

Evaluation of the Livermore Public Library Web Site

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### Abstract

This paper evaluates the Livermore Public Library Web site, specifically focusing on the layout, navigation, online catalog, and help screens. The site is looked at from the point of view of a novice user, and the paper evaluates how easy information is to find and interpret. Overall, the site was found to be well organized and clear, but improvements could be made on the online references page, the help screens, and the presentation of information in the online catalog.

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### Introduction

A library Web site should have general information about the library, such as location, hours, and what services the library offers. It should also have information on events and programs, as well as how to reserve rooms for events. The online resources, such as the online public access catalog, the periodicals database, and electronic databases, should be easy to find and access.

The Web site, and the online catalog, need to be intuitive and easy for patrons to use remotely, without the help of a librarian. The design should have ample negative (unused) space, and menus should be clear and distinct. Screens should have clear titles so the patron always knows where in the site the page is located. On-screen language should be positive and professional, and avoid jargon (Shires and Olszak, 1992).

The users of the system evaluated are the general population of the city of Livermore. This includes a wide range of ages, education levels, job types, and skills, which means the Web site has to be set up to handle both novice and experienced users. This paper will focus on students and novice users of the Web site.

### Layout

The overall layout of the Livermore Public Library Web site is clear and organized. On most pages, there are general links across the top and links to library information and services down the left side, and the pages have a consistent color scheme that ties the site together. On the front page, a search box to the library catalog is prominent in the top left of the center space, and to the right of that is the address and phone number of the main

branch, the Civic Center Library. Underneath this is information on events and classes, as well as contact information for all three of the branches. The most useful information, the catalog and the links, is displayed clearly and prominently, while the other information is visible but less intrusive. Each page has a title, located at the top of the page under the links.

However, the layout of the page is done completely with tables. According to Web Junction's site on Web site accessibility for non-profits, tables can be difficult for screen readers to interpret, and should be kept small (2004, ¶ 13). Screen readers are often used by people with vision problems to interpret Web pages. In addition, the links across the top and down the left side of the page are images, not text. Pages heavy with images can cause problems for people with slow internet connections. The images are small, which generally keeps download times low, but there are a lot of them.

### Navigation

On the whole, the site navigation is good. Most of the links across the top and down the left side of the page are clearly labeled and intuitive. Each page has a link back to the home page, labeled either "home" or "library home," as well as links to other parts of the site. However, there is a major flaw in that a patron looking for journals and periodicals would have a difficult time finding them.

A student coming to the library Web site for research is most likely to be looking for all types of publications—books, journals and periodicals. The search box for the library catalog is prominently displayed and easy to find, but journals and periodicals are not mentioned on the front page. Users are likely to assume that the catalog will also give

them access to journals and periodicals; in a usability test on an academic library's Web site, most students selected the link for the library catalog when looking for journal articles (Battleson *et al*, 2001, p. 193). A similar study by Cockrell and Jayne found that the participants "did not recognize the difference between what would be found in the library catalog as opposed to the periodical indexes" (2002, p. 123). These studies indicate a need for the contents and purposes of the library catalog and the available databases and indexes to be clearly defined. There is nothing on the Livermore Public Library Web page to indicate that the catalog does not have journals and periodicals, nor is there any description of what the catalog does contain. The correct link for journals and periodicals is "online references," but because nothing on the page indicates what "online references" are or where the link will take the user, it is likely to be ignored, and the journals and periodicals may not be found.

The "online references" page is a listing of many kinds of resources—databases, indexes, and other resources the library provides. The services are listed down the center of the page and separated into three categories: new additions, most frequently used, and other resources. The resources are extensive, covering homework help for children, resources for businesses and companies, health and wellness, newspapers, science, and more.

However, although the page is rich in resources, their usefulness is reduced because very few of these resources have descriptions. Other than any clues provided by the title, there is nothing to indicate what information the resource contains or why it would be useful. Grouping the resources by how new they are and how frequently they are used, rather than by content, means a patron would need to scan the entire list to see what

options are available for a certain subject. Cockrell and Jayne found that “users generally skim Web pages for cues to their usefulness, investing only about 10 second per page” (2002, p. 123). In addition, a usability study by McGillis and Toms found that “users are very reluctant to click a link unless they are fairly certain that they will discover what they are looking for” (2001, p. 364). The lack of descriptions may make patrons reluctant to try different links, and patrons would be likely to give up before finding what they need.

