S1
Design &
Typography

S2
Planning
& Usability

S3
Business
Value

ABOVE THE FOLD

Understanding the Principles of Successful Web Site Design

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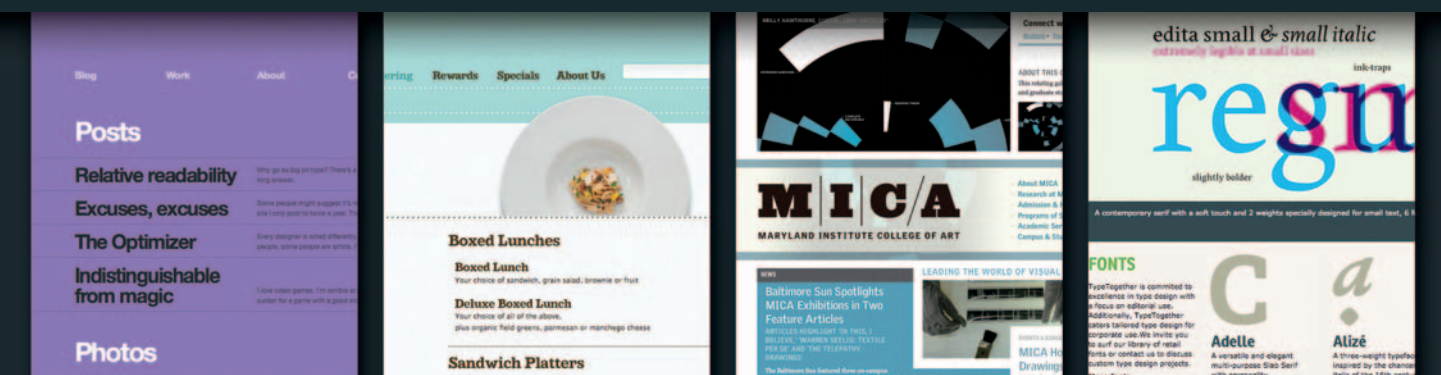
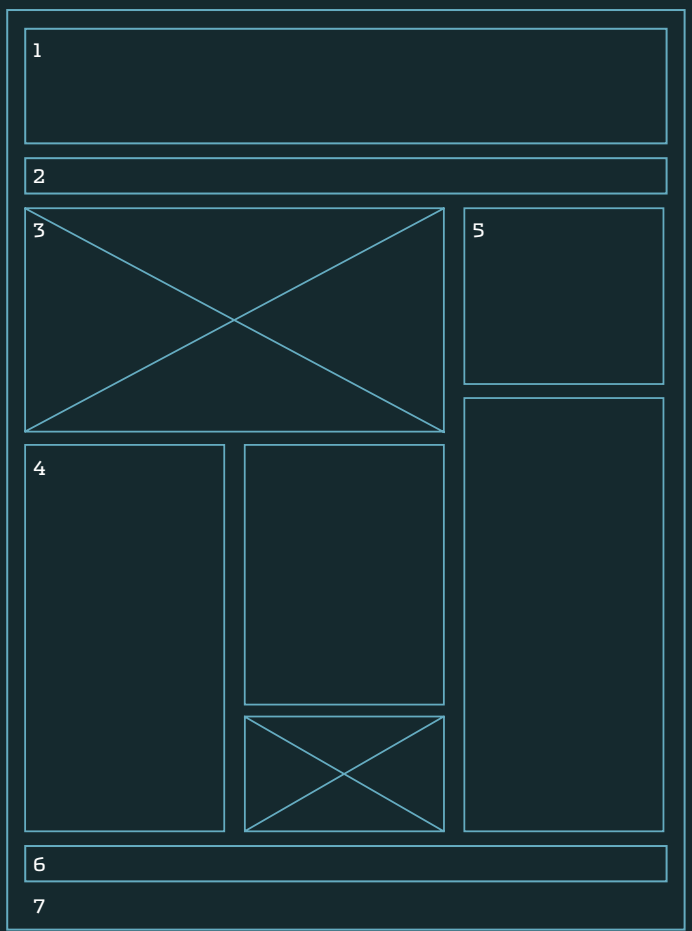
Foreword by Roger Black



