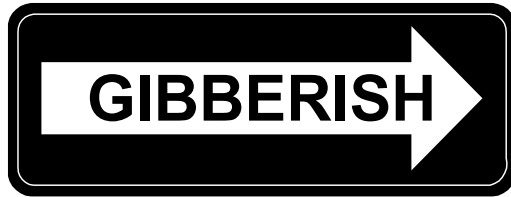# Write URLs That Humans Can Read

Detached from the materiality of the codex book, the text escapes to the other side of the computer screen.

—Christopher J. Keep, "The Disturbing Liveliness of Machines"
in *Cyberspace Textuality*

Keep it short and predictable

Wondering where a link will take them, users count on interpreting the address of the target page. If you throw up the confetti of a URL made up on the fly by your content management software or database, or if you just allow totally cryptic addresses, you frustrate some users.

> Because we know that users try to understand URLs,
> we have an obligation to make them understandable.
> (Nielsen, 1999f)

So keep the URL short enough to read. Make it **predictable**, too. If your company is called IBM, people expect your site to be found at www.ibm.com. Getting an expected domain name is worth millions of bucks.

In general, don't make up a name with half a dozen words and underscores just because you won't buy the rights to a reasonable name. If you must put words together, don't use hyphens, underscores, or a bunch of dots because users don't try those at first.

Avoid special characters. And remember, zero is a weird character because people just type a capital O and don't find

As readers move through a web or network of texts, they continually shift the center—and hence the focus or organizing principle—of their investigation and experience.

—George P. Landow, *Hypertext, The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*

you, if your name starts with a zero. (Of course, your URL will show up at the top of most search lists if you start with a real zero).

Don't shuffle your pages

Leave those addresses alone. If you switch pages around, every customer who bookmarked the old pages will get an annoying message saying the page is unavailable. That doesn't look good. If you redesign your site, set up redirects on your server so people who click old links out there on the Web can get to the new pages.

EXAMPLES

Before:
http://ad.doublesnit.net
/jump/clubelectric.newsletter
/news.iss34.???=mar10-4;sz=120x90

After:
http://www.clubelectric/newsletter/Issue34

Before:
http://ad.doublesnit.net
/clk;2572368;5624853;r?http:
//www.buyandsellit.com/Buy32?
request=rr.refBy&ref=
CLUBidiotW12"

After:
http://www.buyandsellit.
com/offer32

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...	How well does this guideline apply?
TO HAVE FUN	Why confuse them?
TO LEARN	May not matter. Depends on how suspicious your users are.
TO ACT	Keep it simple, if you really want people to go where you point them and do what you suggest.
TO BE AWARE	Why not?
TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE	Make it look as if your site was created by a human being.

See: IBM (1999), Nielsen (1999f).

For your review only.

Excerpt from *Hot Text: Web Writing that Works*.
(New Riders).

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