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Designing Web Pages for Depositories

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Who, at this point, has *not* heard about the wonders of the Internet and the vast potential of the World Wide Web? Who has *not* heard the colorful, if clichéd, term of "information superhighway"? The number of Web sites continues to grow exponentially, and an increasing number of those sites provide public access to Government information, whether on official Government sites, unofficial or personal sites, or through depository library home pages. The widespread presence of depositories on the Web has had three significant results. First, more Government information has been made available to more people as librarians and staff track down obscure sites and provide links to them through their pages. Second, access to this information has often been simplified as depository staffers make use of their library-oriented conceptual frameworks (such as subject headings and bibliographies) to help people navigate Government sites. Finally, it becomes more difficult for those libraries not yet represented on the Web to present a new framework for accessing Government information on the Internet without repeating the style and organizational approach that other libraries have used.

For those depository libraries that have hesitated to make their presence more widely known through the Web, for whatever reason, I hope that this discussion will give you several new ideas and encourage you to make your own contributions in promoting Government information on the Internet. After all, if I could learn how to design Web pages and live to tell about it, you can, too! My colleague, Rosalind Tedford, and I would like to present the steps you might follow to create your own Web pages based on the experiences we had at our individual institutions.

Before I began to work on our depository page at The College of Wooster¹, I asked myself certain questions that I think are important considerations for anyone creating any new Web pages:

Do you want to revise an old page or create a new one?

Can you revise an older page with minimal effort, or do you need to create an entirely new one? In my case, the library had a government resources Web page in place when I took over the project; however, it was poorly organized and thus not very useful. The student assistant who updated all of the library's pages could not keep up with the constantly changing needs of the depository page. I therefore

decided to take advantage of the summer break to begin a complete overhaul of the page's organization and design.

Do you have experience in HTML?

I had absolutely no experience in HTML when I started the task of revising our Web page, so I knew I would need to learn the basics quickly.

What technical requirements do you need to meet?

I had the good fortune to work in the same building as my chief Web contacts, so I could get fast answers to my questions about software for writing and updating the pages (these programs were already installed on my workstation) as well as any layout or content requirements. I had no real restrictions; I just needed to be aware of how our depository page would fit in with the library pages. Unfortunately, some other Web servers have more stringent requirements, and it is best to learn about them before you invest any time in your page. (Otherwise, you may find you have to start over!)

What do you want from your Web page?

The two main questions to ask about your Web page are "What information will this page provide?" and "Who do I intend to reach with this information?" With so much information available on the Web, you want to be sure that you are not "reinventing the wheel." In my case, the main audience for our department pages has always been The College of Wooster community. That meant I needed to tailor the information on the pages to the research interests of faculty, students, and staff, interests that closely follow the general strengths of the college curriculum as well as of our depository collection. In addition, I wanted to ensure that the pages would be useful for those of us working in the library to help further those research interests, so the pages needed to be a combination of specific source sites and directories or locators.

Where to Start

Having answered these preliminary questions, my next step was to lay the groundwork for the Web pages. My top priority was to learn HTML quickly and thoroughly. An eight-week e-mail course on HTML did not prove to be as useful as I had hoped since I found the pace too slow, and the computing center did not offer a course on HTML until well after I had started teaching myself. Fortunately, our library had a copy of Laura Lemay's excellent book *Teach Yourself Web Publishing With HTML 3.0 in a Week*². By reading a chapter or two a day and following the exercises outlined in the book, I picked up the basics very quickly.

Once I learned HTML, I needed to do a little research on how best to use it in reorganizing and redesigning our Web page. By looking at the home pages of several other depositories³, I learned many different ways to organize the links to Government sites. In addition, the pages of other depositories gave me ideas for page design and layout. Some libraries used a simple, straightforward outline of the information they provided, while others

used graphics, tables, and even frames to enhance their presentation. Since my knowledge of HTML was still at a relatively basic level, I found that by viewing the document source of pages I particularly liked, I could study the HTML commands used to create the layout elements I admired and then create my own design without copying someone else's page.

After exploring the possibilities of design and organization, I started searching for possible links to include in our department pages. My first step was to evaluate all of the existing sites from the old page and then find new sites to add to our page. Most sites previously listed on our page were still useful and could form the foundation of the revised pages, but some sites had been upgraded from gopher sites to WWW addresses or had simply disappeared and therefore had to be rediscovered. I then needed to find additional sites for our pages, a process that was easy and entertaining, if time-consuming. I found several useful sites announced on GOVDOC-L by other Webmasters or other depository librarians who had discovered these sites. While examining other depository Web sites, I also looked at some of the links listed there and added them to my list. Finally, to make certain that I hadn't missed any other potentially useful sites, I tried several searches using Yahoo!⁴ and other search engines, occasionally just browsing their directories for any unfamiliar sites. Every time I found a site that looked interesting, I spent some time browsing the site, evaluating both the information found there and the ease with which I could navigate the site, then added it to an ever-growing list of links.

Spinning Your Web

Armed with a long list of sites, I started to create (or "spin") our new Web pages by sorting through these sites and organizing them into larger categories that would make navigation easier. I started with five broad categories and then subdivided each category into more specific subjects:

- Government Publications at Wooster (collection, hours, staff)
- Federal Depository Library Program (plus resources for librarians)
- Guides to Government Information (in-house guides, guides from other depositories, Internet guides)
- Key Government Sites (Federal, state, locators)
- What's New (new Internet publications, current topics, news sources)

This division soon proved too vague and unwieldy, especially since the bulk of our links ended up on an oversized Key Sites page. I often had difficulty finding links myself because I had forgotten on which page I had listed them. A new organization quickly became necessary, and after looking at the examples of other depositories once more, I came up with a more detailed framework:

- General Information

collection, Depository Program, staff, guides

- Finding Federal Government Information
 - GPO Access, searching by agency, subject, SuDocs number, title
- Finding Other Government Information
 - state and local, foreign, international
- In the News
 - current topics, news sources, selected new sites

Once this new organizational structure was in place, I could then sort links into the appropriate categories and create brief but useful lists of sites for each category.

