Communication 611
Effective Communication for the Web

Winter 2010
TR 10:30 – 12:18
3176 Derby Hall

Professor: Ray Pingree
3143 Derby Hall
pingree.2@osu.edu
Office hours: TR 3:30 – 4:30 or by appointment

Textbooks: Cederholm, D. (2008). Bulletproof Web Design: Improving flexibility and protecting against worst-case scenarios with XHTML and CSS. Second Edition.
Free online at: http://library.ohio-state.edu/record=b6586093~S7
Krug, S. (2006). Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability. 2nd Edition.
Free online at: http://library.ohio-state.edu/record=b6584607~S7

Course Description

This course teaches user-centered web design using Cascading Style Sheets (CSS). The user-centered design philosophy emphasizes helping users achieve their goals and thus treats design as fundamentally a about communication instead of art. Specifically, this course will emphasize clarity, user-friendliness, and above all usability over considerations such as aesthetics, visual impact, and originality.

Course goals

This philosophy is a natural fit with a CSS-based technical approach, and not just because of the near consensus among top web designers in advocating both as the best approaches to modern web design. Their compatibility comes in part from how writing good CSS forces us to think about the *reasons* for design choices. Instead of directly changing the appearance of a design element, in CSS we have to create a general rule that says why we are doing this, and thus can apply to other similar situations. In effect using CSS reminds us that every design choice we make should have a reason. This brings us to the main goal of this course: to teach a design philosophy inherent in proper use of CSS that is essentially just a finer-grained version of user-centered design; one that extends the idea of focusing on clarity, obviousness, and usability beyond the surface of a website all the way down to its code. 10 weeks is not enough to learn every detail of CSS, but fortunately our goal does not require such breadth. What it requires instead is depth, particularly in mastery of core practices of good CSS such as separating content from presentation and making design choices through meaningful rules. Finally, the course also aims to use this same philosophy to expand the designer's horizons beyond a static print-design perspective to embrace the inherent flexibility and interactivity of the web as a medium.

Technical Approach

As noted above, the course will use a modern "web standards" approach.   Specifically, the course will teach hand coding of XHTML and CSS, with particular emphasis on a clean separation of content from presentation. Making a website that is "beautiful on the inside" is a good practice even for static websites, but it is a necessity for more complex interactive ones. Among many other benefits, a well-structured CSS site allows a non-programmer to use simple Javascript and PHP snippets to add interactivity to pages. Accordingly, this course aims to help students master CSS and XHTML to the point where they can benefit from these simple Javascript and PHP techniques. Armed with these techniques, students will apply principles of user-centered design to generate their own creative solutions to a variety of usability challenges common across modern interactive websites.

Prerequisites

This class requires one introductory web design class (such as COMM 311).

Grading

Midterm exam	15
Final exam	15
Resume site and paper	10
In-class activities	15
Homework	10
Final project total	35
Proposal and sketches	5
First draft	10
Usability testing conclusions	5
Final site and paper	15
Total	100

Exams

There will be one midterm exam and one final exam. They will be closed-book and will consist of approximately 50% multiple choice and 50% short answer questions, covering principles as well as technical knowledge. Technical questions will not require writing code, but will test comprehension of it.

Resume site

As a learning project for the first half of the quarter, you will build a resume website for yourself using CSS and XHTML. This site should include a link to a printable PDF version of your resume, and should also include some of the same content (as well as optional additional personal content) in a multi-page organizational structure appropriate to the web as a medium. Do not feel constrained by the conventions of print resume design either in the choice of what details to include or in how to organize the information. Use this assignment as an experiment in re-thinking the goals and usability of resumes in general and of your own resume in particular. Include a brief (1 page max) paper explaining your design choices.

Project

Each student will develop a mockup of an original website during the second half of the quarter. To teach real-world best practices, your design will be developed iteratively in four stages. First, you will submit a proposal with paper and pencil sketches of the key interfaces. Second, after peer and instructor evaluation of this proposal, you will then build an initial XHTML / CSS mockup. Third, you will run usability tests on your initial mockup and turn in a brief paper summarizing the results of this testing. Fourth, you will use these conclusions to improve and flesh out your design resulting in a final site, which you will turn in together with a 3 to 5 page paper describing the rationale behind your design choices. This final site may have features that are still in mockup form, particularly if those features would require custom PHP code. Final projects will be evaluated primarily on the same principles taught throughout the class. In other words, the emphasis is on clarity and usability over aesthetics on the outside, and proper use of CSS "under the hood."