CHAPTER 2

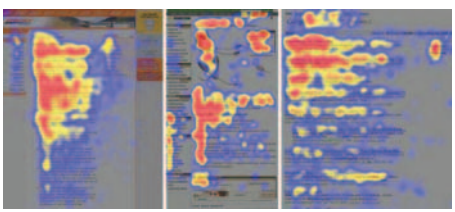
ANATOMY OF A WEB PAGE



1. Header
2. Navigation
3. Feature
4. Body/Content
5. Sidebar
6. Footer
7. Background

Form and Function of Web Design

Web design, as with any other form of design, requires the designer understands the end user's habits, the context in which the work is received and the necessary function of the end result. These factors usually present limitations that set the boundaries for starting design project. For Web design, these boundaries have caused several design and structural conventions to emerge. Such conventions include a page header; persistent navigation; content areas and sidebars; footer navigation; and often a background treatment. Although styling and aesthetics vary greatly from site to site, most sites adhere to this basic structure. Each of these common Web design elements and their placement on the page, came to be for several basic reasons:



These images show the results of an eye-tracking study. They indicate that users focus their attention on the upper-left area of a Web page.

The nature of how the pages are viewed.
In Western culture, we're conditioned to read from left to right, top to bottom. Therefore, the natural position for important information would be the upper left of a Web page. This ensures that elements such as logos, navigation and "featured items" are perceived first by the user.

The notion that users scan pages from left to right, top to bottom has been validated through the use of eye tracking studies. Sophisticated cameras fixed to the top of a computer screen have the ability to track the eye movements of Internet users and map out the patterns. The red areas in the images below indicate where users focused most of their attention. They reveal not only the fact that users' attention is mainly focused on the upper left of a page, but also that Web users skim a page for key points, as shown by the spotty bits of color in the center and left image.

Many Web design conventions are borrowed from the world of print communication. Pictured here is the New York Times *newspaper showing a header and feature area very similar to those on a Web page.*

The "fold"

Borrowed conventions.

Because almost all early Web designers were amateur designers or trained as print designers, elements from print design were converted to Web design. Design elements like headers, feature areas, body text, and sidebars all come directly from age-old newspaper design standards.

The "fold" of a newspaper is literally the horizontal crease in the center of the front page delineating the top half from the bottom half. Newspaper editors tend to put as much of the most important information as possible above that fold since that's the area that potential newspaper buyers will see. Similarly, a "fold" on a Web page is the line that delineates where the browser window cuts off the content. Areas above the fold are seen by the user when the page loads. Content below the fold requires that users scroll down.

User expectations.
Sites that want to attract the masses, like news portals, travel sites, e-commerce sites, etc., need to appeal to the lowest common denominator in terms of one's ability to use technology. As the Web became established in the mid- to late 1990s, companies interested in having their users find what they wanted quickly would imitate the metaphors for navigation and site layout from other, already established, sites. For example, Amazon.com is credited with creating the first tab-style navigation (another borrowed convention); although there are probably earlier examples, the "tabs" served as a metaphor that worked in part because tabs were something people understood from the "real world" of file folders. As a result, Web sites all over the Internet began using a tab structure for their navigation—and still do to this day. Even Apple.com, known widely for its innovative design, once used a tabbed navigation very similar to that of Amazon.

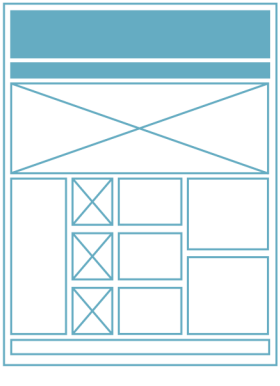
Image of Apple.com from 2007 showing the tabbed navigation style.

At the height of the tab craze in 2000, some said that the navigation on Amazon.com resembled a graveyard.

Header

The header of a Web page is one area that remains relatively consistent throughout a Web site. It acts as a grounding force for the user by identifying and visually unifying all the pages of a site. Headers establish the brand look and feel for a site and often will present the user with a call to action—search, buy, register, etc. The header of a page must perform these tasks without overpowering the content of the page and distracting the user.

