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**DON'T  
MAKE  
ME  
THINK**

*revisited*

*and Mobile*

A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability

**P**eople often ask me:

“What’s the most important thing I should do if I want to make sure my site or app is easy to use?”

The answer is simple. It’s not “Nothing important should ever be more than two clicks away” or “Speak the user’s language” or “Be consistent.”

It’s...

## **“Don’t make me think!”**

For as long I can remember, I’ve been telling people that this is my first law of usability.

It’s the overriding principle—the ultimate tie breaker when deciding whether a design works or it doesn’t. If you have room in your head for only one usability rule, make this the one.

For instance, it means that as far as is humanly possible, when I look at a Web page it should be self-evident. Obvious. Self-explanatory.

I should be able to “get it”—what it is and how to use it—without expending any effort thinking about it.

Just how self-evident are we talking about?

Well, self-evident enough, for instance, that your next door neighbor, who has no interest in the subject of your site and who barely knows how to use the Back button, could look at your Home page and say, “Oh, it’s a \_\_\_\_.” (With any luck, she’ll say, “Oh, it’s a \_\_\_\_ . Great!” But that’s another subject.)

Why are things always in the last place you look for them?  
Because you stop looking when you find them!

—CHILDREN'S RIDDLE

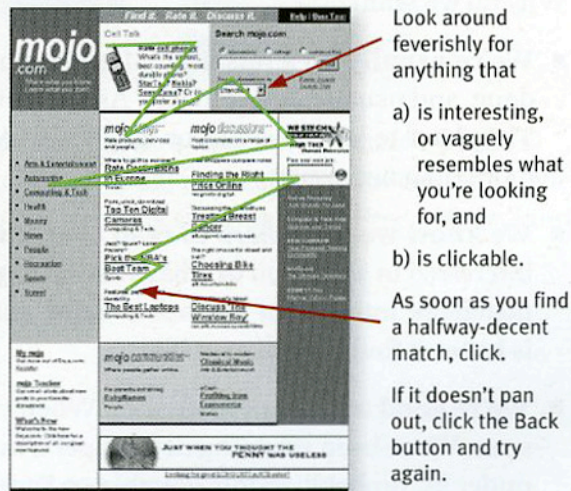
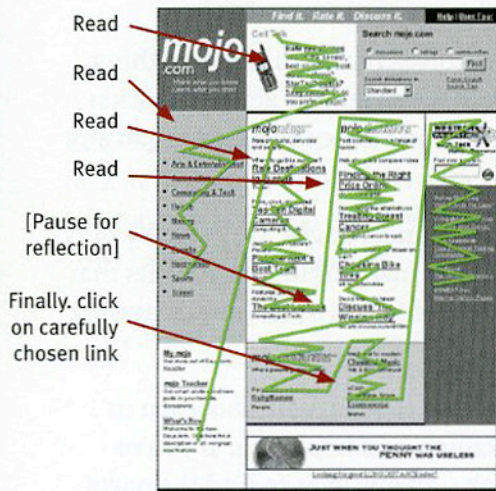
In all the time I've spent watching people use the Web, the thing that has struck me most is the difference between how we think people use Web sites and how they actually use them.

When we're creating sites, we act as though people are going to pore over each page, reading all of our carefully crafted text, figuring out how we've organized things, and weighing their options before deciding which link to click.

What they actually do most of the time (if we're lucky) is *glance* at each new page, scan *some* of the text, and click on the first link that catches their interest or vaguely resembles the thing they're looking for. There are almost always large parts of the page that they don't even look at.

We're thinking "great literature" (or at least "product brochure"), while the user's reality is much closer to "billboard going by at 60 miles an hour."

### WHAT WE DESIGN FOR... THE REALITY...



As you might imagine, it's a little more complicated than this, and it depends on the kind of page, what the user is trying to do, how much of a hurry she's in, and so on. But this simplistic view is much closer to reality than most of us imagine.

It makes sense that we picture a more rational, attentive user when we're designing pages. It's only natural to assume that everyone uses the Web the same way we do, and—like everyone else—we tend to think that our own behavior is much more orderly and sensible than it really is.

If you want to design effective Web pages, though, you have to learn to live with three facts about real-world Web use.

### FACT OF LIFE #1:

## We don't read pages. We scan them.

One of the very few well-documented facts about Web use is that people tend to spend very little time *reading* most Web pages. Instead, we scan (or skim) them, looking for words or phrases that catch our eye.

The exception, of course, is pages that contain documents like news stories, reports, or product descriptions, where people will revert to reading—but even then, they're often alternating between reading and scanning.

Why do we scan?

- **We're usually on a mission.** Most Web use involves trying to get something done, and usually done quickly. As a result, Web users tend to act like sharks: They have to keep moving, or they'll die. We just don't have the time to read any more than necessary.
- **We know we don't need to read everything.** On most pages, we're really only interested in a fraction of what's on the page. We're just looking for the bits that match our interests or the task at hand, and the rest of it is irrelevant. Scanning is how we find the relevant bits.
- **We're good at it.** It's a basic skill: When you learn to read, you also learn to scan. We've been scanning newspapers, magazines, and books—or if you're under 25, probably reddit, Tumblr, or Facebook—all our lives to find the parts we're interested in, and we know that it works.