A Practical Guide to

Designing
for the Web

by Mark Boulton

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Contents

This little book is about graphic design. It's a book about the craft of graphic design practice as applied to the web. It's not a book about CSS or Usability. I may well touch on those subjects throughout, but only to support a point I'm making in relation to design.

Web design should use the principles of graphic design, but the topic of web design tends to focus on web standards, browser technology, user behaviour and backend development. Many web design books touch on some elements of graphic design, but they usually address the subject briefly and superficially. Even most graphic design books just show pretty pictures of other people's work. There are not enough books outlining the principles, practicalities and tools of the graphic design trade.

Who Should Read This Book?

A Practical Guide to Designing for the Web is for people who want to learn the basics of graphic design and apply them to their web designs–producing more effective, polished, detailed and professional sites. It's also helpful for graphic designers who want to brush up on the basics or learn how to integrate what they already know about design with the demands and quirks of designing specifically for the web.

Some Assumptions

- That although the book contains little HTML or CSS, it assumes that you have a working knowledge of web standards.

- That you work in web design and development. Business owners and managers and others who want a well–designed site may also benefit from reading this book, but the book is directed at the people who plan and create websites.

- That this book doesn't aim to be a definitive guide to web design or graphic design. It simply presents some of the theory, tips and processes I've learnt in the past fifteen years.

Credit

I never imagined I'd ever finish writing this book. Without the help of the following people, it simply would not have been possible:

Carolyn Wood, whose enduring patience is only outweighed by her attention to detail. Carolyn helped shape this book out of a few disparate blog posts, and was instrumental in forming the structure of what you're about to read.

Robert Mills, **Nick Boulton**, and **Benn Pearson** at Mark Boulton Design for project management, typesetting and production.

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The guys at **Beanlogic** for continually listening to me complain about the amount of work to do on this book whilst still trying to hold down the day job.

Last, but certainly not least, to my wife, **Emma**, and daughter, **Alys**, for putting up with me as I spent hours and hours in front of a screen.

Introduction

In the summer of 2005, just before the first @media conference in London, I wrote an article on my blog called 'Five Simple Steps to Better Typography'. It was a five part series and presented some simple facts about typography that I felt needed to be addressed, particularly on the web.

Within two months, the traffic on my site had doubled. In the following months I was Dugg twice, and Slashdotted once, which brought my server to its knees–along with a hefty hosting bill. You might say the articles had taken off somewhat.

After working as a designer solely for the World Wide Web since 1997, I've been aware – sometimes painfully – of the amount of web 'designers' in the industry who haven't been to design school. Don't get me wrong, I'm not presenting some kind of design snobbery here, but the popularity of those articles two years ago highlighted the widespread desire for some basic graphic design tips and techniques that are not generally well known outside of design school.

When I finished school, I attended college to study a two–year course in Art, then on to a Foundation course in Art and Design. The first course after school was well within my comfort zone. We painted, and drew in charcoal, pen and ink. It was art, as I knew it. Foundation was a whole other ball game. I liken it to working in a kitchen, or starting in the army. First off, they tell you to forget everything you've done before. It's a bit melodramatic, but they break you down, and rebuild you from strong foundations.

I went to university in Portsmouth in the UK. It's a small university and had, at the time, one of only two undergraduate typography degrees offered in the UK. Following a higher diploma in graphic design, I wanted to specialise in typography, as I felt there was still much more to learn than in the six months devoted

to the subject at university. In Portsmouth I was educated by two book designers approaching retirement. When I arrived, I wanted to learn about type, but on a Mac. I'd spent the summer as an intern at an advertising agency in Manchester, setting tables and forms on an old Quadra. But no, the course in Portsmouth was about the basics.

In the first few weeks, they had us drawing type and grids on a drawing board. I felt more like an architecture student than a typography student. Wasn't I supposed to be working on a Mac? Surely that's what designers need to know?

In the past few years, I've begun to understand the simple lessons I was learning back then. To really get to grips with letterforms, you have to draw them. Even now, I loosely hand-render type in my sketchbook. If the type is a sans-serif, I hand-render a sans serif. If I plan on using Georgia, I hand-render a close approximation.

As design for the World Wide Web is maturing, we are seeing a growing appreciation and willingness to learn good graphic design practice. Studios such as Happy Cog, and Coudal Partners, whose adoption of simple, powerful graphic design as a central service of their offerings, have been influential. Now, three years on, we see a constant chatter about grid systems and good typography. A few people are even art directing.

Simple, sophisticated graphic design is making a shift from the offline world to the web as more designers are finding that the tools which were formerly so constrictive – the browsers – now allow them to create the layouts that once were difficult or impossible. The web is looking good, and will only get better.

Originally devised over three years ago, and announced over two years ago, this book has moved far beyond the original idea of rehashing some old blog posts. Some articles are still included, but mostly, this book has been written from scratch, and is based on the premise that was central to those original blog posts: *Five Simple Steps to Designing for the Web*.

Getting Started

Designing for the web is different than designing for any other medium. The breadth of skills required is sometimes daunting. The depth of experience required, seemingly unobtainable. Yet, the medium attracts designers from all spheres of design practice: from engineering and architecture, to product and graphic design. This chapter aims to provide a snapshot of the current state of the medium, and our role as practitioners working within it.

1