

MARKING THE TRAIL

Because there are many different types of links and link destinations, it can be quite difficult for your audience to anticipate where a link may take them. Will it lead to a long page in a different Web site, or open a new browser window with a descriptive image? Because of these ambiguities, your audience needs to be “told” what they can expect from the links they encounter. *Indication* can help “mystery” links become articulate links that speak to your audience and let them know where they are going. We can provide indication for our links with descriptive wording, adjacent information, pop-ups, and colors.

Descriptive wording: There is no substitute for using *descriptive wording* for links. The more information the actual link can provide, the less your audience has to think about what lies on the other side. For example:

Check out our [numbers](#), or Check out our [third-quarter financial report](#).

The second option provides a clearer indication of what you can expect to find by following the link. While the preceding example clarifies the link by adding words, sometimes removing words is more effective. In general, you should not let your links get too long. Long links are difficult to scan, can contribute to visual clutter, and are more prone to word wrapping between lines of text. Try to choose descriptive words that match the content destination of the link. In the preceding example, if your audience arrived at a page titled “third-quarter financial report,” their expectations would have been met. If they were led to a page titled

“company profile” that had a two-sentence reference to the success of the third quarter at the bottom of the page, they are more likely to be disappointed. When you make a promise to your audience through a link description, make sure that you deliver.

Adjacent information: Though the change in wording in our preceding example helps to clarify the link, it still leaves a lot of unknowns. How large is the financial report? What kind of information does it contain? Does clicking the link download a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet or open a detailed image in a new window? Trying to answer all these questions with descriptive wording will only lead to a confusing and distracting links. Instead, we can provide some additional information about the link with *information adjacent* in space and pop-ups. If we revisit the preceding example, we can provide a better indication of where our financial

link leads. Check out [third-quarter financial report](#) (858KB PDF)

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The download links for Macromedia's Dreamweaver Updater include the descriptive title of the file followed by the full file name (as a link) followed by the approximate file size. Using the full file name of the updater helps Macromedia's audience make sense of the document that will be saved to their desktop. (The file name is truncated to comply with operating system procedures for file names.) Instead of including the file type near the file size, it is part of the link.

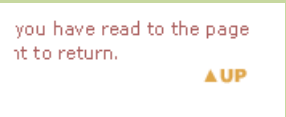
Now we have made it clear that the report is a 258KB PDF file. By including the approximate file size, we give the audience a better understanding of how large the file is and how long it might take to download. We also let them know that they will need a program capable of displaying PDF documents in order to view the third-quarter report.

When linking to standard Web pages or images, it is not necessary to detail the file type. But for most download links, you should include some adjacent information detailing the type of file. This prevents unwanted external programs from opening on your audience's computer and lets them know the technology needed to view the link's contents. Indicating file sizes for links is not necessary unless a significant download time is associated with a given file or the file size is substantially larger than your audience might expect. File sizes are often included adjacent to download links (such as video and multimedia links), to forewarn users of a lengthy wait.

Pop-ups: Though adjacent information can provide immediate clarification of links, it can also add a lot of visual noise and clutter to a page. Consequently, we want to keep the adjacent information we include with

ADJACENT IMAGES

Sometimes it might be beneficial to use graphics as adjacent link clarifiers. A small image next to a link can emphasize the importance or category of a link. This is especially useful for inline links. A small arrowhead can quickly communicate the effect of selecting an inline link, as in the example below. Note that the Up link is located at the end of the page to the right, exactly where you would finish reading the page.



Access Int Samples

- * [Interface Only](#) 248 KB
-  [Rocket Science Story](#)
-  [Clearing the Air Story](#)
-  [Interface Screen Shot](#) 116 KB
-  [Download](#)

Open a new window with this image.

NOTE: Access Interactive 2.0 requires the Flash 3.0 (or higher) plug-in from Macromedia. You may download it by following the link above.

This example uses a small image to distinguish between external, internal, download, and action links. The first link requires the Flash plug-in, the second two are distinct internal Web pages, the fourth link opens a new window with a 116 KB image, and the last link is an external link to Macromedia's site. Though the audience is initially unlikely to know the type of link each icon represents, they will notice the difference between the images. Once they rollover a particular link, a pop-up further clarifies what they can expect. Because this system is used consistently throughout the site, the audience can rely on it for an understanding of different link functions.

our links to a minimum. Often, file type and size take up more than enough space. But files size and types do not answer all the questions we might have about a link. For more information, we can turn to *pop-ups*. Pop-ups appear only after a user has moused over a particular link. Though they present no immediate information (pop-ups require user action, whereas adjacent information does not), pop-ups can supply valuable information about the link and what a user can expect when following it. This can save your audience time that they might have otherwise spent following unhelpful links. Link pop-ups can be implemented very simply with the TITLE attributes of HTML anchor tags (within browsers that support them), or as Dynamic HTML (DHTML) scripts.

```
<A HREF="page.html" TITLE="Link to a page.">
```

TITLE attributes offer no visual control or image support within the pop-up. They also appear differently from browser to browser. For most links, these simple text boxes work fine. However, when you need more control over the presentation and content of pop-ups, DHTML is the way to go. DHTML pop-ups offer a large amount of visual control (colors, fonts) and can include just about any type of Web content. However, DHTML pop-ups carry a lot more overhead with them and are much more difficult to build and maintain. Regardless of the method you use to implement pop-ups, use them to present supportive, and not vital, link information.

Unvisited and visited links: So far we have used indication to help clarify what your audience should expect from each of your links. However, we can supply them with even more information by properly using *link colors*. Links can exist in four states: unvisited, visited, active, and poised. The two most important distinctions are between visited and unvisited links. Without being otherwise specified by Web developers, they appear as bright purple and blue, respectively. Or was that blue and purple? Despite the arbitrary color-coding of these links, they let your audience

LET’S SEE WHAT POPS UP

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NOTE: Access Interactive 2.0 requires the Flash 3.0 (or higher) plug-in from Macromedia. You may download it by following the link above.

A pop-up created using the TITLE attribute of a link.

Commercialization Process 180 KB PPT

Download PowerPoint slide presentation.

Dynamic HTML lets you control the visual presentation of pop-ups, including colors, typefaces, and content. In the example below, pop-ups provide thumbnails for an image gallery. This lets the audience preview each photograph before they commit to a lengthy download.

