Library Guides on the Web: Traditional Tenets and Internal Issues

by Eric A. Cooper

One of the basic functions of librarians is to help people locate information. We have developed many techniques for reaching this end. One of the more effective ways has been through the provision of instructional guides. These guides often explain how to use an individual title or type of resource, how to conduct research, or what materials are available on a particular topic. They provide enhanced access for patrons and consequently further a library’s goal of offering effective reference assistance. The introduction of the World Wide Web as a reference and research tool allows librarians to produce guides in electronic format, thus enhancing the level of access for a larger and more diverse patron group.

Electronic library guides share many similarities with print guides, and so should follow the same basic design tenets. However, these electronic aids reach a larger and more diverse group and present new issues that librarians must consider regarding guide design and library policy. Among these issues are 1) the equipment and knowledge differences that diverse groups possess; 2) the heightened expectation of electronic access in today’s society; and 3) the possibility of attracting patron groups who require additional assistance.

The following discussion focuses on basic design tenets for electronic library guides and the concerns these guides present for internal policy making. The goal is to help library staffs produce electronic guides that will be effectively utilized by a variety of patrons without creating an added burden for the library.

Designing Electronic Guides

With the onslaught of new World Wide Web capabilities has come an enhanced ability to be creative in designing Web pages. Tables, graphics, and complicated backgrounds are now easily integrated into Web files. This often presents a strong temptation to create colorful, intricate file contents. However, print library guides and other documents have traditionally been considered most effective when they are pleasing to the viewer’s eyes. Characteristic design features of these guides have included a simple color scheme, distinguishing fonts or typefaces, and blank space sufficient to allow viewers to easily categorize information. The utility of these design characteristics has not disappeared with the appearance of Web-based documents. In fact, computer screens do not allow viewers to visualize as much information simultaneously as do print guides, and consequently the need for uncomplicated, easily understood design is even greater.

The World Wide Web, through HyperText Markup Language (HTML) code, offers several mechanisms by which library guides can be designed in a simple and effective manner using the same design tenets as print guides. (See sidebar on next page.)

When producing word-processed library guides, we often create blank space by using hard returns. HTML provides this ability through break (<br>) and paragraph (<p>) tags. Text following a break tag will be shifted to the next line down and the remainder of the first line
Helpful HTML Web Sites

For instruction on using HTML code in Web documents, see the following Uniform Resource Locators.

The HTML Quick Reference at: http://www.cc.ukans.edu/info/HTML_quick.html


HTML Basics and Advanced at: http://desktoppublishing.com/htmlbasics.html

HTML Documentation at: http://www.gov.nb.ca/hotlist/htmldocs.htm

will be blank. Text following a paragraph tag will be shifted two lines down, leaving the remainder of the first line and the line immediately following blank. A break command is equivalent to one hard return on a word processor, and a paragraph command equals two hard returns. Strategic placement of blank space and lines will serve to draw the viewer’s attention to the next section of the guide and emphasize its overall organization.

To further enhance the impact of blank space, place headings or lists immediately below paragraph tags. Word processors create headings and lists primarily through font sizes and special features such as bullets. HTML allows six heading sizes, with the first, <h1>, being the largest and the sixth, <h6>, the smallest. As with print guides, the largest heading is generally reserved for page titles, while smaller headings, such as <h2> through <h4>, are used to emphasize smaller sections and subsections.

Another method for emphasizing guide organization is to use lists. HTML includes tags for ordered (<ol>) and unordered (<ul>) lists. These commands place listed words or phrases one above another with either a number or a symbol indented from the left margin and immediately preceding the text. Ordered and unordered lists should generally be preceded and followed by paragraph tags so that blank space will appear above, below, and to the left of the list. This will separate the listed items from other text and emphasize their interrelation. Combining headings and lists with blank spaces will organize Web-based guides visually and require less written instruction for clarity.

Categories within an electronic library guide can also be emphasized by inserting a hard rule (<hr>). This HTML tag will impress a straight, thin line upon the Web page. Hard rules are often placed above and below category headings or between a paragraph tag and a new heading. Whenever placed, a hard rule or pair of hard rules serves to notify viewers that the text above and below the impressed line(s) is not to be considered a continuity, but instead as distinct elements of the whole. When hard rules are combined with paragraph tags and headings, the organization of a Web-based instructional guide becomes easy to understand and pleasing to the eye.

Hard rules and headings also serve as excellent anchor points for a hyperlinked table of contents within an electronic library guide. Because computer screens limit the amount of information that can be viewed at one time, a table of contents can be an effective organizational tool for Web-based guides of modest or extraordinary length. With an electronic guide, items within the table of contents can be hyperlinked to their corresponding sections through the use of hypertext references and anchor commands (<a name=sec1>). Placing anchor tags directly above category headings or hard rules will result in clear organization and pleasant viewing and will enhance the effectiveness of the table of contents. Viewers can immediately see the scope of the guide, double-click on a listed section heading, and access that section with its heading or separating line neatly placed at the top of the screen. (See Figure 1.)

