School Website Design 101

Follow these six lessons to an effective school website | *Julie Muenster*

There's a young family moving into your part of the state. While choosing which neighborhood to settle into, they research one of the most important factors in their decision: the school district. How will they conduct their research? A primary way will be visiting school websites.

With the options afforded by school choice, your district must consider how it is positioning itself as an educational leader. You have an important service to offer. If you want parents to choose your school, you must evaluate the effectiveness of your image and message, including your online presence. Your website is the core of your school marketing.

Simply having a website is not enough — sites that look outdated or haphazard don't inspire confidence. If a parent visiting your site doesn't get the impression that you value excellence and are current in technology, they may wonder if you can meet the needs of today's students.

Since we are educators, consider this article a crash course in web design. Your first assignment: take a benchmark assessment. Check your current website against the rubric on page 12. Then take the course — and do your homework!

LESSON 1

Determine Your Rhetorical Situation

Every type of communication has a rhetorical situation: audience, purpose, and context. Good design is built on a thorough analysis of these fundamentals.

Audience. Who visits your site? Your list might include parents, grandparents, community members, students, staff, organization leaders, potential new student families.

Purpose. This is closely related to audience. Your purpose may include conveying information (e.g., lunch menu), connecting people with other people and programs (staff email addresses), and appealing to potential new student families (list of Advanced Placement classes).

Context. How will users connect with your website? Will the majority be on personal computers or smartphones? Knowing the answer will affect your layout and design choices.

LESSON 2

Determine Your Content

Once you've analyzed your rhetorical situation, plan the content for your site. Determine what information the different groups are seeking. For example:

- **Parents:** School calendar, lunch menu, staff contact information, etc.

- **Community members:** How to request space in the facility, how to connect with the parent/teacher organization, why we are going to referendum.

- **Others:** What do potential new student families want to know? What does the staff need from the site? Students?

When gathering this information, don't merely guess or assume. Talk to your audience. Know what they come to your website for and how frequently.

LESSON 3

Organize Your Content

School websites have massive amounts of content. The structure of your site should lead the different segments of your audience on a pleasant, logical (to them) journey.

A practical way to lay the foundation for site navigation is card sorting: Write content topics on index cards and ask various users to organize them in a way that makes sense. Working with actual site users will make the final product more user-friendly — and you will be enlightened by the differences in logic you observe. Accommodating these differences demonstrates that you practice what you preach regarding differentiation.

Create a visual representation of your information architecture (a site map). This is a great tool for collaboration. It also enables you to see how many clicks it takes to get to any information on your site. To create this structure, you can use free, online, wireframe software, a large whiteboard with plenty of colored markers, or index cards and an empty wall or floor.

When creating the navigation for your site, consider these tips for better user experience:

- **Limit the categories** in your navigation bar to seven or fewer. More than that is overwhelming.

- **Organize content** so users do not have to click more than four times to get to the information they need.

- **Create a quick-links section** for information that is sought most frequently.

LESSON 4

Design Your Site

Finally, we are getting to the actual design in this web design class!

First impressions matter — website users make snap judgments on whether your site is worth their time or not (you've made those kinds of decisions yourself). You don't want to irritate or frustrate your users. This is why the home page design is core to your site's effectiveness. Colors, typography, images, white space, and content must all work together to create a page that's appealing, welcoming, and informative.

Decide the color palette, layout, typography, and images for the entire site. Create a style guide that has all this information. Include the specific site colors; the typography styles for headings, subheadings, paragraphs,

