinds of honey. Then don't link every occurrence of the word honey.

The only exception are links in a menu. You can repeat menulinks, i.e. on the top and on the bottom of your page.

## Don't use ambivalent navigation

Navigation must be clear. Unless you run some kind of experimental site be sure to avoid experimental buttons that make visitors have to guess what they mean.

## Don't create dead end pages

A dead end page is a page that is linked to by other pages but itself has no links.

A visitor gets trapped in a dead end page and needs his backbutton to get away.

Don't use dead end pages.

## Don't make prisoners

You can imprison your visitors. I.e. by redirecting them to a page without taskbars and icons.

But your prisoner will escape eventually and never return.

## Don't frame other sites

You can load pages from other sites within a frame of your own site.

Don't!

It might ruin the look and feel of the framed site. And it gives the wrong idea that the framed site is a part of your own site.

Load all pages in a full page.

# Design

## Do use a consistent look and feel

Your site should stand out as a whole. Use the same look and feel for all the pages at your site. This way your visitors have a sense of recognition when they visit various pages. Using stylesheets makes it much easier to maintain the look and feel of numerous pages.

## Do use recurring visual elements

Repeat visual elements (images, colors, fonts etc.) on several pages. This will add to a consistent look and feel.

## Don't use dark backgrounds

Dark backgrounds tend to make text less readable. So avoid dark colors or dark background images. If you do need them, use a nonserif font for the text (like Arial, Universe, Helvetica) and be sure to not to use a small font size.

## Don't cram your pages

A page with text pushed aside against the border of a table - or an image - looks awful. Don't cram your pages, use colspan and borderspan for tables and vspan and hspan for applets and images.

## Don't push your table out of the screen

Tables are very flexible. They're able to get almost anything more or less visible on a screen.

But by putting large elements in a table cell you might force the cells to become too large. Thus making horizontal scrolling necessary.

So limit the number and size of pictures, long words (e.g. long links), predefined text etc.

## Don't overuse frames

Use only a limited number of frames. Always check if the screen doesn't get crammed if a low resolution screen is used.

## Do vertical align the content of table cells

You do you use table cells to get your info on the right position? Then be sure to align the content vertically.

## Don't mix horizontal aligning

Mixing centered text and text that's left aligned makes a mess of your page.

If you want to center text do it consistently.

Exceptions are centering text of headers or centered text placed in a border.

# Bandwidth

## Do use few colors in your GIF's

Minimize the number of colors in your GIF images. GIF's can be stored with a maximum of 256 colors. Minimizing the number of colors to 16, 8 or even 2 dramatically reduces the size of the GIF-file and therefore improves performance. Choose as few colors as possible without ruining the image. You might test both reducing colors with error correction or by selecting the nearest color.

## Do use high compression in JPEG

Improve the performance of your site by reducing the size of your JPEG-images. JPEG can be saved with different compression-percentages. A high compression results in a smaller file size but also in a less perfect image. Test several compressions for each image you want to use. For different images the acceptable compressions will differ.

## Do reserve space for images

Generally text arrives more quickly than an image. By reserving space for an image the browser is able to render the text. A visitor can start reading right away. Reserving space is done by defining the attributes vsize and hsize in the tag <IMG>

## Do provide thumbnails for large images

In some cases you do need large pictures that take a while to load. I.e. if you're running a website on modern art. In such a case do provide small copies of the original images (thumbnails) that link to the original ones.

## Do reuse images

Once images are loaded they are stored in cache. If you use the same image in several webpages the image will be loaded the second time in a breeze. It is necessary to have the image in the same location. Also be sure to use exactly the same filename. Even if a browser can handle differences in uppercase and lowercase, your browsercache can not.

## Don't reference images from other sites

If you use images from another site (i.e. an image archive ) do copy them to your own site. Looking up other servers to get the images would introduce overhead and an extended load-time.

## Do provide size information

If you use large images, videos etc., give an indication of the size before the actual transfer begins.

## Don't use large textual images

Avoid creating images of large pieces of text. It gives you more possibilities but it costs valuable bandwidth. If you do need textual images be sure to reduce the number of colors.

## Don't use wordprocessors

Don't use wordprocessors to write HTML. They really mess it up. It's not uncommon for a site to double or triple in size because tags are added unnecessarily by a wordprocessor.

# Presenting Text

## Don't use blink

The tag **<BLINK>** should never have been introduced to HTML. Blinking text is irritating, it offends your readers. Don't use it.

## Don't use columns for text

You can show your text in 2 or more columns. This can be implemented with tables or with the not official tag **<MULTICOL>**. The result is newspaper-column like page. But columns have a large drawback on a screen. It takes more up-and-down scrolling to read the text, especially if it's a large page. Avoid using columns this way.

