

SDCS Web Publishing Guidelines

Plan It

Target Audience and Goals

Whether you decide to build your own site or to have one built for you, you will need to clarify your goals for the site.

- Who is your intended audience? Will your site serve staff, students, parents, a particular community, the public in general, or a combination?
- What is your intended purpose in communicating to that audience?
- What do you hope to accomplish with your site?

Gather & Organize Information

Gather existing content and determine what should be included on the site and how it might be modified to be more effective on the web. What additional content will need to be generated to meet the needs of your target audience and achieve your goals? You may wish to use the Website Planning Worksheet to help you gather and organize your Unit's information. (If you wish to have your site created by Web Services, you must complete this form.)

Determine Web Structure

Structure the website by organizing and categorizing information in a way that will make sense to your target audience. A common mistake is to organize information based on an organization's internal structure rather than by more intuitive factors, such as topic.

Keep important content at the top levels of the site and structure the site to minimize the number of clicks required to get to any piece of information.

Content Guidelines

Recommended Components

1. **Index**
List of jump links pointing to named anchor tags marking major page sections.
2. **Overview**
Concise list of the Unit's primary functions, explanation of the Unit's relevance to the intended audience, and brief historical context where appropriate.
3. **News & Events**
Unit-specific news, events or time-sensitive announcements.
4. **Programs/Services/Reference**
Include Information produced or managed by the unit, such as forms, manuals, etc.
5. **Meeting Schedule & Information**
6. **Frequently Asked Questions**
Include lists of "frequently asked questions" to provide quick answers for users. An effective FAQ can significantly reduce phone inquiries.
7. **Related Resources**
List sources of additional information, tools or services relevant to the Unit's purpose. Examples include websites, user groups, books, community programs, events, classes, etc.
8. **Contact Information**
Include general contact information--main phone and fax numbers, address and email--as well as key contacts for specific topics or issues.

9. Feedback Function

Provide a conspicuous means for users to provide feedback. This can be a form or just a link to the Unit Webmaster's email. Encourage users to report errors or make suggestions.

General

- Ensure content is relevant, accurate, concise, and timely.
- Since web users tend to skim more than they read, keep sentences and paragraphs short and use bullet points to quickly convey information wherever possible.
- Avoid using jargon and acronyms that may be unfamiliar to your audience.
- Always spell out names—at least the first time it's mentioned on each page—rather than assuming that everyone will be familiar with a particular acronym.

Design

- Keep presentation clean and consistent.
- Present the most important information first so it is immediately viewable without scrolling, regardless of resolution or monitor size.
- Black text on a white background offers the most contrast and is easiest to read.
- If not using the district style sheet, use a sans-serif font like Arial for main body text. Studies have shown it's easier to read on a monitor than serifed fonts.
- Avoid using ALL CAPS. It's extremely difficult to read, and can be interpreted by some as shouting.
- Don't use tiled backgrounds or background images; they make text hard to read.
- Users expect graphic "buttons" to do something when clicked. To avoid confusion, label buttons clearly and don't make an object look three-dimensional (like a button) if it isn't, in fact, a button.
- Users expect to see an organization's logo in the upper-left corner of the page. Most users further expect that clicking the logo will bring them to the site's home page. To avoid confusion, design to these conventions.
- Users expect links to appear as underlined text. To avoid confusion, never use underlining for anything other than hyperlinks.
- Make links an integral part of sentence structure rather than using the clumsy "click here" link.

Navigation

- Offer navigation within long pages to avoid the need for cumbersome scrolling.
- Include critical navigation items at the top or left side of the page. Non-critical items may appear in a footer.
- Always give the user a way out other than using the "back" button on his/her browser.
- If a site is complex, include a search engine and site map or table of contents to help people quickly find what they're looking for.
- Avoid opening new windows unless it's absolutely necessary. An exception is when linking to external sites. In this case, opening content in a new window helps users find your site again, regardless of any navigation limitations of the site being linked to.
- Use text labels to warn users of links to non-HTML files or when opening a new browser window.
- Don't create links to pages that have nothing viable to offer (e.g., "under construction" text). If a page is not ready for publishing, leave the link off completely.

Technical Guidelines

Be mindful that most users have a slower connection to the internet than we do through the district network. Many of the guidelines provided here are intended to help Unit Webmasters create pages that download quickly.

File size and format

- Keep file sizes as small as possible. With few exceptions, a page's total file size should be under 100KB. (Total file size is determined by adding the size of the html file along with the sizes of all graphic files called by the page's html.)
- As indicated in SDCS Web Policies & Standards, information intended for public consumption may not be posted in the form of Word or Excel files. These file formats are not appropriate for the web because they require users to have specific software installed. Files of this type can also be infected with viruses so many people will not open them even if the appropriate software is available. Although highly discouraged, these file types may be used if a) there is a compelling reason to maintain this format over standard web formats, and b) the information is intended for SDCS staff only.
- Avoid using Adobe Acrobat Reader (pdf) files.

Users get lost inside PDF files, which are typically big, linear text blobs that are optimized for print and unpleasant to read and navigate online. PDF is good for printing, but that's it. Don't use it for online presentation.

(Source: Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox, July 14, 2003. Read the full article at <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20030714.html>.)

