

# Designing CSS Layouts for the Flexible Web

September 10, 2008

NAGW National Conference, St. Charles, IL

**Zoe Mickley Gillenwater**

# A little about me

- Design Services Manager at UNC Highway Safety Research Center
- Author of upcoming *Flexible Web Design: Creating Liquid and Elastic Layouts with CSS*
- Author of *Web Accessibility Principles* for lynda.com
- Member, Adobe Task Force of Web Standards Project (WaSP)

# What is flexible design?

- Overall width is not fixed number of pixels
- Liquid (aka fluid)
- Elastic
- Hybrid

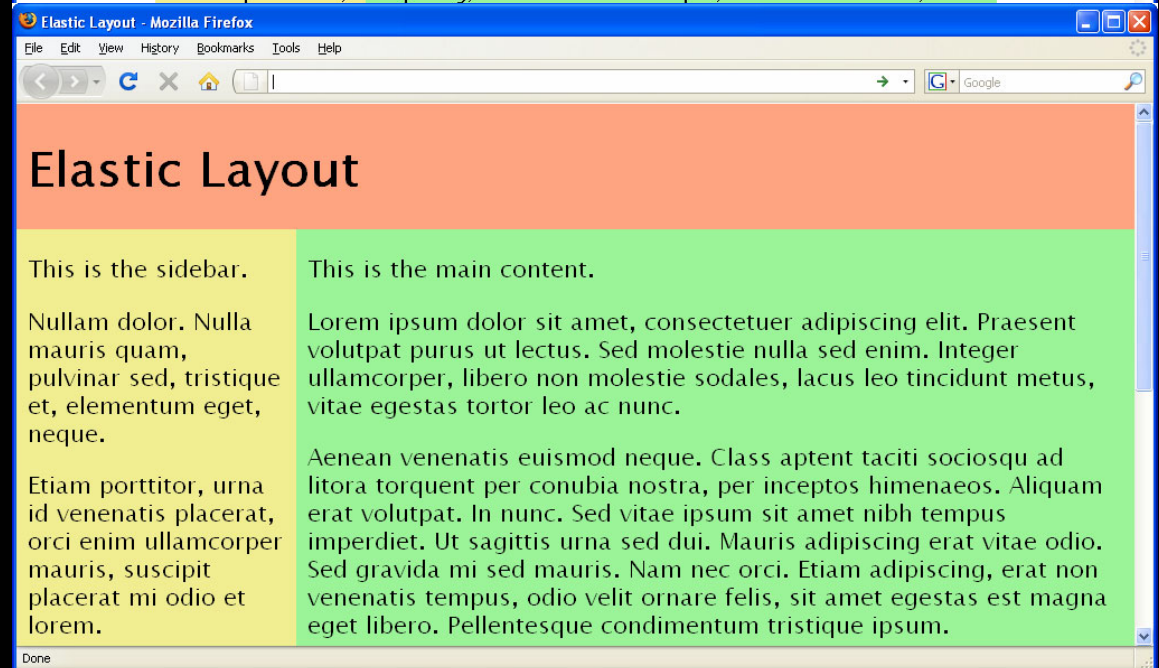
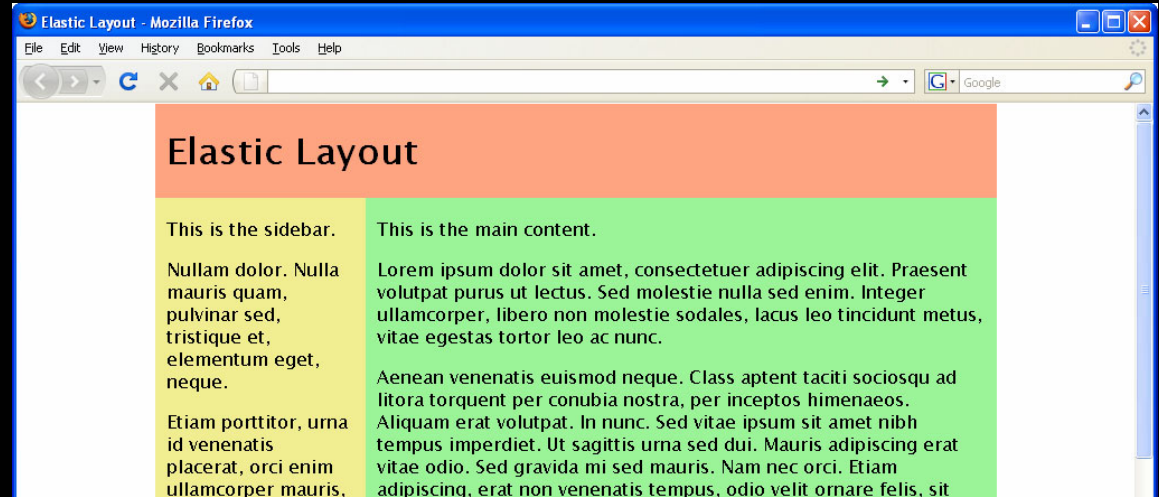
# Liquid

