

“The more bad writing you push on your users, the more you train them to disregard your message. Useless content doesn’t just annoy people; it’s one of the leading causes of lost sales.” -*Prioritizing Web Usability*. [Jakob Nielsen](#) and [Hoa Loranger](#)

I didn’t start out in the field of Web development as a usability enthusiast, or a crackerjack coder, or even as a skilled graphic artist. My background is much more non-traditional. I came to this field with a mouse in one hand and a book of poems in the other. I was an aspiring poet who had been playing video games since the 70’s and Atari. I got into computer gaming in the mid-late nineties. It turns out, all those hours of killing monsters and collecting kewl loot, wasn’t such a waste of time. It was really just the just the start in a non-traditional education in user interface design. If you play computer games much, especially online games, you eventually find yourself talking to or reading about other player’s experiences with the game interface. In my case, I talked with friends, posted on boards and did a fair amount of beta testing.



The other side of my skill set came as a result of my poetry education, which led me to join a writers listserv. As a member of the WRITERS listserv I became a part of a community of writers from all over the world, sharing thoughts and ideas about writing. Some of these people were taking their craft to the World Wide Web and staking a claim for writers in the form of online literary journals and other online literary resource sites. There was an explosion of writing, critiquing, revising, and publishing all evolving on the Web from a relatively small, but engaged group of writers, who broke from traditional models of networking and publishing and built their own models of literary publishing online. In essence, it was a push back on traditional modes of authoring, critiquing and publishing, to incorporate new forms of digital communication and composition. It was as part of this community that I had the good fortune to help shape the models and practices for online literary publishing. It also lead me to building my first Web pages where I peeled back the skin to explore the underlying code, learning ways to better shape it to suit my needs.

My pursuit of poetry led me to Michigan State University, where I pursued a degree in English. While there, I took a humanities and computing class and received my first formal training in Web development. The computing class led me to an internship in Web development, which led to a job as a student Web developer for University Relations. After graduation and a stint as a part-time developer, I applied for and was hired as the Web Coordinator for University Relations at MSU. I had a pretty solid grasp on HTML, some experience with Photoshop and a bit of Flash development.

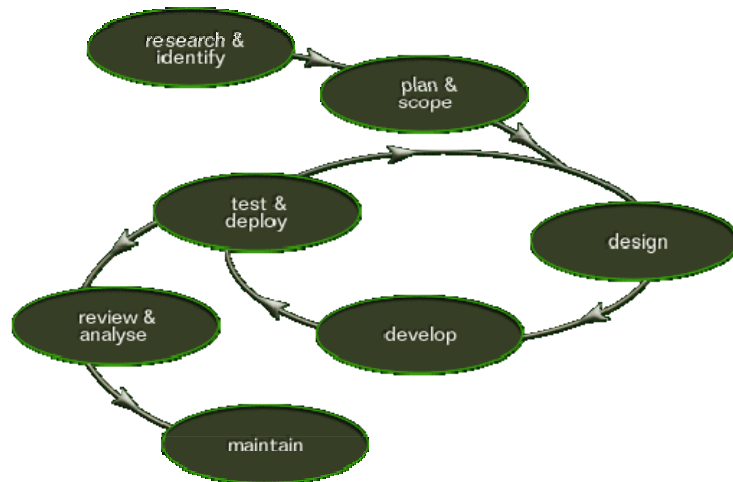
Around this time, in early 2002, the Web was humming with a loud buzz of all the cool things you could do with Flash and JavaScript and whiz-bang this and DHTML that. There was also this soft, steady whisper of usability and some guy names Jacob Nielsen...I admit it, back then we made fun of those silly notions of best practices and usability. If they can't view the page in Netscape 4.0, they should upgrade. Don't get me started on MAC compatibility.

My catapulting into a Web development career coincided with the start of a joint venture between University Relations and Libraries, Computing & Technology, to redesign the MSU homepage. By the end of 2002 I was still a mere newbie developer, seeming light years from becoming a master. Yet, I had begun to incorporate some techniques which I still use today, such as card sorting and stakeholder interviews.

In January of 2003 the research phase of the redesign of the MSU homepage was well underway. The division of labor on the project was such that UR was tasked with: research, information architecture, graphic design and content development/population. I had the great fortune to be able to work with a very talented marketing director, who had years of experience running a public relations firm, as well as managing media relations for another Big Ten University. Sandra Conn brought to the table the big picture of Web development and a Web project management model that for the most part, I still use today.

What I learned from Sandra was the importance of harmonizing all the pieces of Web development and how to weigh and measure compromises between stakeholders, developers and users. I also had the fantastic and maddening experience of drafting information architecture on a vast and complex project attempting to organize and present a large university online. When I tell people how there were four of us locked in a room for hour and hours for days with flowcharts and sitemaps, how the information architect negotiated from a viewpoint of information science and the marketing people argued from a viewpoint driven by PR and politics and where I tried to assert my viewpoint as a longtime Web user; I talk of how it was exhausting and frantic, but also really exciting and such a learning experience. It was an experience that set me on the path to becoming an expert in information design and research. It showed me that at the heart of it, managing a Web development project is a process of thoughtful negotiations. On a typical project that I manage, there is a graphic artist, a font-end Web developer, a content manager and a programmer. My role is divided between research, information architecture and project management; sometimes I also serve as the creative director. The other part of the equation is the client and other stakeholders. The final and crucial component is the end user. To achieve a successful outcome on a project like this, it requires understanding and compromise among the project team and with the client and most importantly, the needs of the audience need to drive the project.

