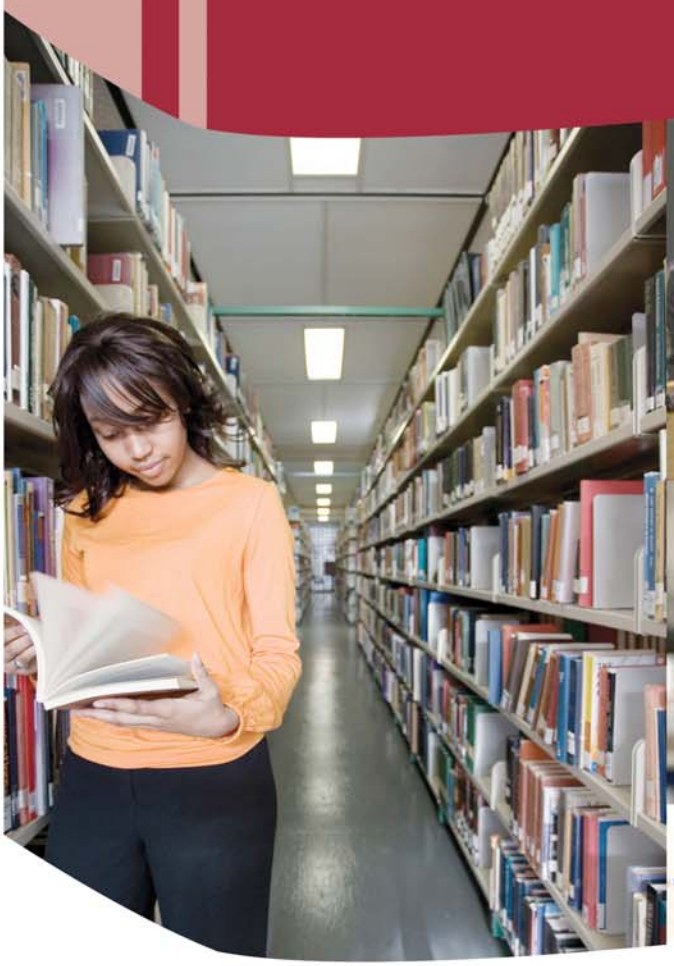
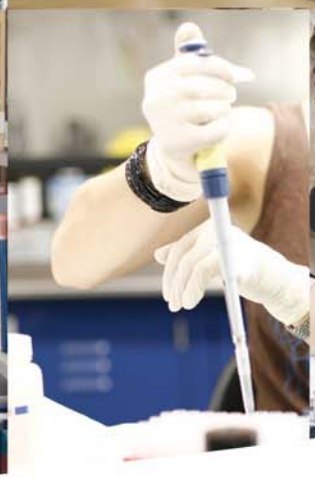
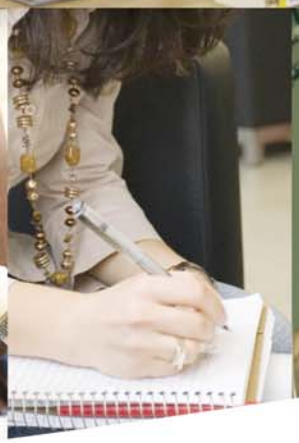
Concordia University
Arts and Science

Redesigning Your Website

GUIDE







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GUIDE TO REDESIGNING YOUR WEBSITE

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PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This document will introduce you to the process for redesigning websites in Concordia University's Faculty of Arts and Science. This document serves two purposes:

- to familiarize you with the advantages of the new University-wide web template, and
- to guide you through the initial stages of the redesign project by helping you set realistic goals for your new website and determine the scope of work that will be required.

In the process, you will be introduced to the principles of web design and user advocacy. You will have the opportunity to evaluate your existing web site as you begin to think about the design specifications for your new site. You will understand the role of the Faculty's web developer in the redesign process, and you will be made aware of the your responsibilities in the project.

WHY REDESIGN YOUR WEBSITE?

Your unit's website is included in a University-wide migration of websites to use the new web template that was produced by the Web Communications unit. This redesign effort will create a visually seamless set of websites within the University,[1] based on a shared technological infrastructure, that reflect the defining characteristics of high quality, daring, diversity, and approachability set forth in the guidelines for applying Concordia's new visual identity.[2] This undertaking will benefit the entire university community with enhanced usability and accessibility features for users and easier maintenance and better visibility for your unit.

Enhanced Usability and Accessibility Features for Users

The web template combines several interface elements, including the University global path, a standardized header and footer, a horizontal navigation bar for top-level sections, and a Tools & Quicklinks bar at the bottom of the page to help situate the user within the University. This is particularly helpful for visitors who arrived on your web page by way of a search engine.[3] Other features, like the search interface, the audience tabs, and the prominent placement of news and announcements, allow visitors to quickly find the information that they need.

