Link placement – transcript

Part of the ‘Effective Digital Content’ training

Now we’ll take an important look at how and where you place your links within the user journey.

# Inline links

An inline link is where a part of existing text is made into a link, like this example. You’ll see this kind of link used a lot online.

# Separated links

However, University style is to not use inline links, but rather use separated links, each on their own line.

# Inline link text

This is because inline links make the content very difficult to read by cluttering the page – especially for users with dyslexia or a visual impairment. They can cause an inaccurate impression of key messages, as words that stand out on a page may not really be what the page is about

It’s also very difficult to write a well-worded link, that makes sense out of context, within a sentence that meets good web writing standards – especially if you’re in a hurry.

# Calls to action

Lastly, it’s much easier to manage the user journey by placing links strategically, as calls to action for the user to understand where they might want to go next.

This is why you should use a paragraph of text followed by one or two relevant links. It’s not good practice to list more than three links unless there’s some clear context. You should always avoid simply dumping all your links in a list at the end of a page. Consider why people might want to visit these links and place them as relevant.

# Choice paralysis

The reason you should avoid presenting people with too many items in a list like this is because of a psychological phenomenon known as choice paralysis.

Although people tend to say that they want an array of choice, it is actually very difficult for people to choose between too many options.

The most well-known study on this is the jam experiment from 2009. Supermarket tasting stations were set up for customers to sample a range of jams. Where there were six jams to sample, 30% of those who tasted one decided to buy a pot of jam. However, where 24 jams were on offer, customers were unable to decide, and so only 3% bought any jam.

# Satisficing

As we can see, this is an element of human behaviour which isn’t limited to the way users behave online. There are lots of interesting studies on choice paralysis, and they show that people do one of two things when dealing with choice paralysis: either they choose nothing (as with the jam), or they choose something at random. This is what marketers term ‘satisficing’ – selecting the first thing that looks like it might be right, rather than fully examining all the options.

If you have long lists of links, users will tend to pick one at random and then hit the back button if it doesn’t turn out to be right. This becomes very frustrating. It’s best to support the user journey by placing your links where relevant.

# Links pages

In particular, avoid pages that are just list of links, with page titles like ‘Links’ or ‘Useful links’. Links are integral to the way the internet works. Having a section called links is like having a sign in a library saying ‘books’.

# FAQ dumping grounds

You should also be careful about any page or section called ‘FAQs’. Frequently asked questions are fine if they’re related to a very specific topic, but more often than not, they’re just a dumping ground for content you don’t know what to do with. They should certainly never be present at the top-most structure of a site. It’s like a flag highlighting that your site is difficult to navigate.

# Effective FAQs

The best FAQs are just an alternative route to information, and link the reader back to somewhere in the structure of the site. They are also genuinely questions that are frequently asked. If you find yourself having to add too much content into your FAQ, it’s probably time to review your site structure. (Get in touch with Website Support if you’d like some help with this.)

# When link lists are necessary

When you do have lists of links – like a news archive or course list, make sure you set some kind of context, such as months or years, or an alphabetical list. Break it up with subheadings, and consider alternative ways to search.

This example from the Degree Finder lists programmes A-Z – but also allows searching by School or subject area.

# Navigation menus

Remember that your navigation structure is of course a list of links. Look at your structure and page titles very carefully. Make sure that they make sense as a group and that it’s clear where to go if you’re looking for something. Users would rather click through a couple of levels of navigation, confident that they’re heading in the right direction, than choose between confusing options.