The next step in designing a Web-based instructional guide concerns color. The World Wide Web offers a seemingly endless array of colors and background designs for those who treasure creativity. (See sidebar on next page.) However, instructional library guides, whether print or electronic, are intended to guide the use of, or refer patrons to, information resources. Colorful text over complicated backgrounds does not further this goal.

Keep electronic library guides simple in both physical layout and color scheme. No one will care that the sections are visually well defined if the dark orange text is difficult to read on a blue background. Also, be cognizant of hypertext link colors. Although these links to additional information need to stand out for the viewer, they must also coordinate well with the other colors within the guide. Contrasting white or gray backgrounds with darker colored text and brightly colored links should ensure that guides are easy to view.

Figure 1: The above is a basic example of the HTML code necessary to follow the design guidelines discussed in this section (left) and an example of how text would appear on the Web given these tags (right).
Libraries need to be conscious of the potential problems of putting resource guides up on the Web.

The design and appearance of an instructional guide can be as important as its textual contents. If the guide is not easily viewed and clearly organized, many people will be dissuaded from reading. As word processors are for print guides, HTML code is an effective tool for designing electronic guides. Although the medium is far different, the basic tenants are the same: If you design a clearly organized library guide that is easy to view, then people are more likely to read and understand its contents.

Variations in Your Audience

Placing an electronic library guide onto the library’s Web site offers the new opportunity of disseminating information to a much larger and more diverse group of people. As Internet access becomes more common and the Internet is used more as a research tool, a broader cross-section of society will use the Web to locate information. This enhanced ability to distribute allows librarians to provide assistance without relying on the physical presence of patrons. Aside from the issues this raises in terms of the “virtual library” concept, librarians must be aware of the various challenges presented by reaching a diverse group. The knowledge of and equipment used by viewers may vary greatly and require consideration by the guide’s author.

When producing print guides, librarians can safely assume that what they see represents what the viewers will see. However, when producing electronic library guides, this is a faulty and potentially precarious assumption.

Guides available electronically to a large number of people in both local and remote locations are viewable through a wide variety of hardware and software products. Students and teachers in small public schools may not use the same type of computer equipment as their counterparts in large universities. In essence, the equipment an individual viewer uses will filter what he or she sees on the computer screen. Since hardware and software will often vary within large groups, members are likely to see different presentations of the same guide.

For example, if one member is using Netscape 3.0 Gold as her Web browser software and another member is using Netscape 1.2, the person with 3.0 will see frames and backgrounds placed in a guide whereas the person with 1.2 will not. Images can appear in different places when one person is using Netscape and another, Mosaic. Members may also have different hardware capabilities that affect what they see. A video card recognizing 256 colors can present text, graphics, and backgrounds quite differently than a 16-color card can. Individuals with laptops may have smaller screens with lower resolution, which can make viewing graphics more difficult. Following the less complicated design tenants discussed in the previous section will help to offset these differences and ensure that what you see when producing an electronic library guide is the same as or very similar to what people see when viewing the guide. An additional equipment issue to consider when preparing electronic library guides is that some individuals may use text-based browsers such as Lynx. These browsers will not recognize graphics, backgrounds, or other non-text elements available in a Windows environment. Insert a hyperlink at the beginning of the electronic guide that points to a text version. This will allow those using text-based browsers to read the guide easily. If possible, load the text version onto a gopher server. This involves no additional formatting as gophers are text-based and only require that you scan or directly load the word-processed text.

In addition to having diverse types of electronic equipment, the audience that can be reached through the World Wide Web will be intellectually diverse. Members may range from novice to expert in the area with which a particular library guide is concerned. This issue will be more prominent in special libraries where many patrons are affiliated with the particular profession the library supports. For example, a law library guide concerning case law research should contain a higher level of detail when the target audience is law students, law faculty, and attorneys. The same guide should be more basic for students in nonlegal disciplines. When you place this guide on the Web, members of the general public who have very broad questions and concerns will need an even more basic case law guide.

Conversely, a public library that loads a bibliography on mystery novels or a “how to” guide on finding biographies

Helpful Design-Related Web Sites

For information regarding Web colors and backgrounds, visit the following Uniform Resource Locators.

http://www.phoenix.net/~jacobson/rbg.html
http://www.ukshops.co.uk:8000/tc/rbg.html
http://www.iconbazaar.com/216color.html
http://www.missouri.edu/~wwttools/colormaker
http://ftp.netgate.net/~asylum/graphics/backg.htm
http://www2.netscape.com/assist/net_sites/bg/backgrounds.html
http://xinu.bangym.se/diverse/colour.html
need not produce multiple guides for these general resources because they require very little specialized knowledge to use. If the guide concerns a specialized topic that is familiar to some viewers but new to others, and the library makes it available electronically without restriction, then multiple guides should be prepared with hyperlinks linking the various versions to one another.

