

The **Plain English** Guide to

Getting an Effective Website

Clear Information **for Businesspeople**
Who Want a Website
that Works

2004 Edition

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Chapter 7 Excerpts:
Site-Wide Guidelines for Effective Pages

The Plain English Guide to Getting an Effective Website

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Get the Essentials into the No-Scroll Zone

Importance:	very high
Work Required:	low-med

High
HP ayoff

PRINCIPLE

Make sure that the no-scroll zone of each page holds these four things:

- a **summary** of what's on the page
- all the **key points** for the page
- the site's **navigation system** (see Chapter 5)
- your **company name and/or logo**

DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier, the *no-scroll zone* is the part of a web page that the user can see without scrolling. Usability studies show that:

1. some users **will not** scroll
2. many users will only scroll if the no-scroll zone gives them a clear idea of what's on the page

For these reasons, the no-scroll zone of each page must hold a full **summary** of what's on that page, plus **all the essential points** you want users to see even if they decide not to scroll.

Keep in mind that people can arrive at any page on your site from any place on the web. They need to be oriented quickly. For this reason, the no-scroll zone of every page in your site should also contain your complete **navigation system** (see Chapter 5 for details) and your **company name and/or logo**.

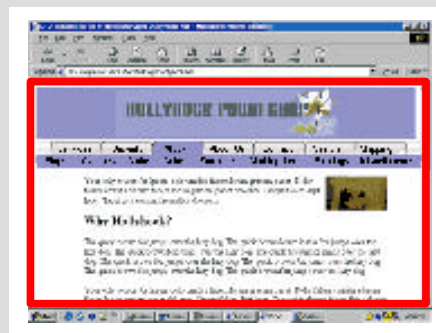
With the possible exception of the Home page, the logo and navigation elements should be in the same place on each page.

**For Designers:
The No-Scroll Zone is
Smaller Than You
May Think!**

Technical
Topic

As you design pages, always remember that the browser itself will take up some vertical space onscreen.

Practically speaking, if you're designing a page for 800 by 600 resolution, you can count on seeing only about **430 vertical pixels in the no-scroll area**.



The No-Scroll Zone is Smaller than the Full Screen Height

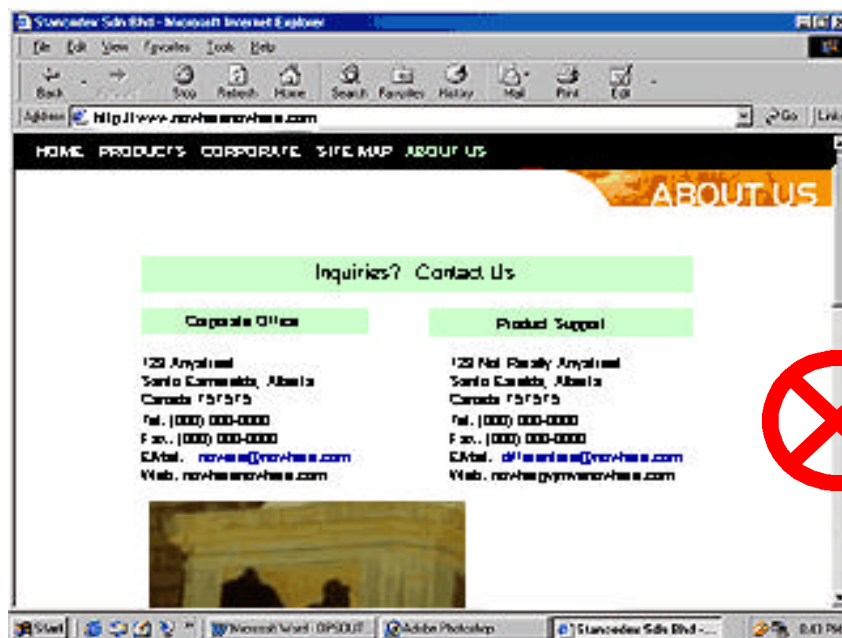
Here's an example of a page where the no-scroll zone holds all the essentials: navigation system, summary/overview, key points for the page, and company name/logo.