Width adapts  
to **viewport**



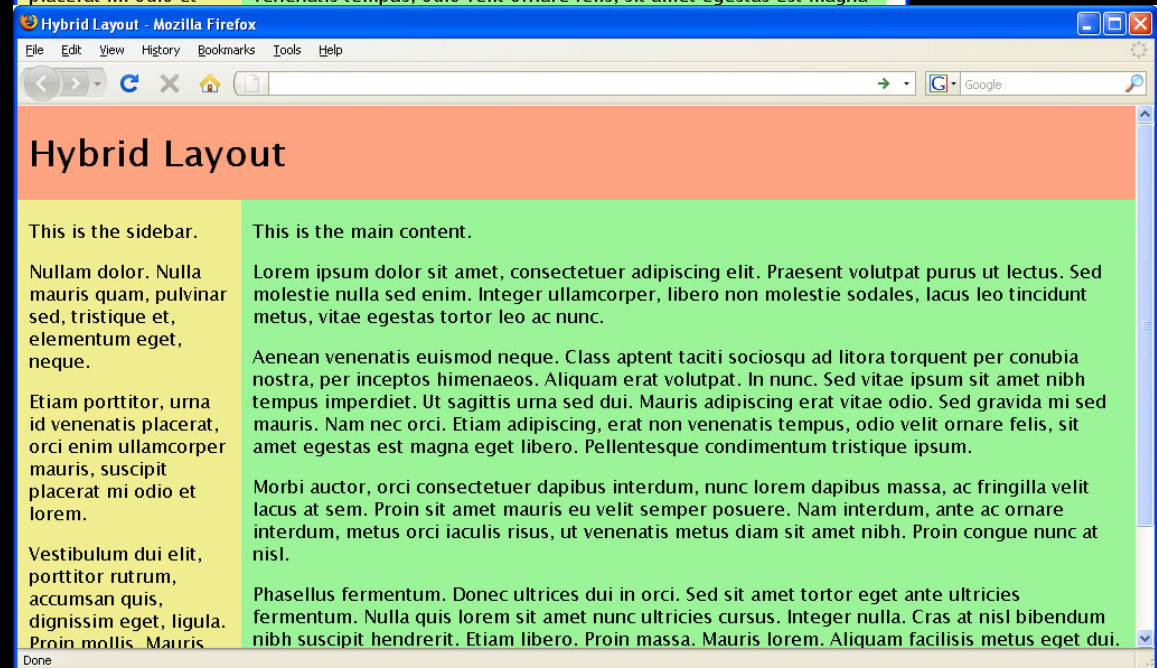
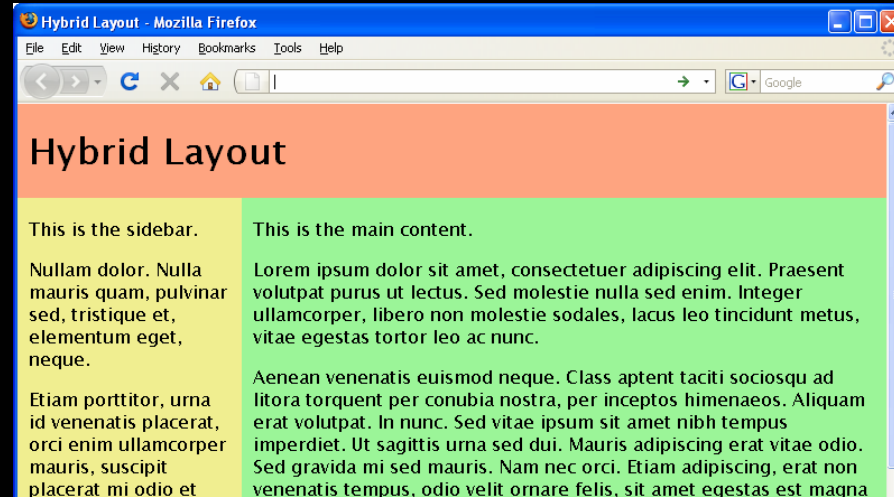
# Elastic