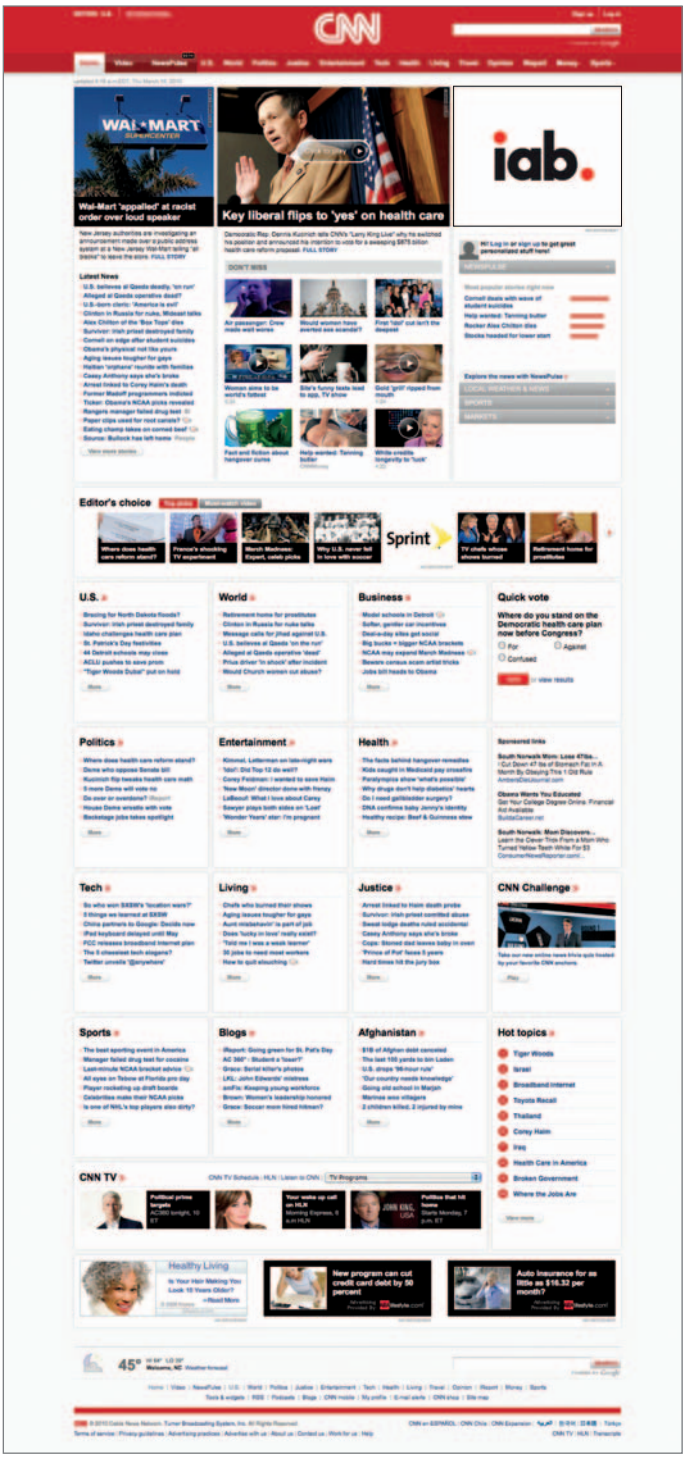
The code behind the header contains information that is vital to the search engine optimization of the page. From meta data (keywords and descriptions of the page in the code) to the page title (this is the line of copy that appears on the top of a browser window), search engines use these elements to begin indexing the content of the page.

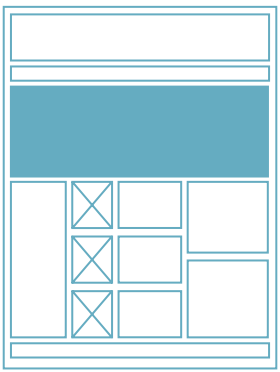


The header graphic for GQ.com uses the magazine's iconic logo as the central element. The clean, centered design approach creates a unique and identifiable presence for the brand.