The web template also comes equipped with accessibility built right into the design. Accessibility has its roots in the underlying computer code that makes up the web pages, which is fully compliant with the latest international coding standards. Accessibility allows visitors using assistive technologies, older computers, and slow Internet connections to view the site. Even users who simply wear reading glasses can benefit from the "Text Size" selectors located at the top right corner of the site.

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[1] "Tour the New Concordia University Website: The Web Redesign Project," Concordia University, http://www.concordia.ca/tour/project.php.
[2] "Tour the New Concordia University Website: Visual Design," Concordia University, http://www.concordia.ca/tour/design.php.
[3] Barbara Black, "New Concordia home page a first step," *The Concordia Journal* 2, no. 18 (2007), http://cjournal.concordia.ca/journalarchives/2006-07/june_14/011261.shtml.

Easier Maintenance and Better Visibility for Your Site

The standards-based core of the web template allows for a website's textual content to be separated from the computer code that controls the site's visual appearance. The text elements that make up the site are also given meaning; in other words, a title is differentiated from a caption or a block of text. This internal structuring of a web page has a positive impact on the maintenance and operation of the site, significantly decreasing maintenance time. Advantages include:

- Cut-and-paste updates to the site using Adobe® Contribute®
- Less training required for staff
- Content that is easily repurposed
- Easier redesigns in the future
- Removal of cross-browser issues
- Smaller file sizes and faster loading of pages
- Pages that are more visible to search engines

The redesign of your website should not be just a matter of copying material from one site to another. The redesign process is a *valuable opportunity* to evaluate your existing web presence and incorporate the feedback that you have been receiving over the years into your site. Use the redesign process to remove any headaches associated with your existing website at the same time as you recommit your website to serving its audience in the best way possible.

Websites are designed in a milieu of competing interests. The Faculty's web developer will guide you through the design process. Besides providing the obvious technical support, the web developer's role is to serve as an advocate for the users of your site. Over the past decade, web development has evolved into a discipline that incorporates project management, programming, graphic design, and user-interface design (including usability and accessibility). As web developers advocate for the users, they now can rely on a set of sound design principles to guide their design decisions. The remainder of this document will introduce you to the foundations of good web design and familiarize you with the redesign process.

SETTING GOALS FOR THE WEBSITE REDESIGN PROJECT

A successful website redesign project begins by clarifying goals for the project. In general, our primary goal is to create a website having:

- Visual clarity – a pleasing layout, with ample white space, that draws the eye to the most important information in the site and on within a page
- Informative graphics – images that personalize the site and help to drive home the written content without being distracting
- Ease of navigation – menus and links that allow the users to find the information that they want with the fewest mouse clicks
- Relevant information – what your audience is expecting to find on your website
- Timely information – information that pertains to the present or near future and that is not outdated

You can think of these characteristics as falling into two categories:

- the *structure of the site* – the page layout, the navigation system, and the organization of the pages into a logical hierarchy, and
- the *content within the site* – the text and images that make up each page as well as the site's visual image.

Fortunately, we have the University template as a basis for our page layout and navigation system. However, we will still need come up with a hierarchical organization for the site and translate this information to the menus and submenus that make up the navigation system. This task will come after we determine what content you will be presenting on the site and how many web pages it will involve. The site structure should also contain some flexibility for adding new content after the site is completed, and it will highlight timely information.

Deciding on what content to present can be a daunting task. The process can be made simpler if you first set some specific goals for your site. When setting your goals, don't think about menus or links or photos or paragraphs. First, think of your site's message. Then focus on your audience and ask yourself what their goals are when they visit your site. Your goals should align with their goals. Write down your goals and refer to them often during the redesign process.

You might find it helpful to think of the following questions when determining your goals:

Questions for Setting Goals for Your Site

Who is your audience? Students? Faculty? Staff? Parents? Alumni? Donors? The international academic community?

How can you best serve your audience?
What types of information do they need or expect?
What tasks will they need to accomplish?

Are you committed to providing timely information to your audience?
How will you ensure that your site is kept up-to-date?

What image would you like to convey to visitors on the web?
For example, is the character of your department or unit rooted in its people? In its innovative programs? In its innovative facilities?

Who is your competition? Another department? Another university?
What is their image?
What goals are driving their site?

DEFINING PROJECT SCOPE BY EVALUATING YOUR CURRENT SITE

The scope of a website redesign project depends on your evaluation of your current website as well as how much new information you would like to provide on the web. Now that you have set your project goals, you can use them as a basis for evaluating your current site.