In 2005 our Web development process was pretty solid and looked something like this:



Not every step of the process was given equal attention, however. This was mainly for one or more of the following:

- the timeline for the project did not allow for a thorough undertaking of each step
- the scope of the project didn't call for it
- we did not have enough staffing resources to complete all of the steps adequately

Faced with these kinds of obstacles, I tried to find ways to refine the process so it could be implemented more efficiently. In the summer of 2005 we lost our programmer when he decided to take a job with another company. This was a tremendous blow, since he not only did programming but was also our primary front-end developer. Replacing him would be difficult, especially since we were embarking on the most complex job we had done to date, the redesign of the Office of Admissions Web site. As we were interviewing candidates, the skill sets were all over the place. Several people had some programming experience, but none of them had experience programming Web applications, nor did anyone have solid experience in Web design. Finally, we interviewed an applicant who not only was a savvy front-end developer but the focus and style of her work centered on usability and accessibility. It occurred to me after meeting her and seeing her work, this was just the kind of skill set we needed to add to our team to further improve and streamline our process. By putting more of an emphasis on usability at the beginning of the development process, instead of trying to test for problems at the end of a project, we began to see reductions in development time and our projects outcomes were more effective. Similarly, by complying with established accessibility guideline our sites were more accessible for a not only persons with disabilities, but for all users. They were also more usable across a wider range of browsers and platforms and had higher search visibility.

Backing up a bit to 2003, we had the good fortune of adding a very skilled editor to our team who joined us to manage some of our internal Web projects, as well as to work on content population and copy editing for Web projects. It wasn't until we were able to shift the focus of our development process to include a more user-centered, broadly accessible approach, that it became clear that the content phase of a Web project was problematic for both us and our clients and often it was causing real slowdowns in getting sites launched. There wasn't a lot of information on standards or best practices for writing on

print resources and copy management software training. With each client having different skill levels and needs, the plan was to match the various tools to the client's needs.

Our pilot project was for the MSU Learning Resources Center. We devised the following content plan for their Web project:

- Writing and Managing Effective Web Content: Part One (PowerPoint, discussion and exercises)
 - Overview of University Relations (UR)
 - Overview of the UR Web development process
 - How users read on the Web
 - Scanning
 - How we can make things easier for users
 - Overview of information architecture
 - Why IA is important
 - UR information architecture process
 - Writing for the Web: Print vs. Web
 - Inverted pyramid style of writing
 - Developing Web content:
 - Present one idea per paragraph
 - Use active verbs
 - Keep your sentences simple; omit unnecessary words
 - Use bulleted lists to summarize content
 - Consistency and clarity
 - Keep text current – statistics, dates, times
 - Using PDFs

At the completion of part one of the seminar series, we had the following assignment for the content team:

- Divide the site content among the writers
- Create a shared repository for content (shared drive, ANGEL) that mimics the information architecture of the site, so that each content page has a folder
- Use a consistent naming convention for documents (draft, final)
- Each writer should attempt a few sentence or paragraph for their content areas
- All of the writers should meet and discuss and edit content

We gave a period of approximately two weeks for the writers to draft the first versions of their pieces of content and have at least one group editing session. Then we came back and had an editing session where we reviewed at least one piece of content from each person and answered questions and gave tips for editing.

One to two weeks after the editing session, we met with the clients again for part two of the seminar session:

- Overview of HTML, CSS and Contribute (copy management software)
- Formatting for the non-visual user
- Formatting for the visual user

The purpose of this seminar was to prepare clients to add content to their new Web site using the copy management tool, Contribute, which we had been using at UR, successfully for several years. It was also intended to teach them some simple but important tips for formatting content. This also included an interactive session with discussion and questions.

To date, the pilot project has been very successful. Our clients have been very receptive to the seminar content and trainings. They are more engaged in the content process than nearly all of our previous clients. Currently, development on the site has concluded and the site has been turned over to the clients for content populations. Once they are done populating the site, we will do one last review of the site and then it will be launched. The site can be previewed at: lrc.msu.edu.

With the positive outcomes from our writing for the Web pilot project, we used a similar strategy for another Web project that started in December 2006, the MSU Office of Supportive Services (OSS). The OSS project is just entering development, but we have presented the first part of our seminar series and it was very well received.

My expectations for this new part of our development process, is that it will continue to evolve and we will refine it and adapt it to meet various client needs. I expect we will see even better outcomes, in regards to the content on client sites and their ability to manage their sites, post-launch. For me, personally, this has been an extremely positive experience. I've really enjoyed working on this new process. It's encouraged a more relaxed and casual working experience between my team and our clients. With this process, the client has a better understanding of the overall Web development process and more specifically, the importance of well thought out content management. We've provided basic training and tools to help enable our clients to in the success of their Web site. Once they see how much impact they can have, the project becomes more meaningful for them and their users.

The tools and resources used in the development of this project will be housed at a new site that is currently in development: toolbox.ur.msu.edu: The Web Author's Toolbox. Content population will commence in Summer 2007. The client Web sites used to beta test our new writing for the Web seminar series can be found at: lrc.msu.edu and oss.msu.edu.