

Universal Usability Statements: Marking the Trail for All Users

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Signposts at ski areas help skiers to choose slopes that match their skills and equipment. Skiers use this information (easy, intermediate, and expert; grooming; vertical drop) to make informed decisions, avoiding routes that may be too difficult. They may choose different skis or waxes depending on the conditions. When too many trails are marked “extremely difficult,” operators cut some more “moderate” and “easy” trails to allow more visitors to enjoy the scenery.

For Web surfers, good guidance and safe visits are still too rare. Despite extensive research and improved products, the primary experience of many users is frustration and anxiety. Common problems include long download times, incompatible browser versions, and unavailable plug-ins. Too often users find that their screen size does not match the designer’s screen size, needed fonts are not installed, or media players just don’t work on their machine. These problems are troubling to experienced users as well as novices; they are even more problematic to users with disabilities.

We need trail signs for Web sites.

Universal usability statements are declarations by Web site designers of the usability measures and concerns associated with a given Web site. The statements describe the contents of a site, browser requirements, network requirements, and other characteristics that may influence its usability.

For users, these declarations will enable them to avoid the frustration of dealing with sites that require new plug-ins, fresh browser versions, or media capabilities that are not

installed. For example, for users with visual impairments, knowing that a given site has been tested with their screen reader software will reassure them that they can comfortably explore the site.

For Web site operators, these statements offer a powerful means of building user confidence. The presence of a universal usability statement on a site tells users that the developers of the site are concerned about the quality of the user experience. Just as “works best with Foo browser, version 7.9” icons currently tell users what they need to be successful site visitors, eventually, the presence of a universal usability graphic on the site might provide a visible reminder of the availability of information about the usability of the site. Entries identifying potential usability problems can be used by concerned developers to guide revisions.

Like well-written Web site privacy policies, usability statements should be designed to provide as much information as possible as quickly as possible. This goal can be accomplished through the use of common phrasing and organization that will make the content of these statements easy to understand.

To begin this process, we have created a universal usability statement template. The template is divided into several categories, with examples of specific entries under each category (see sidebar). It can be used to generate statements that share a common style. Starting from the basic template, Web site developers can provide the information needed and omit items that do not apply.

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Basic System Requirements: Which systems has the site been tested on?

Browser Requirements: Which browsers, including version numbers? Does the site use frames? Java? Cascading Style Sheets? ActiveX Component? Which plug-ins are necessary?

Input Devices: Does the site require any particular mice? Can the site be navigated with keyboard only? Which (if any) speech recognition products can be used with the site?

Display: What are the recommended and minimum screen resolutions? Was the site designed for a fixed width? What screen sizes have been tested? Mobile devices? Handheld devices? Which font sizes have been used and tested? Do nontext messages have text equivalents?

Audio-Video: What sorts of audio and video (if any) are used? Are alternative descriptions provided?

Network Connection: What is the maximum download size for a page? What is the minimal bandwidth needed? Recommended? Which bandwidths have been tested?

Access for users with disabilities: Is there a text-only version of the site? Which alternate browsers have been tested? Which screen readers? Has the site accessibility been validated? If so, to what level?

Diverse Users: Which languages are supported? Has the site been tested on left-to-right and right-to-left languages? What education level is required for the site? Has novice user testing been conducted? Are there any other assumptions of user background?

User Support: What is the availability and response rate of online (e-mail) assistance? Phone assistance? Are there any online communities on the site? Is there a site FAQ?

Contact Information: How can the Webmaster be contacted? When was the statement last updated?

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The template can be found at www.universalusability.org/template.html and an example at www.universalusability.org/about/uupolicy.html.

Developers may find that they do not have the resources to do all of the testing implied. This is to be expected—universal usability is a goal to be achieved gradually. See also the World Wide Web Consortium's Checklist for Web Content Accessibility (www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/full-checklist).

Web site operators interested in promoting universal usability should use the template to

develop usability statements and place them prominently on their sites. Eventually, we hope to see usability statements as a standard component of site design, just as privacy policies are currently found on commercial and noncommercial sites.

To make this happen, we need your help. Publish universal usability statements for your Web sites. Provide feedback on content and format. Most important, we need champions and evangelists, individual and institutional, who will promote the idea of the universal usability statement in particular and universal usability in general. ☺

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