Evaluating your current site involves 1) evaluating the site structure and 2) evaluating the content within the site. Your Faculty's web developer can guide you through this process.

Evaluating the Site Structure

When evaluating the site structure, it is helpful to think in terms of tasks. A typical task that a visitor would perform on a university website could range from "I want to register for courses" to "I want to know why I should choose Concordia." The task metaphor takes a motivation and outlines the procedure—navigating a site, skimming through an individual page or submitting a form—for producing the desired result:

Motivation		*Procedure*		*Result*
[user]	→	[site structure] navigation page layout forms	→	[content]

Tasks should follow from the goals you set for your site. Tasks allow us to more clearly see what content or what functionality is important. Moreover, tasks help us to evaluate how easily that content is retrieved or how easily that function is performed. In this metaphor, it is easy to see that site structure is the mechanism that governs the successful completion of a task. As we said earlier, site structure includes the navigation system and the page hierarchy, but it also includes page layout elements such as headings, bulleted lists, boxes, sidebars, and white space. These elements help the user pull out important information from within a page.

A good site structure allows a user to complete a task in the minimum amount of time using the minimum number of mouse clicks. Jot down some of the tasks that you think a user would want to accomplish while visiting your site and try them yourself. How did you do? Is there anything on your site that you should change? Next, complete your evaluation using the following checkpoints:

Checkpoints for Evaluating the Structure of Your Current Website

- ❑ Users can accomplish tasks quickly and easily
- ❑ The site is organized from the user's perspective
- ❑ Different audiences or users having different expectations are directed to different parts of the site
- ❑ Pages having similar information or similar function are grouped under the same menu category
- ❑ Users are not overwhelmed by too many menus or by too many choices within a menu
- ❑ Menu links use clear, descriptive text that is not easily misinterpreted by users having different expectations
- ❑ Important or time-sensitive information can be accessed directly from the home page
- ❑ The site can be easily scanned for major messages and functions
- ❑ Pages can be easily scanned for overall meaning and important or time-sensitive information
- ❑ Important information or a summary of a page's content is place at the top of a web page; links are provided to more detailed information within a page
- ❑ Headings and lists are styled for visual prominence without being overly showy
- ❑ The site contains adequate white space to improve readability
- ❑ Popup windows are used sparingly, preferably for content that will be referenced repeatedly

Evaluating the Content Within the Site

When someone starts reading a book, they expect to patiently wait as the narrative unfolds before them. When someone surfs the Web, they expect to find the information they are looking for within seconds. Writing for the Web is much different than writing for print matter. Web usability guru Jakob Nielsen has found that:

- 79% of users merely scan web pages,
- people read 25% slower from computer screens than from paper,
- good web text should contain only half of the words of its paper equivalent, and
- people prefer to focus on text and headings to images. [4,5]

These statistics underscore the need to evaluate the text in your existing website to guarantee that your information reaches its intended audience. In the section on evaluating site structure, we hinted at using page layout and the organization of information within a page to enhance a site's readability. Mr. Nielsen used eye tracking to discover that a reader's focus stays within the main text area of a web page and that users scan web content in a F-shaped pattern, [6] concentrating on the first two paragraphs and scanning for headings. When writing for the Web, it is imperative that you provide an informative page title, summarize the most important information at the top of the page, and briefly present more detailed information making ample use of headings and bulleted lists.

Web pages are also different from print matter in the ease in which images can be added within the page. Web pages can also include Flash animations and live or recorded video. Photos and videos have the potential to either add to or detract from your web pages. Gratuitous animations, "talking-head" videos, or rapidly changing slideshows add nothing to a site, but take valuable space away from important information. They also increase the time it takes to load a page and take bandwidth away from other users. On the other hand, photos or videos that reinforce your message can provide a positive experience for your visitors. For example, prospective students do want to see what life is like on campus. But prepare your web photos with care! Use your valuable page real estate to maximum effect by cropping images to show

[4] Jakob Nielsen, "Writing for the Web", http://www.sun.com/980713/webwriting/
[5] Jakob Nielsen, "Eyetracking Study of Web Readers", http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20000514.html
[6] Jakob Nielsen, "F-Shaped Pattern For Reading Web Content", http://www.useit.com/alertbox/reading_pattern.html

only the regions of the image that are relevant to your message[7]. Your Faculty's web developer can assist you with this.

Additional guidelines for writing for the Web are included in the "Checkpoints For Evaluating the Content Within Your Current Website" at the end of this section. If you have just completed the evaluation of your site's structure, it would be beneficial for you to take a break before evaluating your site's content. A fresh pair of eyes, even someone else's eyes, will be better able to objectively judge the quality of your content.