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website evaluation rubric

	Visual Appeal	Readability	Typography	Navigation	Content	User Experience
0	Site is outdated, cluttered, and full of links.	Text is blinking or moving across the page.	Text is Comic Sans and ALL CAPS.	Link to "Crime-stoppers" is on the homepage.	The date for Homecoming is from 2012.	Content is on PDFs that have to be downloaded to be viewed.
1	Images appear on almost every page: photos, icons, charts, infographics.	High contrast between text and background — black text on white is easiest to read. Text is left justified (not centered).	The fonts are easy to read; main text is in a sans serif typeface (like this one). Not Times New Roman.	Navigation is predictable: navigation bar along the top, quick links in the left sidebar, contact information in the footer.	The content is current, relevant, and thorough. It anticipates all user questions.	Site loads quickly and is responsive (adapts to all screen sizes and devices).
2	Color scheme is limited to two or three colors plus black/white/gray.	A clear hierarchy— headings and subheadings are consistent in style and break up large sections of text.	Consistency. Headings, sub-headings, links, and paragraph text are the same across the site.	A quick links section provides easy access to the most-visited information.	The writing is concise, error-free, and in simple English.	Use of regular dropdowns is limited (mega dropdowns may work well).
3	White space helps define the different sections and helps users scan the page.	Use highlighted words, lists, and quotes to help users quickly find relevant information.	Limited style and color (headings are not blue on one page, red on another; or bold here and italic there, etc.)	No more than seven links in navigation bar. Takes four clicks or less to get to any info on the site.	Use of jargon and acronyms is limited; all acronyms are explained.	Site meets all accessibility standards.
4	Photos are of happy students and staff. Photos and other images have alt text for screenreaders.	Sentences are short and easy to understand. Paragraphs are short. Line lengths are from seven to ten words.	Size, spacing, and density work together for comfortable reading on any device.	Header/navigation bar is sticky so it's easy to get to other pages even if user has scrolled down the page.	An alternative to PDFs is provided so that content can be read by a screenreader for readers with vision challenges.	Forms can be submitted online (rather than from a crumpled paper from a backpack). Payments can also be made through the site.

and links; and specific logo and mascot images to use and how to access them. Many schools have different people in charge of various sections of the website. A style guide ensures that the team maintains consistency across the site — an important aspect in looking professional and building trust with your visitors.

Design cannot work effectively apart from content. Keep readability and usability in mind when making decisions. For example, if you have a lot of content on a page, break it up with subheadings, lists, and white space so users can scan for the information they're seeking. Keep PDFs to a minimum — or make them accessible for all users. Left justify large amounts of text — centered text is hard to read (don't frustrate your visitors).

additional resources

- **Design & user experience:** usability.gov
- **Website style guide:** webstyleguide.com
- **Card sorting:** bit.ly/web-cardsorting
- **Readability test:** webpagefx.com/tools/read-able
- **Color contrast test:** contrastchecker.com
- **Usability testing:** bit.ly/testing-usability

- **Intro to Web Accessibility:** webaim.org/intro
- **Accessibility compliance:** bit.ly/edweek-site-accessibility
- **Accessibility test:** wave.webaim.org
- **Creating Accessible PDFs:** bit.ly/accessible-pdfs
- **Style guide/identity standards:** bit.ly/tufts-visual-identity

Consider the context of your website — how users will interact with it. Let's say a mother is going school supply shopping. Is she able to find the supply list without navigating a series of dropdown menus on her smartphone? Can she access the supply list online without having to download it? Is your site mobile friendly, or does she have to enlarge the screen and swipe to see the entire list?

See the rubric (page 12) for more details on website design.

LESSON 5

Test Your Site

Make sure your site displays correctly on all browsers and on all screen sizes. Test all the links.

Check your site for readability, accessibility, and color contrast. See "Additional Resources" above for more information.

Conduct an informal usability study. Select members of your audience groups and give them tasks, such as, "Find out when the next school board meeting is scheduled." Then take note of the process they go through to find that information. Have them speak what they're thinking — you will gather valuable information on how users navigate your site.

LESSON 6

Maintain Your Site

Congratulations on your website makeover! But the work is not finished — the site needs to be maintained and updated.

If you are dividing these responsibilities among team members, invariably something will be forgotten (and you know what they say about too many cooks). Designate one person to be in charge of the website. The site go-to person can manage all the details, maintain the style guide, and do behind-the-scenes maintenance. This leader can also provide training and support for other website editors, such as teachers who want to update their classroom pages and administrative staff responsible for various sections.

Now take another assessment of your site and be proud of the improvements you've made. Who doesn't love a good makeover?

Keeping your website effective, functional and accessible is an ongoing process. While the work continues, keep that young family in mind — you want them to visit your site and be confident that yours is the school district for their children. ■

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