Width adapts  
to **text size**



# Hybrid

Mixture of fixed-width, liquid, and/or elastic for column widths



~~Why bother?~~

**Why not?**

Why choose fixed-width when web is flexible by default?

# When fixed-width makes sense

- Lots of fixed-width, large content
- Known users with known setup
- Beginning designer
- Just need to get something small and simple up quickly



Image from flickr, "swimming upstream" by tempo

A large group of salmon swimming upstream against a strong current. The water is turbulent and fast-moving, with many salmon visible in the background, some struggling against the flow. In the foreground, a single salmon is seen from a side profile, swimming towards the viewer. The scene is captured in a low-angle shot, emphasizing the scale of the migration.

**Don't swim upstream  
if you don't have to**

# Benefits of flexible layouts

Liquid	Elastic
Increased usability, readability and accessibility	
Respect user preferences	
Less chance of horizontal scrollbars	Increased typographic control
Take advantage of screen real estate	Preserve design proportions

# Design differently from the start

- Not every comp can be turned into liquid or elastic layout
- Learn which design features aren't "flexible-friendly" and how to change them so they are

# Goals of this presentation

## **Fixed-width designer:**

Make designs more adaptive to user preferences

## **Flexible designer:**

Know what to watch out for/plan for in comps to make construction easier, layout more robust

## **Non-designer:**

Identify problematic design elements to convince designer to change or tweak yourself

**Not just avoiding fixed widths**

No fixed **heights** for anything containing text

# Width affects height

## Liquid:

Change in viewport width



Text wraps differently



Change in number of lines  
of text



Change in height of block  
text sits in

## Elastic:

Change in font size



Change in height of text  
characters



Change in height of block  
text sits in

**Avoid:**

**Irregular shapes defining a text area**

Irregular shapes defining a text area

# Example:

*Recent Comments*

“ **congrats! halarious video too Lisa!...** by **ComposeAnalysis**

“ **Thanks to every one who participated and...** by **Mostly Lisa**

“ **[...] Contact [...]...** by **MostlyLisa.com: Lisa Bettany. Canada's Sexy Geek Blog » Blog Archive » And the Vector-sized glory goes to...**

“ **I vote "Not the Fish", just becuae he's...** by **Grant**

“ **I'm with you! For the past few days** by **Dan**

*Recent Posts*

★ **And the Vector-sized glory goes to...**  
12-03-2008

★ **[UnDigg] Omg. I had so much fun at SxSW.**  
12-03-2008

★ **Vote for the First Annual Vectorama Winner!**  
10-03-2008

★ **Don't Mess with my Vectorama!**  
10-03-2008

★ **Audition Peep Show #2**  
08-03-2008

*about Lisa*

Lisa Bettany lives in Vancouver, BC, Canada. She is a multimedia producer, model, actress, blogger, and geek. She mostly comes out at night... mostly.