[7] Jakob Nielsen, "Ten Good Deeds in Web Design", http://www.useit.com/alertbox/991003.html

Checkpoints for Evaluating the Content Within Your Current Website

- ❑ The appearance of your site conveys your intended image
- ❑ Content is relevant to the user's objectives; infrequently-used information is left out
- ❑ All pages are given clear titles; users realize when they have landed on the page that they were looking for
- ❑ Important information or a summary of a page's content is placed at the top of a web page; links are provided to more detailed information within a page
- ❑ Each page in the site could stand alone
- ❑ The home page is not crowded with text
- ❑ Terminology and titles are consistent throughout the site
- ❑ Pages use simple language without jargon; all specialty terms are defined
- ❑ Paragraphs are brief and to the point
- ❑ Headings and lists are used in favor of multiple paragraphs
- ❑ If several people provide text for the site, someone edits the text for consistency of writing style
- ❑ Link text should be meaningful and consistent throughout the site; "Click here" should be avoided
- ❑ Links use standard conventions, such as underlining
- ❑ Images and videos should be relevant and not distracting; text alternatives should be provided
- ❑ Photos should be cropped to display only the regions of the image that are relevant to your message

THE REDESIGN PROCESS

Now that the goals and the scope of the website redesign project have been defined, you and the Faculty's web developer can begin planning the new site. The table at the end of this section gives all of the steps in the redesign process (including the ones we have already covered in this document) and assigns responsibility for each step. The Faculty's web developer will aid in organizing the site's pages and suggesting appropriate (as well as inappropriate) content, but you will make the final decision as to what should be included in the site.

Notice that two steps have been highlighted in the table: *Planning meetings* and *Content created/provided*. The first step is a joint responsibility between you and the web developer, and the second is your responsibility. These are the most difficult and most time-consuming steps in the redesign process and the most likely places for the project to stall.

We understand that the decision process is complicated by the large number of people that make up a department or unit. In order to make things run as smoothly as possible, we suggest that one full-time faculty member or other administrator be assigned as your representative in the design process. Only that person, their assistant, and possibly a department's chair should work with the web developer, and only those people will be given access to update the website's content after the site is completed. If individual faculty members or other organizations would like to maintain their own professional pages outside of the site, we encourage you to link to those pages from within the site.

We strongly recommend that you follow the steps in this Guide to define the goals and scope of the redesign project at the outset. Nothing is worse than having to scrap a site that is nearly completed because important stakeholders were not considered in the beginning. We also recognize that your representative will walk a fine line between inclusiveness and making the decisions that get the job done. We hope that they can use the sound principles of web design set forth in this Guide to back up their decisions and to educate other members of your department or unit in the philosophy of user advocacy.

Your website should be as vibrant and as dynamic as your department or unit. Don't forget to include your student association representatives in the design process as well. Besides being one of your main audiences, students are very familiar with the norms of the Internet and the expectations of its users. But keep in mind that no one can create the perfect website. Trends change, technology changes, people change, and departments and units change, and compromises struck one day may not be best the

next. Websites are meant to be updated frequently with timely and relevant content. Never stop gathering feedback and incorporating it into your site, even long after your site is "complete."

*What Is **Not** Part of Your Redesigned Website*

It is useful to note what services will *not* be provided by the Academic Technology unit or the Faculty's web developer. These include

- Creation or hosting of department or unit intranets. Intranets are internal computer networks for communicating and sharing calendars and documents within an office.

- Blogs or online journals. IITS does not support the use of blogging software on its servers.

- Updates to faculty member's personal web pages (including those used for professional purposes) outside of the standard faculty profile page that is included in a department's website.

- Websites for student organizations.

- Discussion forums.

While these items are either not technically feasible within the University at this time or are not part of Academic Technology's mandate, we are still interested in hearing about your technology needs. We are always open to expanding our services, if possible, and to providing R&D support on instructional technology projects. What is not possible today may be possible tomorrow.

Steps in the Redesign Process

Steps	*Responsible Party*	
	Web developer	*You*
Initiation of project	as needed	
Representative assigned to project		x
Initial meeting between your representative and the Faculty's web developer		x
Goals set for new site		x
Evaluation of existing site	joint responsibility	
Planning meetings (between web developer and your representative and within your department or unit)	joint responsibility	
Site shell added to test server	x	
Tentative site structure and live walk-through	joint responsibility	
Finalize site structure		x
Finalize colours and graphics		x
Styling completed	x	
Banners and graphics completed	x	
Metadata entered	x	
Content provided/created		x
Content entered into new site	to be determined	
Quality assurance	x	
Approval of department or unit		x
Move to live server	x	
Staff trained on updating new site (Adobe® Contribute®)	x	