

# Rule Busters Lose

By Bob McElwain

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Bob McElwain  
mc@sierratel.com

Site Tips and Tricks <http://www.sitetipsandtricks.com>

Slow loading pages are site killers. Splash screens as well. Most webmasters appear to know such things. And most know better than to demand the download of some plug in to view their site. Still, many are breaking other rules as if unaware even of their existence. The cost in doing so is incalculable, as it amounts to what visitors might have bought had they lingered for a time.

I find the following rules broken routinely. And it continues to puzzle me. It is difficult to believe anybody who has put together a website is unaware of these rules. If they are aware of them, and break them, this makes even less sense. Whatever the case, here they are.

## What's In This For Me?

When a visitor hits your site, there is no thought of you, your site, or how hard you worked to put it all together. All that matters is the above question. And you have only a few seconds in which to answer it to your visitor's satisfaction.

So what's with the giant logo up top that fills half the first screen? Or that blinding, bright red slogan sprawled across the width of the page? What's with that blue and purple thing to the right whirling like crazy?

Such things do not answer your visitor's question. In fact they send the mouse cursor scurrying to hover over the Back button.

## About Table Width

One that's becoming a favorite of mine is ...

This site is best viewed with your browser window adjusted to 800 x 600 pixels.

Hey, if I've got a horizontal scroll bar, I know this is so. Why waste valuable space belaboring the obvious? And if you think I'm going to readjust my window dimensions to accommodate you, you're out of your mind.

And what about those WebTV viewers? 12 million, maybe. What are they supposed to adjust? And of those 24 million AOL members who use the AOL browser, what magic button do they press to increase the maximum of 585 pixels to your "desired" setting?

As recently as January, 2001, TheCounter.Com reported 7% of surfers are still using 640 pixel monitors. Do you expect these people to try a hammer or something?

Your site is not about you or what you want. It's all about your visitors and what they want. Provided you want to sell, that is.

### A Fast, Easy Read Is What It's All About

While other factors of your website matter a great deal, nothing matters more than providing pages that are quick and easy to read. Picture a fellow standing in a crowded subway car, bumped and joggled this way and that, trying to read the evening paper. How much patience does he have with copy difficult to follow?

The same is true of your visitors. Can you draw them past your headline? Do your sub-headings grab attention? Will one of them slow your visitor long enough to start reading that body copy you so laboriously crafted?

If they do, they won't stay long with line lengths greater than 65 characters. Give me five bucks for every site I've seen bust this rule, and I can afford to take the next couple of years off!

### New Happenings Don't Change Old Rules

Sure, the Web is new. But some things don't change. Parents and teachers have been searching frantically for over a hundred years for better ways to teach kids how to read. Why? Because the better kids read, the better they do in school. Drop the accumulated research into the lake of your choice and watch the water level rise ominously.

Long before the Web was dreamt of, we knew the maximum line length for easy reading was 65 characters. Violate this rule as you please, but the existence of the Web does not change it.

Grab a couple of novels off your book shelf and start counting characters. If you find a line with more than 65 characters, it's got a lot of narrow ones in it. Publishers are keenly aware of this rule. Many webmasters either are not, or choose to ignore it. Either way, say bye-bye to those visitors who expect and demand a fast, easy read.

### If Line Length Didn't Run Them Off, Try New Times Roman!

Look, this isn't a debatable point. That New Time Roman, or a close cousin, is the favored font in the print world, means nothing on a computer monitor. Not one darned thing. In print, it's those serifs that make Times Roman so easy to read; they accent the character for quicker identification.

But those same serifs slow reading on a monitor by over 20%. Why? Simple. It's a matter of pixels.

If you display 80 characters in Courier on one line in a 600 pixel window, this means you have roughly 7 pixels in width for each character. Draw an array of dots to represent pixels 7 wide and 9 tall. Maybe duplicate the pattern several times with an editor, then print it. Now try drawing some characters.

It won't take long to discover that there aren't many dots that can be used to draw lines at an angle. That's why italic is so faint and hard to read on a monitor.

If that's not a sufficient challenge, try drawing some circles by connecting dots. The kind of circles

used to create the serifs in Times Roman. Little tiny circles. You'll make a mess of it, I guarantee, just as your monitor does.

## The Better Choices

Since reading is about 25% slower on a monitor compared to printed material, you need to make a special effort to produce copy quick and easy to read. Holding line lengths under 65 characters helps.

Use Arial or Verdana. The latter is best for there is more space between characters, which helps avoid the big black globbiness of large blocks of text.

Forget the screen sized logos and company slogans. Answer that question: What's in it for me? And at all cost make it easy to read your page and copy. Provided you do want sales, that is.

Forget animation, flash, and such. It only interrupts the reader. Picture that all important line at the bottom of your presentation: Click To Order. Then a half inch below it, a multi-colored whirling gizmo.

Will the reader's attention remain focused on the link and the action you want taken? Or will attention be distracted by the whirling gizmo? If it is, will it ever return to your link? Maybe, but I won't bet on it.

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