## Don't use small serif letters

Serif letters are developed for printing. They don't look good on a computer screen. At least not in smaller fonts. You should avoid these letters, especially if the serif is tiny, like Times.

## Don't use all capitals

DO NOT USE ALL CAPITALS. It takes more time to read text that consists of only capitals. Besides, using all capitals is the online equivalent of shouting.

## Don't overuse bold text

Bold text is meant to give some focus to a part of your text. Don't put whole paragraphs in bold. It has the same effect as shouting. Keep focus - and bold text - short and functional.

## Don't overuse italics

Text in italic is hard to read on a screen. The resolution of a screen just isn't capable to present italics without distorting them slightly. This is even more noticeable if you use a small font. So don't use italics for larger portions of your text.

## Don't use small fonts

Don't use small fonts (font size smaller than 4). Small letters are hard to read and that's even worse on a computer screen.

## Don't use too many fonts

Using all kinds of fonts on one page - or in one site - is a very bad typographical practice. Unless you run an online font-archive.

## Do use punctuation

Present information surveyable. Present it in small chunks. Use headings to separate them. Use lists to avoid long textual summing ups.

## Don't hide your links

The default color settings of links is pretty standard. You can change link colors. But if you do you'll have to be sure that links can be recognized. Don't let those fancy colors hide your links.



## Do use all lowercase or all uppercase links

Many browsers discriminate between differences in case. Even if your server doesn't, don't rely on it. If you'll need to move to another server you will be happy if all your links still function. The easiest way to accomplish this is to use links consequently all lowercase or all uppercase.

## Do separate adjacent textual links

If you place textual links horizontally be sure to separate them clearly. With spaces, a vertical line, bracket, whatever. The point is that it must be clear to a visitor where a link starts and where it ends.

## Do limit the size of predefined text

Predefined text (between the tags `<PRE>` and `</PRE>`) cannot be wrapped. If you use it be sure to limit the size, especially the width. Otherwise your visitors might need to scroll horizontally to read the text.

## Do limit the width of text

Reading full width text on a full screen browser is quite terrible. The lines of text get too long; giving you a headache reading them. Limit the width of text-lines using tables, blockquotes etc.

## Do use textual dates

Probably you do use dates. For instance to show the most recent update of your site.

But it's a **world wide** web.

Do keep in mind that 02-03-2000 will be the second of March or the third of February, depending on the country your visitor comes from.

If you use text for your month, like March 2, 2000 the date will be correctly interpreted.

## Do provide a visual e-mail address

The mailto: trick is great. Start the e-mail-application right from the webpage. But it only works if your visitor uses an integrated e-mail application. For all the others provide a readable e-mail-address.

# Images and colors

## Do use transparency

The presentation of images often improves by giving the images a transparent backgroundcolor. They'll better integrate visually with the background.

## Do use interlacing

Interlace larger GIF-images. The visitor will get a quick feedback while the image is still loading. For very small images - like bullets - interlacing makes no sense but in all other cases it does.

## Don't use too many images

Too many images slows down your site. Don't chase your visitors away; limit the number of images.

## Do make your graphics reproducible

If you create your own graphics make them reproducible. You might need another one of the same kind, so be sure to write down all the effects and the parameters you've used to create the graphics.

## Do break up images

If you use large images you can break them up in several parts. You can combine the parts in the webpage to form the original image. Doing so the image-parts can be downloaded parallel, thus reducing download time.

## Don't use PNG (yet)

PNG is a great format for graphics and will eventually replace GIF. But right now many browsers are in use that don't support PNG. For the time being stick to GIF and JPEG.

## Do combine backgroundimages and background-colors

Even if you do use a background-image, still provide a background-color. The background-color should approximately be the main color of the image.

If text has a color that contrasts with the background-image, it will still be readable before the background-image is loaded.

## Do use a browser safe palette

Use a browser safe palette for your colors. This will prevent colors from dithering on older monitors.

## Don't use too many colors

You have access to 16 million colors. Be selective - don't try to use them all. Too many colors distract from what you're trying to say.

## Don't override only one standard color

If you override a standard color, be sure to override them all. Your visitor has her own color settings. If you change i.e. only the fontcolor to darkblue, text might become unreadable on a dark background. So be sure also to change the backgroundcolor.

# Compatibility

## Do supply alt's for your images

Quite a few people disable the automatic load of pictures in their browser.

Don't blame them, some images take a lifetime to load.

By defining an alternative text with the attribute **alt** in the tag **<IMG>** you can take care of imageless browsers.