In-class activities and homework

Most class sessions will include an in-class activity to give you hands-on experience with the design principles and/or techniques covered, as well as to check attendance. These will be turned in at the end of class via Carmen. Small homework assignments will also be assigned periodically. These include practice for techniques learned in class, reading questions designed to ensure that you pull out certain important takeaway messages from assigned readings, and content preparation assignments in which you create images or text to be used in an in-class design exercise. For either in-class activities or homework, your grade can be 0, 1, or 2 points for each assignment. As long as you follow directions, meet the deadline, and devote a reasonable amount of effort to the assignment, you will receive 2 points.

Academic Integrity

All students at The Ohio State University are bound by the code of student conduct (see http://studentaffairs.osu.edu/resource_csc.asp). Any evidence of academic misconduct will be reported to the Committee on Academic Misconduct in accordance with the Ohio State University Code of Student Conduct and the rules of faculty governance. Academic misconduct is any activity that compromises the academic integrity of the institution or subverts the educational process. Examples of academic misconduct can be found at the above website.

Accommodations

Any student who feels he or she may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact me privately to discuss your specific needs. Please contact the Office for Disability Services at 614-292-3307 in room 150 Pomerene Hall to coordinate reasonable accommodations for students with documented disabilities.

Tentative schedule
(Always check Carmen for updates!)

January 5: Introduction

January 7: User-centered design

Reading: Krug pp 11-49 and pp 164-167
Homework due at class time: reading questions on Krug. See Carmen dropbox instructions.
Recommended reading: "A Dao of Web Design" by John Allsopp
http://www.alistapart.com/articles/dao/

January 12: Intro to CSS and XHTML

Homework: Explore CSS Zen Garden. Read the page, explore some of the styles, and write a paragraph or two explaining the advantages of CSS.
http://www.csszengarden.com/
Reading: Chapter 2 from Holzschlag, 2005, "Spring into HTML and CSS"
Available via OSU libraries / Safari books online. Search for "Spring into HTML" or login & go to:
http://proquest.safaribooksonline.com/0131855867/13
Recommended reading: "Better Living Through XHTML" by Jeffrey Zeldman
http://www.alistapart.com/articles/betterliving/

January 14: CSS targeting, grouping, and floating

Reading: Chapter 1 from Andy Budd, "CSS Mastery: Advanced Web Standards Solutions"
Available online via OSU libraries. Log in and then search for CSS Mastery, or go to:
http://proquest.safaribooksonline.com/9781590596142/1
Homework due at start of class: content for your resume site in XHTML form. See Carmen for details.
Recommended reading: Graphic design resume guide (also useful for resumes in general)
http://www.youthedesigner.com/2008/04/29/the-graphic-design-resume-guide/

January 19: The box model and positioning

Reading: Chapter 2 from Andy Budd, "CSS Mastery"
(See January 14 above for instructions on finding this book)
Homework: CSS targeting

January 21: The two design functions of images
Reading: Chapter 5 from Schultz & Cook, 2007 "Beginning HTML with CSS and XHTML"
(PDF in Carmen)
Homework possible, check latest syllabus on Carmen

January 26: Basic layout
Reading: Chapter 7 pp 134-141 from Andy Budd, "CSS Mastery"
(See January 14 above for instructions on finding this book online)
Homework: background image techniques applied to resume site

January 28: Rounded corner techniques
Reading: Cederholm ch 5
Homework possible, check latest syllabus on Carmen

February 2: Scalable navigation
Reading: Cederholm ch 2
Resume site due at end of class

February 4: Midterm

February 9: Homepage and navigation conventions
Reading: Krug chapters 6 and 7
Homework: reading questions on Krug

February 11: Adding interactivity with two simple JavaScript tricks
Readings and homework possible, check latest syllabus on Carmen
Final project proposal and sketches due at start of class

February 16: Grid-like results without tables
Reading: Cederholm ch 4

February 18: How to use tables when absolutely necessary
Reading: Cederholm ch 7
Homework possible, check latest syllabus on Carmen

February 23: Fluid and elastic layouts
Reading: Cederholm ch 8
Homework possible, check latest syllabus on Carmen

February 25: Usability testing of project first draft
Reading: Krug ch 9
Project first draft due at start of class

March 2: Forms and some simple PHP
Readings and homework possible, check latest syllabus on Carmen
Usability testing conclusions paper due at start of class

March 4: Exercise: chat application
Readings and homework possible, check latest syllabus on Carmen

March 9: Project work day

March 11: Project peer evaluations