Coding

- Avoid using frames; if you must use them, make sure they are used appropriately.
- Avoid reliance on plug-ins or 3rd-party software that must be downloaded to view content.
- Avoid using non-standard proprietary (browser-specific) features.
- Use relative rather than absolute links to pages on the same server.
- Always include image height and width parameters in the html image tag. Example: ``
- Do NOT resize images in the browser (i.e., use the image at actual size; if the image must be resized, use image editing software to do so).
- If rollovers are used, preload rollover images in the body tag.

Naming Files & Directories

On district servers, the default file name is *index.html*. This file will be displayed by default when the path to its parent directory is entered with or without the actual file name.

Unit Webmasters will be given access to directories necessary to carry out approved functions. Establishing structure within those directories is to the Unit Webmaster's discretion. However, Unit Webmasters are encouraged to consider implementing a structure that is meaningful and manageable for users as well as for the Webmaster.

- Organize content in a simple, clear directory structure.
- Keep similar items (such as images) together in one directory.
- Avoid excessively long URLs by keeping the number of nested directories to a minimum.
- Keep file and directory names short, simple and relevant to the content.
- Use the date format 'yymmdd' (e.g., 030925agenda.html) when naming files that will be archived online. This is relevant only when files of the same type are concurrently presented (e.g., agendas or minutes from past meetings) and/or when files contain information that reflects events that happened at a given point in time (i.e., this information will never be updated).
- Except in the archive-type scenarios described above, avoid broken links by following these guidelines:
 - Avoid using dates in filenames containing information that will be updated.
 - When updating information, keep the same file name by saving over the old information.

- Don't move or change a file's name once it has been posted and linked within a site.
- Renaming or moving files should be a last resort. If it is absolutely necessary, be sure to provide a "redirection" page in the original location. If possible, notify parties responsible for maintaining external sites that link to the old files.
- Although the district's current Windows servers are not case sensitive, it is a good idea to keep filenames in lowercase in the event that files need to be moved to non-Windows servers in the future.

Graphics Usage

The careful use of graphics can enhance a website, making it more interesting and visually appealing. However, every page element, including graphic elements, should have a purpose. Images should be clear, quick loading and relevant to the text.

Avoid the superfluous use of distracting graphics such as looping animations, scrolling headlines, blinking text, or Flash "splash" screens. If an element won't help reach your audience or achieve your goals for the site, don't use it. If in doubt, leave it out.

GIF/.gif

- Best format for line art and electronically drawn images (generally, anything that isn't a photograph).
- Keep file sizes small by using transparency only where necessary, turning off interlacing and dithering/diffusion options, and using as few colors as possible while maintaining acceptable appearance. 16 colors or less is usually sufficient and 32 is the maximum you are likely to ever need. If the image looks bad at 32 colors, consider saving it as a jpeg.
- Avoid images with horizontal gradients. Image quality is difficult to maintain at adequate compression levels.

JPEG/.jpg

- Best format for photographic images. JPEG compression will cause artifacts or image blurring. To compensate, use your image processing software's sharpen filter before and after resizing, then compress. Don't use the "progressive" option, if available.

Meta Tags

Include meaningful *content* and *keyword* meta tags to improve your site's visibility in search engine results.

Web Content Accessibility

To enable individuals with disabilities to access web content, Unit Webmasters are strongly encouraged to follow general principals of accessible web design. These principals are outlined in the *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines* developed by the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI).

The fourteen guidelines include:

1. Provide equivalent alternatives to auditory and visual content.
2. Don't rely on color alone.
3. Use markup and style sheets and do so properly.
4. Clarify natural language usage.
5. Create tables that transform gracefully.
6. Ensure that pages featuring new technologies transform gracefully.
7. Ensure user control of time-sensitive content changes.
8. Ensure direct accessibility of embedded user interfaces.

9. Design for device-independence.
10. Use interim solutions.
11. Use W3C technologies and guidelines.
12. Provide context and orientation information.
13. Provide clear navigation mechanisms.
14. Ensure that documents are clear and simple.

The complete document is available online at <http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/>. Detailed markup examples and explanations of how to implement the *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines* are available online at <http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10-TECHS/>. Additional resources, including quick tips, frequent questions, and checklists are available on the WAI Resources page of the W3 site: <http://www.w3.org/WAI/Resources/>.

Helpful tools may also be found at *The Accessible Web Author's Toolkit* (<http://aware.hwg.org/tools/>), which includes links to evaluation tools, correction and repair utilities, web authoring programs and accessible browsers.

Test It

Test your pages as you build them.

- Check pages for potential problems such as unclear navigation, functional errors or broken links.
- Check pages on different hardware platforms (Mac/PC) and browsers including Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator versions 4+, and a text-only browser such as Lynx (available free at <http://lynx.browser.org/>).
- Validate code with an HTML validator.
- Finally, ask several people to use your site to complete a task or find the answer to a question. Observe how they navigate through the site and note problem areas.

Announce It

Upon completion of a website, contact the district webmaster (webmaster@sandi.net) to have it registered, announced, and linked from the district site.

Maintain It

- Ensure timely content by assigning individuals to review pages on a regular schedule.
- Develop a routine for updating your site and performing maintenance, such as archiving or deleting information.