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I've always kept a little list going of reasons why I still design for monitors and windows set to 640x480, and a list of reasons why I don't want to design for 640x480 anymore. My reasons for accommodating 640x480 users are still rock-steady in my mind, while the reasons against still don't cut it.

Compiled below is my list of reasons, with caveats, that I maintain for reference whenever I find that client who wants to design only for his or her monitor, forgetting about the wide variety of users out there. I should also qualify this by stating that the real problem with designing outside of the 640x480 box isn't really the 480 height, since most users are accustomed to scrolling down, but the width. Many people never notice the scrollbar on the bottom and those that do resent having to scroll left to right to left to right, etc., just to read your content or navigate your site.

Readability

If you need to use more than 600 pixels for a line of text, you need be aware of readability issues. Keeping lines of text around 30-70 characters offers the best readability for the widest variety of users. This holds true on the web as well as in print, where hundreds of years of printed text has taught professionals that very same lesson.

Go beyond that, and readability begins to suffer. Now, obviously many users may have their fonts set to varying sizes, but usually these different sizes still cause the viewable text to fall into the broad range of 30-70 characters. Avoid the opposite - setting the fonts of your site to painfully small at 640x480 to get all your information on screen at 640x480. This is about quality, not quantity. If you tailor your design so the smallest fonts a user will reasonably select get 70 characters per line, and the largest fonts they might select get 30 characters per line, you are right on target. And don't worry about throwing an occasional image into your content (resulting in, say, rows of 20 character-per-line copy), because that design element helps break up the content for the reader, giving their eye somewhere to rest. Keep in mind the reading styles of people on the web, and their desire to get to information quickly. Unless this broad swath of text is the actual content for which a user has searched, there is probably too much text.

Some readers may be familiar with Jakob Nielsen and his Alertbox articles. Some readers may think he is full of it (after all, it's not like his own site is a poster boy for usability), but the articles cited below have been referenced time and again and have withstood more than 2 years of challenges. I think these three articles cover the usability issues I've pointed out above rather nicely in case you should want more detail.

- [How Users Read on the Web](#), October 1, 1997.
- [Be Succinct! \(Writing for the Web\)](#), March 15, 1997.
- [Changes in Web Usability Since 1994](#), December 1, 1997.

Images



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