

Rules of the Road

What can I do to help learners new to the Web?

Imagine traveling to a city you have never visited before. Even though there are road signs and highway signs, eventually you find yourself lost. After traveling down the same road a fourth time, you decide to stop and ask for directions...

...and a map.

Learners arriving at your course site need maps too. Your site is like a new city to them. Attractive and usable pages make learners more comfortable and ease their transition into unfamiliar territory. Just as road maps make it easy to get around in an unfamiliar city, a clear and usable course site makes it easier for learners to hit the ground running.

Lost Horizon

Rule: *Make the organization of your site obvious!*

Course sites aren't like textbooks. Books are laid out in a linear manner and most follow a similar convention. Web pages are nonlinear. Unless the layout is obvious, your learners won't know where to go!

When learners reach your home page, start by telling them where you want them to go next. Make it easy to get from one part of the site to another. Use menus so learners can get to any other page from the page they are on.

Each page should stand alone as an independent unit. Pages can and will be accessed in any order you can imagine, so each page should make sense on its own.

Structure course materials consistently so that learners will be able to easily find what they need. Once they've accessed your first unit, learners should know how to access the other units. It reduces fear of being in an unfamiliar place to have all units accessible and consistent.

Being There

Rule: *Pages should be easy to use, attractive, consistent.*

Make sure pages aren't cluttered with too much text and/or too many graphics.

Don't clutter. It's hard to read loads of text on the screen. And graphics need to be useful... or they just add to download time.

Chunk information. When you have a lot of text, for instance, you might divide it into different pages or sections.

Determine what is critical. If you don't really need it, throw it out.

Provide downloadable text when large amounts of text are needed.

Use a consistent design theme for main sections. Themes help learners see how the site works, reducing cognitive overload.

And similar types of pages should operate and look the same way. All unit intro pages should operate the same way, for instance.

Let a graphic designer and editor help you, if they're available. Their expertise will make your site better. If this type of expertise isn't available, get comments from others before going live.

North by Northwest

Rule: *Make instructions clear.*

If necessary, be redundant. Assume learners won't read every page and even if they read it, they'll forget it.

Assignment due dates and other important information should appear in multiple locations. Due dates, for instance, might appear in the syllabus, on the assignments page, and within the course materials.

Encourage questions. Make questions public. I use a Questions folder in my discussion area so other students can see the answers to questions they may have as well.

Provide your contact information on the syllabus page and your e-mail link on the footer of every page. New online learners are often nervous that they'll get lost and be alone. Make sure you are easily available. Answer their questions quickly.

Now that you know the rules of the road, it's time for a test drive! Happy teaching!