When browsing Web pages, including library Web pages, users tend to choose the first reasonable option, the first link that looks like it might be useful (Krug, 2000, p. 24). Once users find a somewhat-useful option, they tend to return there, without looking for a more appropriate choice (p. 28). Without descriptions, patrons are likely to scan over the list of resources, and then choose a link from the first third or half of the page without knowing whether it would be useful or not, which means they miss potentially more-relevant links. A one- to two-sentence description for each resource would make the online references page clearer and easier to use, allowing patrons to be more successful.

### Catalog Search

The Livermore Public Library Web site provides a number of different ways to search the library catalog. Most of them are simple enough for a novice user to understand without assistance, and there is also an advanced search page where experienced searchers could use wildcards, Boolean operators, and field limits. Overall the catalog search function is well designed and easy for users of varying experience levels to use.

The home page offers quick access to the online catalog by providing a search box near the top of the front page. It includes a drop-down menu that gives the patron the option of searching by title, author, subject, keyword, or call number. The link labeled “library catalog” on the side navigation bar takes the patron to a page with a similar search box and drop-down menu that also has links to more detailed searches by specific field. These include advanced keyword search, author/title search, and ISSN/ISBN search, in addition to the options provided on the drop-down menu.

The pages for searching specific fields include search tips specific to searching that field; for example, the author search page tells the patron to enter the author’s last name first, while the keyword search page explains wildcards and phrase searches. There is also a note on the subject search page explaining that the subject search uses a specific, controlled vocabulary, and suggests using the keyword search if the subject search is unsuccessful.

### Presentation of Information

The online catalog is one of the most important features of a library Web site, and should be not only easy to find and easy to search, but should also display information in a way that is clear and easily understood. The screen “should be clear and consistent, require minimal action by the user, give only the needed information and nothing more, and give that information in a directly usable form,” and, “what is shown on the screen should be obvious, and all elements should be identified” (Shires and Olszak, 1992, p. 359). The Livermore Public Library online catalog display meets most of these requirements, but has room for improvement.

Search results are displayed twelve to a page, in alphabetical order, except for the keyword search, which is displayed by relevance. Icons accompany each entry, to identify at a glance whether the entry is a book, movie, CD, or other medium. The information for each item is displayed as a single entry: title, author, location, call number, then icon, with the date of publication and the number of copies in separate columns. Having so much information all together makes it difficult for the patron to find a single piece of information, such as call number, quickly. In addition, this layout combined with the size of the icons make the icons distracting, and scanning the titles is more difficult than it would be without the icons or if the icons were not run together with the text. There is an option for an “extended display,” which generally puts the icons in a separate column. However, some entries still have the icon with the text, and this inconsistency is not only distracting but confusing. The inconsistent placement seems to be an error, and should be fixed, or the reason for the placement should be made clear. In addition, the icons should be made smaller so that they distract less from the text.

### Help Screens

Help screens should provide quick solutions as well as in-depth explanations of system functions. They should include examples and clear, chronological directions. Text should be as brief as possible. Context-specific help screens tend to be the most helpful (Shires and Olszak, 1992, p. 365). The help screens on the Livermore Public Library Web site are good but could be improved by the addition of examples.



The “help” link on the main page leads to a screen with a list of topics. The list includes topics from how to use the online catalog, to requesting materials, to accessing the library’s wireless internet connection and the library’s policies. These topic links generally lead to short pages of text that give instructions and explanations specific to that topic. The pages are not needlessly wordy, but they lack clarifying examples. “Examples help the user obtain desired results by mimicking the example displayed on the screen” (Shires and Olszak, 1992, p 365). Without examples, a patron would either have to keep the help page’s written instructions in mind and relate them to what they see on the appropriate screen, or keep two windows open and go back and forth between them. The Web is a visual universe, not a text-based one (Marmion, 2001, p. 2), and text takes longer to mentally process. In addition, some people are visually oriented, and have a difficult time with textual explanations. The examples don’t have to be extensive; they could be as simple as having small images of what the patron can expect to see.

## Conclusions

The Livermore Public Library Web site has a clear, organized layout. The navigation is good, except for the online references page. This page could be improved by the addition of short descriptions for each of the resources. The library catalog search interface is easy to use and also powerful enough for experienced searchers, offering a quick search on the home page as well as separate pages for searching individual fields. However, the library catalog search box should be accompanied by a description of what the catalog contains, so that patrons don't mistakenly search the catalog for something that is located elsewhere. The display screen for the library catalog’s search results is

decent, but could be improved by reducing the size of the icons that accompany each item and moving the icons to a separate column. The help screens are context specific and brief, as they should be, but they should have examples to help the patron understand the text. Overall, the Livermore Public Library has a decent site that has room for improvement.

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