[Read more](#)

*Site by Coding Monkeys*



Irregular shapes defining a text area

# Example:



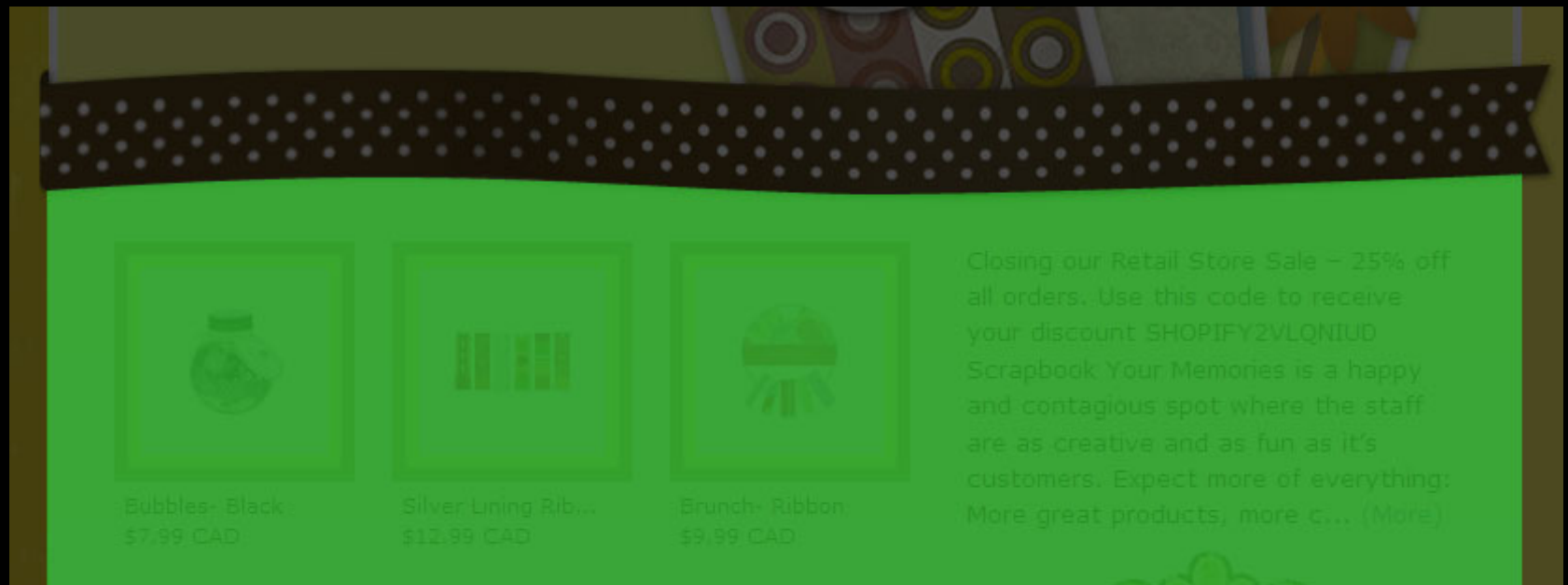
Closing our Retail Store Sale – 25% off all orders. Use this code to receive your discount SHOPIFY2VLQNIUD


Scrapbook Your Memories is a happy and contagious spot where the staff are as creative and as fun as it's customers. Expect more of everything: More great products, more c... ([More](#))

		
Bubbles- Black \$7.99 CAD	Silver Lining Ribbons \$12.99 CAD	Brunch- Ribbon \$9.99 CAD