Prepare the guide for your primary audience first, and then edit copies for the convenience of secondary audiences. By preparing multiple versions of electronic library guides when necessary, and by using basic design tenets, librarians can better meet the needs of a more diverse patron base and thereby answer some of the challenges that Web-based guides present.

Making Internal Policies

The ability to make library guides available on a Web site also presents challenges that give rise to issues of internal library policies. The proliferation of online and Internet resources has brought expectations that materials will be available electronically in full text or, alternatively, that physical presence in the library will not be necessary to obtain print items. However, these expectations are far from reality, and the large majority of individuals must still visit the library to obtain information.

The World Wide Web continues to reach an increasingly diverse group of people, and, when resources are not available electronically, individuals are likely to visit the library to use or obtain them. Providing electronic access to guides that discuss materials available in the library will prompt expectations of electronic access from some patrons and library visitors from others. Either way, librarians will need to decide what circulation and reference policies they will follow to effectively deal with increased demands and patron traffic.

The first question to consider is whether or not to provide access to the library’s online catalog via the Web site. Many items referenced in library guides are available at the library producing the guide, and a rapidly growing number of libraries are offering remote access to their catalogs.
via the Web. If those individuals using the library’s Web site will have access to both the electronic guide and online catalog, will they be able to charge out referenced materials or place them on hold electronically? This question may be more important in institutions, such as public libraries, where a large majority of materials circulate. However, regardless of the library type, the sheer diversity of potential viewers warrants that circulation policies be solidified. Academic, corporate, and other private libraries often offer extended circulation privileges to members of the institution that the library supports and more limited privileges to nonmembers. Where this is the case, these circulation policies will need to be applied to the library’s Web site possibly through a password system that restricts catalog access and/or borrowing privileges.

Libraries within public institutions may face either a de facto or de jure requirement to provide equivalent levels of access to all members of the general public regardless of institutional affiliation. If this is the case, then a password system must be flexible enough to accommodate all patrons. Whatever the situation, providing electronic access to library guides via a Web site necessitates a review of circulation policies.

In addition, other considerations must be addressed. If patrons may charge materials electronically, must they come to the library to pick them up or will the materials be sent to them? If materials will be sent, who pays the processing and mailing charges? These are all questions that arise when libraries link from their Web site to their online catalog. Mounting electronic guides that reference library holdings only enhances the need to address these issues.

Whether or not the library chooses to make its online catalog available, the reference department must also consider the implications of offering library guides electronically. As different types of people gain awareness of and access to the Web, a wider array of patrons will visit libraries seeking referenced materials, particularly where they cannot access items electronically due to lack of catalog access. This will certainly impact reference departments by increasing the diversity of visiting patrons. Again, library type will determine the extent of impact. Public libraries already experience a diverse patron base and will most likely feel less impact resulting from electronic guides than academic and specialized libraries, which are accustomed to a more homogeneous population.

Prepare multiple versions of guides for different types of audiences.

As the academic and specialized library patron base grows more diverse and less knowledgeable in the particular discipline, reference librarians will be expected to spend more time on otherwise routine research questions. Most academic and specialized libraries, even when open to the general public, are created to support specific groups instead of diverse populations. Where electronic guides provide basic information for a diverse audience who eventually visit the library expecting time-consuming assistance, the library must review its reference priorities. Administrators and reference librarians will need to decide where to draw the line on giving reference assistance to the general public. This question already exists to some extent today. However, offering library guides electronically will enhance the pressures to formally prioritize patron assistance policies.

As a final consideration, the potential implications of Web-based library guides for circulation and reference should be viewed in conjunction with the staff time required to produce and maintain these materials. Administrators will need to determine who is responsible for Web-based guides and how much time can be devoted to associated tasks. Individuals who produce and maintain these guides must place the text into HTML code and update it periodically. They need to spend time ensuring that each guide’s design is clear and easy to understand. The hardware and software products used by a diverse audience must be considered before inserting special features such as backgrounds, graphics, and frames. In addition, multiple guides may have to be prepared to accommodate users with varying knowledge levels. These are all necessary steps in the production of an effective electronic guide and often consume more staff time than expected.

Conclusion

The World Wide Web will bring many new possibilities for all libraries. How we manage the new issues that arise will have a significant impact on user access to materials—the factor on which all library functions ultimately center. Web-based library guides are no exception and require thoughtful preparation. An electronic guide’s design must reflect the same basic tenets necessary for effective access to print guides, and its contents must anticipate the equipment and subject knowledge differences inherent in any diverse audience.

Once a guide is presented on the library’s Web site, it’s likely that users will develop an expectation that additional material and assistance will be available via electronic or traditional means. Priorities concerning borrowing privileges and reference assistance may be challenged, forcing librarians and library administrators to pay particular attention to internal policy considerations. Regardless of library type or priority, each institution needs to be conscious of potentially problematic issues when offering guides electronically. The same guides that reach out to inform an expansive patronage about information resources will reach in to inform librarians about new access issues.

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