## Do use alt text for areas

Use the **alt** attribute to supply text for areas in an image map, thus providing an alternative for browsers that don't support images.

## Do use NOFRAMES

Not all browsers support frames. Define an alternative with the tag **<NOFRAMES>**

## Do use comments for JavaScript

If you use JavaScript, be sure to place the source between comments in such a way that browsers that don't support JavaScript won't show any garbage.

## Don't be selective with browsers

You believe I'd change my browser just to visit your site? Wake up! Saying *Best viewed with my favorite browser* only has the effect that you drive off people with other browsers.

Test your site with the favorites. It should be readable with all the important browsers.

## Do test Java applets with all browsers

Java is great, I really love it. But as soon as a page starts with *Applet loading*, I got this feeling it all ends up wrong. There are indeed far too many untested applets wrecking browsers and making sure a visitor will never come back again. Do check your Java applets with all popular browsers before using them.

## Do test with fewer screen colors

256 colors still are popular and even 16 colors are used. Test your site with these color settings. Admitted, with 16 colors everything looks ugly. But be sure everything remains readable.

## Do test with lowres

Test your pages with low resolution. If you don't use 640\*480 yourself, just make your browser-window smaller to get the same effect.

## Do validate

Validate your pages. This is the best way to find errors that won't show up in some browsers but might be the cause of trouble in other browsers.

## Don't rely on plugins

You can create astonishing effects with plugins like Flash and Shockwave. But don't rely on them. Many websurfers don't bother to install plugins. They won't be able to see the great effects you implemented. So offer an alternative or even better: check for plugins.

## Do check for browser version

If you want to use non-standard techniques (Netscape or Explorer-specific tags) do check the browser version on the client. And do provide an alternative for non compatible browsers.

## Do warn for important cookies

Some pages rely on cookies. And some people disable cookies in their browsers.

In many circumstances you just can't skip cookies. If so - supply a warning. Thus giving the visitor an opportunity to enable cookies.

## Do offer alternative views

You want to use the newest emerging technologies? Then consider supplying an alternative view for those that don't use the latest browsers.

# General

## Do close popup screens

Remove your litter.

If you want to use popup screens, be sure to close them when the visitor leaves.

## Do stop sounds

If you wanna use sounds, be sure to stop them when the visitor leaves.

## Don't try to mislead search engines

Trying to mislead search engines by repeating keywords will turn against you. Search engines recognize many of these attempts and will react on it by giving your site a lower ranking. Or by not placing it at all.

## Don't try to misleadingly attract visitors

By adding keywords that are specific to adult sites (like 'XXX') you might get some traffic. But those visitors will leave quickly - unless you do have an adult site, ofcourse.

## Do register your site

Register your site at searchengines and directories. This is still the most important way to attract traffic.



## Do read the stats

Use the statistics of your site. It's a good opportunity to check for errors like the dreaded 404's.

But statistics are also invaluable for marketing purposes. What are popular pages? Which countries do your visitors come from?

## Don't count hits

Hits are meaningless. A page with 5 images produces 6 hits. And visited 3 times it produces 18 hits. If you want a counter on your page, be sure to count the sessions: real visitors.

## Do put contact info on your pages

Give your visitors a way to get in touch with you. Their feedback is invaluable. Supply a e-mail address or a reply-form.

## Do beware of robots

Search engines use robots that scan all your directories. Be sure to provide a robots.txt file to make clear which directories and files should not be indexed.

# A concluding don't

## Don't take my word for it

Don't take my - or any other persons - word for it.

There's no such thing as a constitution of webdesign.

You might benefit by considering these do's and don'ts. But actually they're a personal view. And you just might disagree.

But do give these 100 do's and don'ts a serious thought. They might fit more often than you think

# About SpiderPro

This eBook is published by SpiderPro. SpiderPro is a website that presents information for professional webmasters.

Well, with professional I don't want to frighten anyone. If you just want to build a nice personal homepage you'll find lots of info at SpiderPro.

But you'll also find info that you can use only if you have access to a webserver.

Or if you know how to write programs.

With SpiderPro I hope to reach people that are strongly involved with web development. Maybe for a living, maybe just for the heck of it...

The URL of SpiderPro is  
<http://www.spiderpro.com/>

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## Disclaimer

The author of this ebook is Dutch, the use of English surely won't be perfect. If you find a more or less annoying mistake I'll be glad to receive a mail at: [corr@spiderpro.com](mailto:corr@spiderpro.com)

*Jan Kampherbeek, June 27, 2001*

## Release history

- 27 June, 2001 Initial release 1.0
- 4 Aug. 2001, Release 1.1, corrected several language errors. Thanks to all who responded, please keep sending your corrections.