CNN.com's bold use of their brand color and centered placement of their logo make for a distinctive page header.

WhiteHouse.gov uses a simple and elegant treatment for the header/navigation of the site, with subtle hints of depth and texture.





Feature Area

One indication of effective design is a clearly defined hierarchy of information. To achieve this, designers use a focal point—an area in the composition that is perceived before all others and serves as an entry point into the layout. In Web design this is often the main feature area. This area usually takes up a large portion of the home page, has the most vibrant color and typography, and usually features some sort of motion or animation. All of these things combine to make it the most important visual item on the page.

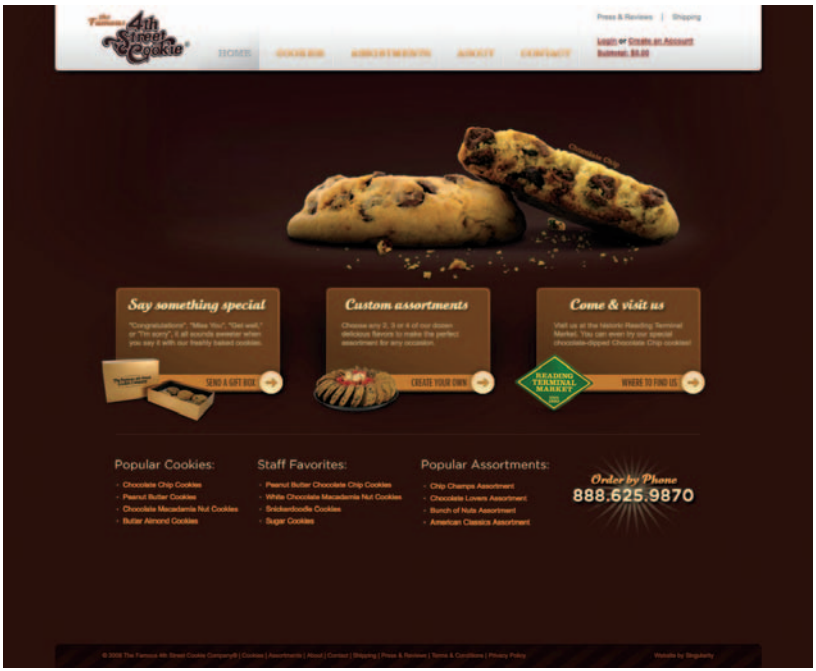
The most common option for a feature area is a slideshow of imagery and content from the site. This can be achieved using SEO-friendly technology like JavaScript and Ajax. Adobe Flash can also be used for highly interactive feature areas or ones that involve sophisticated animation.

MarthaStewart.com has a tasteful feature slideshow that highlights various content from the site with each frame indicated by a tab at the bottom. This solution also includes a pause/play button so users can stop the animation, reducing distractions as they read other content on the page.

To achieve hierarchy, designers use a **focal point**—an area in the composition that is perceived before all others.

Apple.com uses the feature area to highlight their latest products. Dramatic photos combined with simple, pithy headlines set in minimalist typography result in an impactful presentation with a clear focal point and call to action.

FamousCookies.com uses Flash animation for the main feature. The oversized cookies and type are munched away and replaced one at a time. The combination of HTML and Flash technology works well for this site since the animation serves as an accent for the page, and does not contain any important content that would be hidden from most search engines.



Breaks in the content allow users to scan the layout quickly and gives them **multiple entry points** into the page.

Body/Content

The body or content area of a Web site is where users spend most of their time, as it usually represents the end of their search for content. This is where traditional design ideas of legibility and clarity come into play, but with some added considerations. A Web page can be any height; therefore, it's important to break up long stretches of content with white space and subheadings. These breaks in the content allow users to skim the page quickly, and it gives them multiple entry points into the content.

Dividing up the content by using heading tags (<H1>, <H2>, and so on) helps search engines evaluate the content of a page. Some search engines place a higher value on words contained within these tags, since they tend to summarize the key points from the content.

Bolded subheads, iconography, and generous white space make this page from Apple.com easy to scan to find the information you're looking for.