

10.3 How people read

<http://www.websuburb.com.au/HelpDesk/Content/Habits/tabid/776/Default.aspx>

10.3.1 Scanning and Skimming

There is a subtle but important difference between the scanning and skimming of web pages.

10.3.1.1 Scanning

The first thing the user will do when opening a page is a high-level scan to get a “feel” for the page. They will form an impression of the page based on the layout, colours and fonts used. Typically this process is instantaneous – it usually lasts less than one second and the user mostly won’t even read anything. (Reinforcing this point, the latest Yahoo toolbar stores a thumbnail image of favourite web pages because users can instantly recognise an entire page from a thumbnail image.)

Other points to keep in mind when designing your website:

- If the user finds something offensive they will be off in a flash.
- If the page looks amateurish then the user’s interest and attention will automatically lower.
- If the page looks difficult to read, ie. large paragraphs of small text, the user won’t bother.

Be sure to spend time developing a good template and ensure this is consistently applied throughout the site.

10.3.1.2 Skimming

The user follows up the scan with skimming. In skimming, the user will review headings, bullet points, numbered lists, isolated/highlighted text and, to a lesser degree, bold text. Only if they are satisfied with the result of the skimming process will they even bother to start reading the content.

Target a significant amount of every page to headers, lists, isolated and bold text. Ensure that headers and isolated text are in the page “hotspots”.

10.3.2 Using links

A common usability problem on websites is disorientation, where users fail to understand their current position in a website – that is, how they got to that page, and where they can go next. We suggest using “breadcrumbs” to display location, ie. “You are here: [Help Desk](#) / [Pages](#) / [Add Pages](#).”



Figure: “Breadcrumbs” to display location

10.3.3 Eye-tracking heat maps

Eye tracking has been used to identify user behaviour when using search engine results and web pages. The results were used to construct heat maps with the following results.

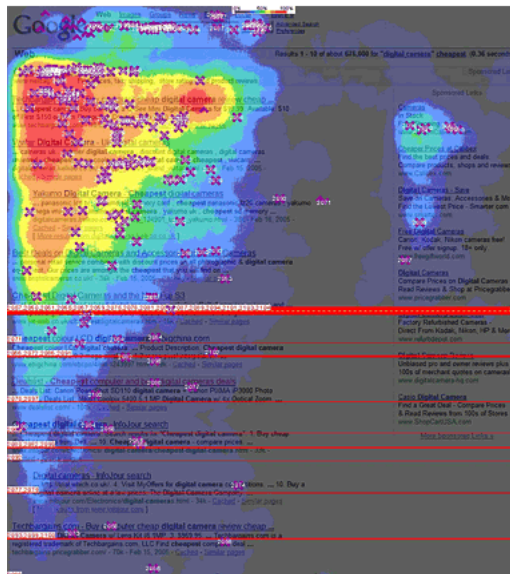


Figure: The Golden Triangle - Eye tracking on Google results
[<http://www.websiteoptimization.com/speed/tweak/clickstream/>]



Figure: “F” Pattern of user viewing for “About us”, product page and search result page
Source: www.useit.com/alertbox/reading_pattern.html

What does it all mean?

- The top left of page is the most important part, therefore you should position the most important information here in the first two paragraphs.
- Users don't read text thoroughly.
- Start headings, paragraphs and bullet points with information-rich words.

10.3.4 Time-related statistics

“Weinreich and Herder analysed users interacting with over 65,000 unique URIs. The average web page had 53 hyperlinks and 551 visible words. Stay times were short, 25% of all documents were displayed for less than 4 seconds and 52% of all visits were shorter than 10 seconds with a peak value located between 2 and 3 seconds (see Figure).”

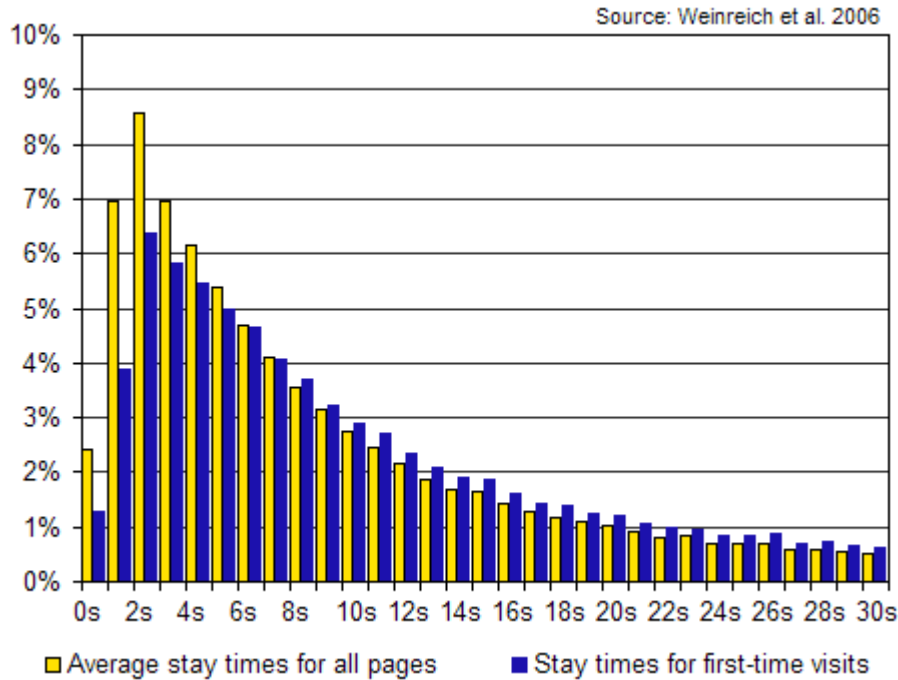


Figure: Distribution histogram for stays of all types

Source: www.websiteoptimization.com/speed/tweak/clickstream

10.3.5 HitWise

HitWise is an internet business intelligence website. One of their publications [www.hitwise.com/datacenter/rankings.php] features the most popular websites based on internet usage. For example, the statistics for February 2007 were as follows:

| Rank | Website | Market Share |
|--------|--|--------------|
| 1 | www.myspace.com | 5.93% |
| 2 | www.google.com | 4.47% |
| 3 | www.yahoo.com | 4.16% |
| 4 | mail.yahoo.com | 4.10% |
| 5 | mail.myspace.com | 3.86% |
| 6 | www.hotmail.com | 1.98% |
| 7 | www.msn.com | 1.81% |
| 8 | www.ebay.com | 1.55% |
| 9 | search.yahoo.com | 1.42% |
| 10 | search.msn.com | 0.81% |
| 1 – 10 | Sub-total | 30.09% |

Important points:

1. In this list there are only 2 publishers of content - www.yahoo.com and www.msn.com. The other 8 (and the next few in the list) are all content-sharing or participative sites.
2. Users like to participate and do stuff, which includes email, trading, searching, games and blogs or forums.
3. When developing content you should aim to create an environment where users can interact with each other through the medium of your site.

The next step is Personas

<http://www.websuburb.com.au/HelpDesk/Content/Personas/tabid/751/Default.aspx>