Determining Web Usability

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Usability is a science that attempts to make "something" more usable by a group of people. Usability studies are common today with regard to websites and software that uses a graphical user interface (GUI). The benefit of good usability is a comfortable user experience for visitors to a website, increased productivity with GUI-based software, and ultimately more dollars for companies who use the Web to sell products and services.

Usability studies take time and involve extensive testing with a body of test subjects. Some experts have taken the fruits of many studies and boiled them down to several **essential components** that can be used as guidelines as we design websites.
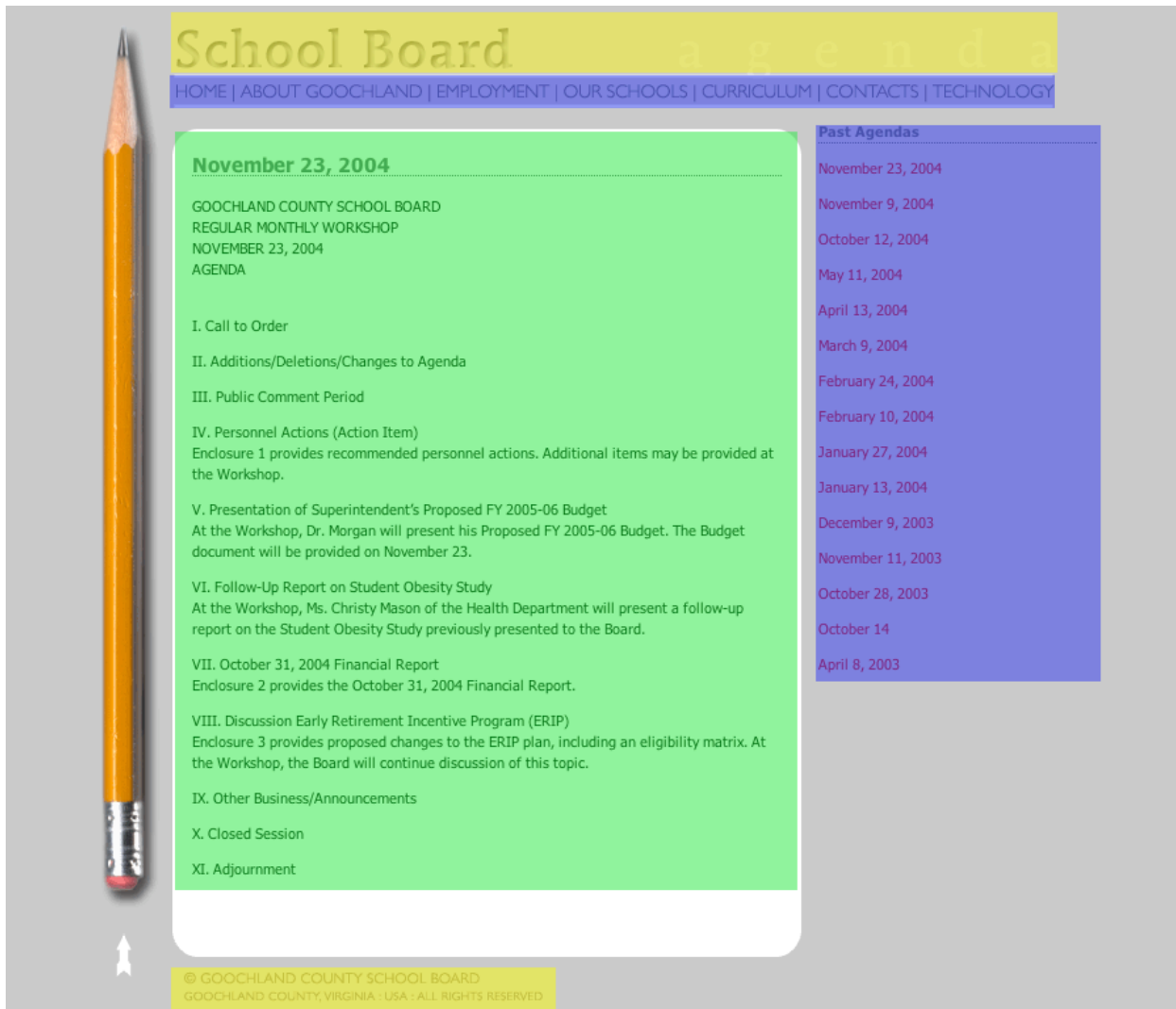
I have put together a two-tier approach to determine if a website is usable or not. This is an informal evaluation, and won't apply to 100% of sites we encounter. Yet, it's a great start towards understanding usability.

Step 1:
Visually examine and categorize a website's front page. You can color-code (in Photoshop) a website into four discreet categories:
- Identification
- Content
- Advertising
- Navigation

Each of these four categories should be represented by a different overlay color as you analyze the site's homepage. A second method involves using a grid, and counting the percentage of each of the four categories. The first, and more informal method is used below. Here's the example:

As you can see, there is a good ratio in this page of **content** (green), although some may say there is too much area given to **navigation** (blue). The yellow shading represents **identification**, and no advertising is seen in this example. The **un-colored areas** are wasted real-estate: these should be avoided when possible, when not contributing to an aesthetic role of "white" or empty space.

So, **the first step in analyzing usability is to take note, graphically, of how space on the webpage is being utilized.** Pages that emphasize content over advertisement, content over white space, and content over identification, are typically more usable. Navigation should be in a clearly-identified location, hopefully at the top, or side of a webpage. Idenfitication should be located at the top, and also possibly at the bottom. Identification should be easily seen without having to scroll in the page. Advertisements should clearly be separated from content.

Step 2:

The second step is more involved at examining some key aspects of a page's design. Again, here, I will focus on a site's homepage.

- **Page Title** – Does the page title clearly define what the site is, or is about?
- **Web Standards?** – check the source (HTML) – does it contain a DOCTYPE tag for HTML or XHTML? Does it validate?
- **Use of Javascript or Java applets** – are these required? Do they take too long to load or work?
- Navigation – does it work? is it organized? is it easy to find?
- **Download Time** – how fast does the page load? What's holding back a faster download?
- **Function of Graphics, Animations, etc.** – are they necessary? is there a point to them besides "Art"?
- **Forms** – can you tab between elements in the form? are the form fields wide enough?
- **Contrast between text content and background** – is the site friendly to color blind users? is the text and content easy to read?
- **Page structure promoting chunking of small groups of text, with use of headings** – does it use headings, and smaller paragraphs and lists?
- **Use of lists over paragraphs, where appropriate** – does it?
- **Links to other file types are labeled with file type and download size** (e.g., PDF, 1.2 MB download) – does it?
- **Clear statement of copyright, terms of use, and contact information?** – is it found? Typically this will be at the bottom of a page
- **Aesthetic Appeal** – does the site's "look and feel" match what it's supposed to be about?

You may choose to use the following form to evaluate a site's homepage based on the criteria above.

Basic comments under one of the three columns should be written for each category on the left.

Based on this method, and the first, you can make the case for a website you examine: is it usable?

Usability Matrix for URL: _____

	Great	Average	Poor
Page Title			
Web Standards			
Javascript and Java			
Download Time			
Function of Graphical Content			
Forms			
Contrast			
Page Structure			
Use of Lists			
Labeled Links			
Copyright, Terms of Use, and Contact Info.			
Aesthetic Appeal			