A Well-Designed No-Scroll Zone
<http://www.bennaco.com>

By contrast, this 'About Us' page is poorly designed. The **entire company profile is below the no-scroll zone**, so many users will miss the fact that it even exists.

A better approach would have been to create two side-by-side columns—one for the contact information and one for the profile. That way, both items would be visible in the no-scroll zone and the user would have a clearer idea of what was on the page.



Important Information Not Shown in the No-Scroll Zone

IMPLEMENTATION

Let your designer know that you want four key elements in the no-scroll zone of every page:

- an **overview** of what's on the page
- all the **key points** for the page
- the site's **navigation system** (see Chapter 4 for details)
- your **company name and/or logo**

Page design is dealt with in more detail in Chapter 9: *Getting the Most From Your Text*.

Content Should Bleed Out of the No-Scroll Zone

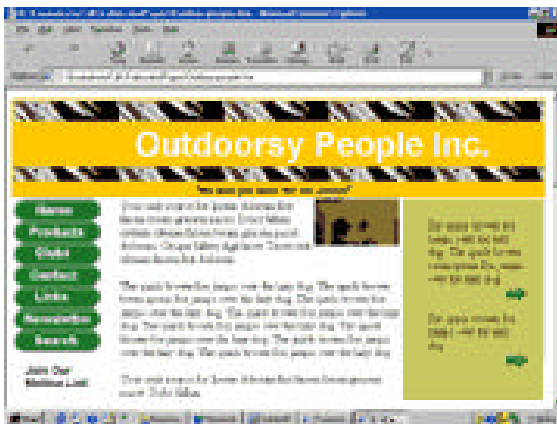
Importance:	low-med
Work Required:	low

PRINCIPLE

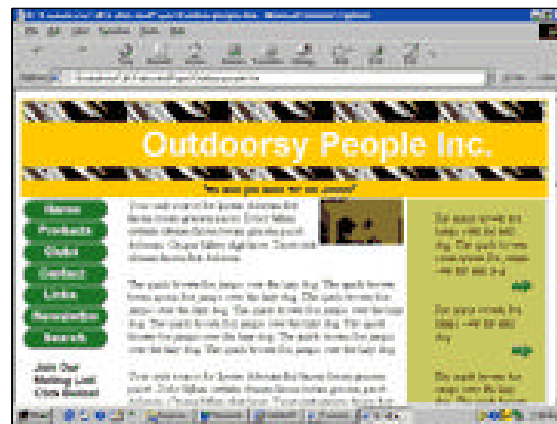
To give users a visual cue that more information is available offscreen, *bleed* your content off the bottom of the no-scroll zone.

DISCUSSION

The technique of running content off the visible page is called *bleeding*. Compare the two pages below. See how the one on the left is composed so that the visible content lies entirely within the no-scroll zone, while the one on the right bleeds its content off the bottom of the page?



Self-Contained No-Scroll Zone May Cause the User to Overlook the Rest of the Page



Bleeding Content off the Page Shows the User that the Page Continues out of Sight

If the information in the no-scroll zone is perfectly self-contained, users may erroneously think that they're seeing the entire page. Bleeding gives users **a strong visual cue that there's more information** below the no-scroll zone. (True, users can always look at the scroll bar, but the scroll bar is a relatively small and weak visual cue that some users just don't register. By contrast, bleeding content off the page provides a strong visual cue that there's more information below the no-scroll zone.)

IMPLEMENTATION

Most of your pages will probably bleed without any conscious effort on your designer's part. On the off chance that your designer is unaware of the benefits of bleeding, and is therefore planning to spend lots of time **avoiding** it (in the belief that a self-contained page looks better), you may want to mention the issue now.

Fine tuning page layouts to ensure bleeding is usually a simple matter of shifting things up or down a bit.

Minimize Real AND Perceived Download Times

Importance:	very high
Work Required:	low-med



PRINCIPLE

Design your pages to minimize both real and perceived download times.

DISCUSSION

Studies show that when a site is slow to download, users leave. If there isn't some substantial content (not ads) on the page within 8-10 seconds, users start leaving the site.