Developing the design and layout of the pages turned out to be even more of a trial-and-error effort. Given my limited knowledge of HTML and my desire to have a straightforward, useful site, I decided against using a graphics-intensive approach in designing the pages. Instead, I kept the information organized in brief lists with minimal graphics, choosing only a depository logo to head each page. This simpler approach ensured that each page would load relatively quickly, encouraging greater use⁵. It has also given me very few maintenance problems to solve!

Once I had developed various outlines of design and organization for the department pages, I created brief practice pages from personal bookmarks that allowed me to test my designs. These pages also gave me an opportunity to experiment with color, graphics, and layout as well as to sharpen my HTML skills. As I felt more comfortable with the elements of HTML and had a better idea of how I wanted the pages for the department to look, I began creating the "official" Government Publications pages. It took a great deal of tinkering with the commands, but I finally came up with a layout that appealed to me. I then created a template page with the header and footer information as well as other standard HTML commands. This approach helped me standardize the entire layout for all of the department pages without much additional effort.

After I completed the department pages to my initial satisfaction, I set up a testing period for the new pages. First, I saved the new pages to diskette, loaded them on the workstations of everyone in the department, then reset the preferences in Netscape on each computer to choose the new department page as the home page. This made it very easy for all of us to test the pages whenever we pulled up Netscape, and it encouraged us to explore all of the links listed. Once we had all thoroughly tested the pages and I had made a few recommended changes, I then took the final step of loading the pages onto the college's server. The second phase of testing took place as I sent messages to friends and colleagues through an announcement on GOVDOC-L notifying them of the new page and requesting that people look at the pages, test the links, explore the organization--in short, "kick the wheels" on the newest Government publications vehicle to hit the Information Superhighway. The many responses I received were all greatly appreciated and very useful.

Keeping Your Pages Current

While I wish I could say that I had been able to rest on my laurels at this point, the most critical part of creating Web pages has been an ongoing one: keeping the pages current. This can only be accomplished when you yourself use your pages frequently. The easiest way to remind myself to use the department pages on a regular basis is to keep the home page on my Web browser set to the department page so that I can start searching from this point. I have also reset the Netscape preferences on the public workstations in Government Publications to pull up our home page first so that our patrons are encouraged to use our site and to give us feedback.

Maintaining the status quo on our pages, however, is inadequate in itself, so I regularly test and evaluate new sites. Notices and announcements about new Government and Government-related sites appear often on GOVDOC-L, so I collect the messages and test each one for relevance and usefulness to our department. I also keep my eyes open for other sites mentioned in the local paper, in library journals, in magazines devoted to computers or the Internet, on the radio, and in Web sites that review excellent new sites. Once I find a site that I think would make a good addition to our pages, I edit and reload the appropriate pages on our server.

Beyond adding sites, I keep the pages well-maintained by testing all links periodically. Given the size and number of our department Web pages at this point, this can be a time-consuming and dull endeavor. (My last check of all our links took two afternoons!) However, it is critical to the accuracy and currency of any Web page and should be done on a regular basis. If any links are found leading to dead ends, I first try to find a new URL for the site, and if that fails, I drop the site from our pages. One thing that I have found to be very useful in keeping track of the many links I've made is a master list of all the URLs used in our pages. I have simply listed these links by title (often a brief form of the title that I can remember), indicated on which pages each link appears, and then provided the URL. When I start testing our links, I pull up the master list and correct URLs as necessary, both in the master list and in the HTML files.

Aside from these technical considerations, you can keep your pages up-to-date by continuing to learn from other libraries' examples. It never hurts to check back periodically and see what other depositories are doing with their Web pages! You can learn new techniques or get ideas for updated designs, especially if you reach a stage when you think you'd like to try something a little new with your own page.

In looking back at this entire project, I must say that learning how to design Web pages has been much easier than I ever expected. Although the HTML tags seemed like gibberish at first glance, I eventually found them to be as simple to decipher as the commands from any word processing program. Creating the design and layout for a Web page became easier as I learned what elements produced the greatest visual appeal. Although designing, maintaining, and updating our Web pages has been a time-consuming effort, the time spent has proven to be a worthwhile investment as the pages become a more valuable reference and research tool for library staff and patrons alike.

II. <http://www.wooster.edu/Library/>

GovDoc.html

2. Lemay, Laura. *Teach Yourself Web Publishing With HTML 3.0 in a Week*. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Sams.net, 1996. A third edition is now available and covers HTML 3.2.

3. Among the many depository home pages now available on the Web, I found the following to be the most helpful:

- Oklahoma State University

<http://www.library.okstate.edu/dept/govdocs/docs.htm>

- University of Memphis

<http://www.lib.memphis.edu/gpo/unclesam.htm>

- University of the South

<http://www.sewanee.edu/dupontlibrary/GovDocs/govdoc.html>

and

- Western Illinois University

<http://www.wiu.edu/users/milibo/wiu/depts/govpubs/home.sht>

Other depository home pages can be found through the University of Idaho's listing at <http://www.lib.uidaho.edu/govdoc/otherdep.html>

4. <http://www.yahoo.com/>

5. This approach has been advocated by many Web designers, including Jakob Nielsen (in "Top Ten Mistakes in Web Design," *The Alertbox : Current Issues in Web Usability* May 1996: online, Available: <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9605>

html> and Maggie Parhamovich (in "Spinning Your Own Web," *Documents to the People* 24.1 (1996): 48-49).