You cannot count on your users having fast internet connections. At present, **over half of all Internet connections are made at 56K or less.** To further complicate matters, studies show that **actual connection speeds are consistently lower than nominal (rated) connection speeds** for both narrow band (modem) and broadband connections. Thus, designing for rapid loading continues to be a top priority on the web.

The main way to minimize download time is to **minimize the number of graphics** (photos, banner ads, Flash animations, etc.) on the page. (Too much plain text is never the culprit in slow-loading pages.)

For Designers
File Size: How Big is Too Big?

Technical
Topic

There's some disagreement among experts as to the maximum effective file size for web pages.

Some recommend that each page's **total file size** (HTML code, plus graphics, external stylesheets, JavaScript, etc.) should not exceed 30K. Others recommend a maximum size of 40K.. 40K may be too generous an estimate—a 1999 study by Zona Research showed that **pages over 40K in size were abandoned by 30 percent of users** before the pages finished loading.

Remember that the above numbers are **maximum** recommended sizes. In practice, the smaller the better. Over half the web's users are still using connections that are 56K or slower.

IMPLEMENTATION

Chapter 1 gave some guidelines for selecting graphics. The following suggestions assume that you're working only with graphics that passed the inclusion tests of Chapter 1.

Specify The Dimensions of all Graphics

If you've ever seen text jump around on a web page while the images were loading, you know how hard it is to start reading the page until the load is completely finished. To eliminate this problem, your designer should put instructions in the page code to specify the height and width of every image used.

Doing so will stop the text from jumping around as the images load. Although this doesn't reduce actual download time, it puts the page into a readable state sooner, giving the user the impression of a faster download.

Your designer will know how to use WIDTH and HEIGHT code tags to specify image size.

Start Pages with Text, Not Images

Another way to reduce the perceived download time of a page is to design the page so that:

- text, not images, takes up most of the no-scroll zone
- the text loads first, before any images

While this won't reduce actual download times, it will give the user something to do while the images are loading—which may be why studies show that this approach reduces the perceived download time.

Group Your Product Graphics and Use Thumbnails

If you're using images to display your products, group the images into related categories and present them as thumbnails (small size images), with only a few graphics per page. Link each thumbnail to a separate page that holds a larger version of that image.

This technique lets you put a reasonable number of images on a page without making download times unreasonably long. See page 204 for more information on using thumbnails.

Prepare Graphics to Decrease Download Times

The way your graphic files are prepared can have a large effect on download times. This topic is dealt with extensively in Chapter 10, *Getting the Most From Your Graphics*.

Testing Download Times Accurately

To get an **accurate** measure of download time, your designer **MUST** do two things:

1. load the site over the Internet, **not** directly from a hard drive to the browser
2. clear the browser cache on the target computer before **EACH** test

Load The Site over the Internet

As they're designing, web designers usually test sites by loading them off their hard drives, rather than uploading the files to their server and downloading them over an Internet connection. At trade shows, designers frequently load sample sites directly off their own hard drives because no Internet connection is available.

Files stored on a hard drive will load much more quickly than files loaded over the Internet, because files loaded from disk bypass all the delays associated with the Internet.

To see how a site was loaded, look at the address in the browser. If the address is `http://www.etc`, the site was loaded off the Internet. If the address is something like `C:/etc` or `D:/etc`, the site was loaded off the computer's hard drive.

When sites are loaded off hard drives, the resulting download times are **ALWAYS** artificially fast.. A site that loads in 3-4 seconds off a hard drive may take 20 seconds or more to load over the Internet. Therefore, for a valid download speed test, the site **MUST** be loaded over the Internet.

Clear the Browser Cache Before EACH Test

If you've already loaded a site onto a test computer, then that computer's browser may have stored some of the files (in a place called the cache) so that they can be more quickly accessed the next time the page is loaded. This means that the next download test of that page on that computer will give an **artificially fast result**. For this reason, the cache must be cleared between each test. See your browser Help system for directions on clearing the cache.

If you take the above precautions when testing, you'll see how long your pages are **really** taking users to load.