Irregular shapes defining a text area

# Example:

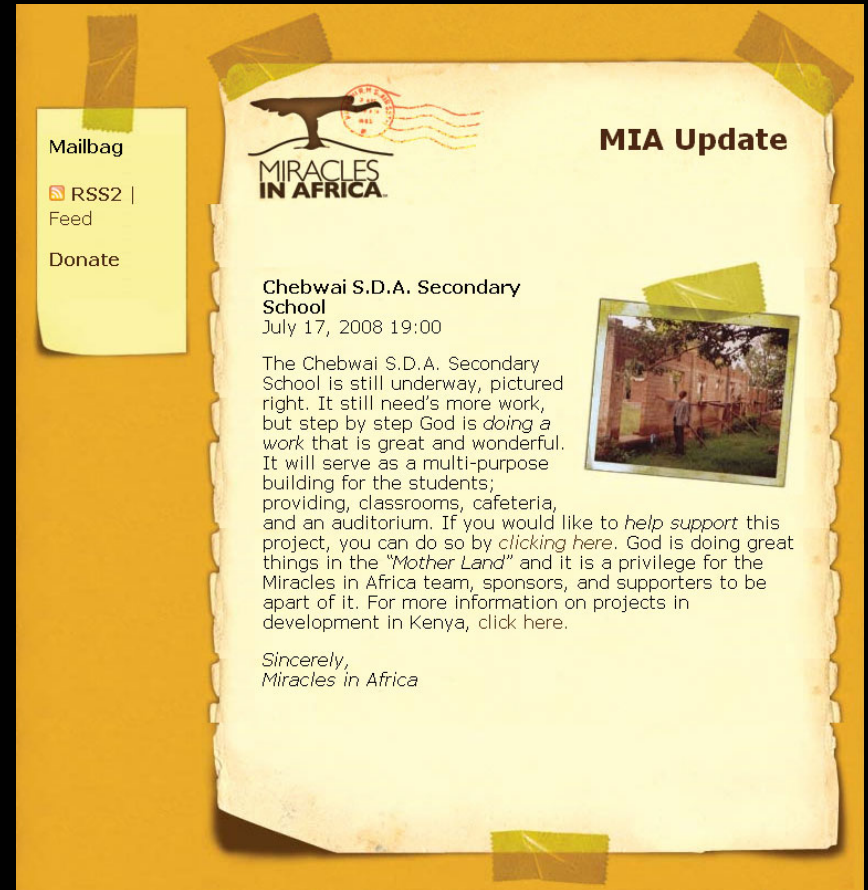
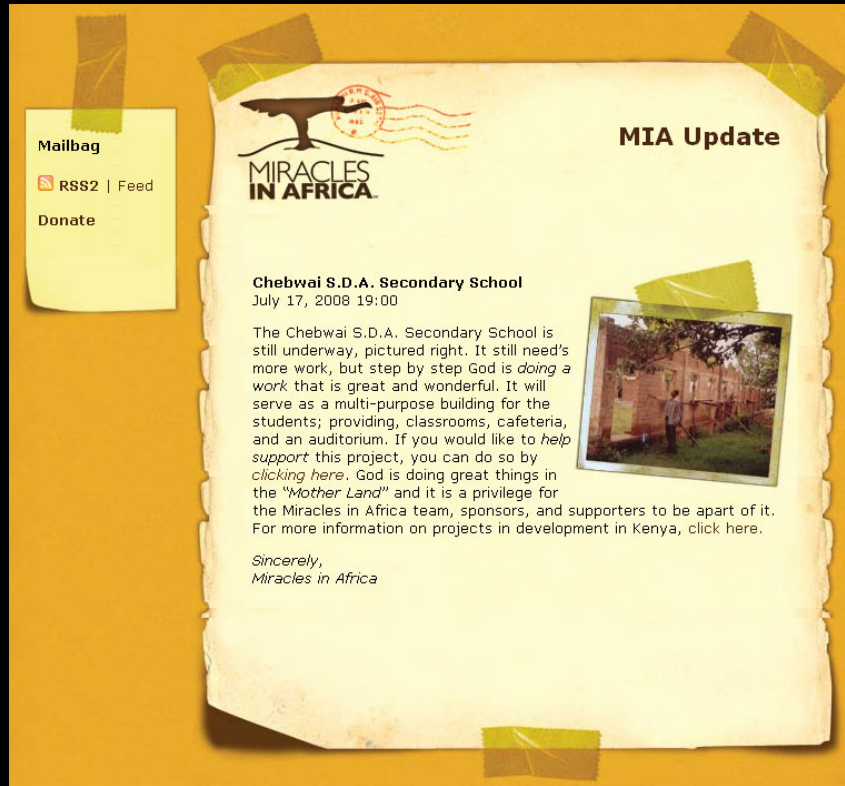




**Are we stuck with only  
straight rectangles?**

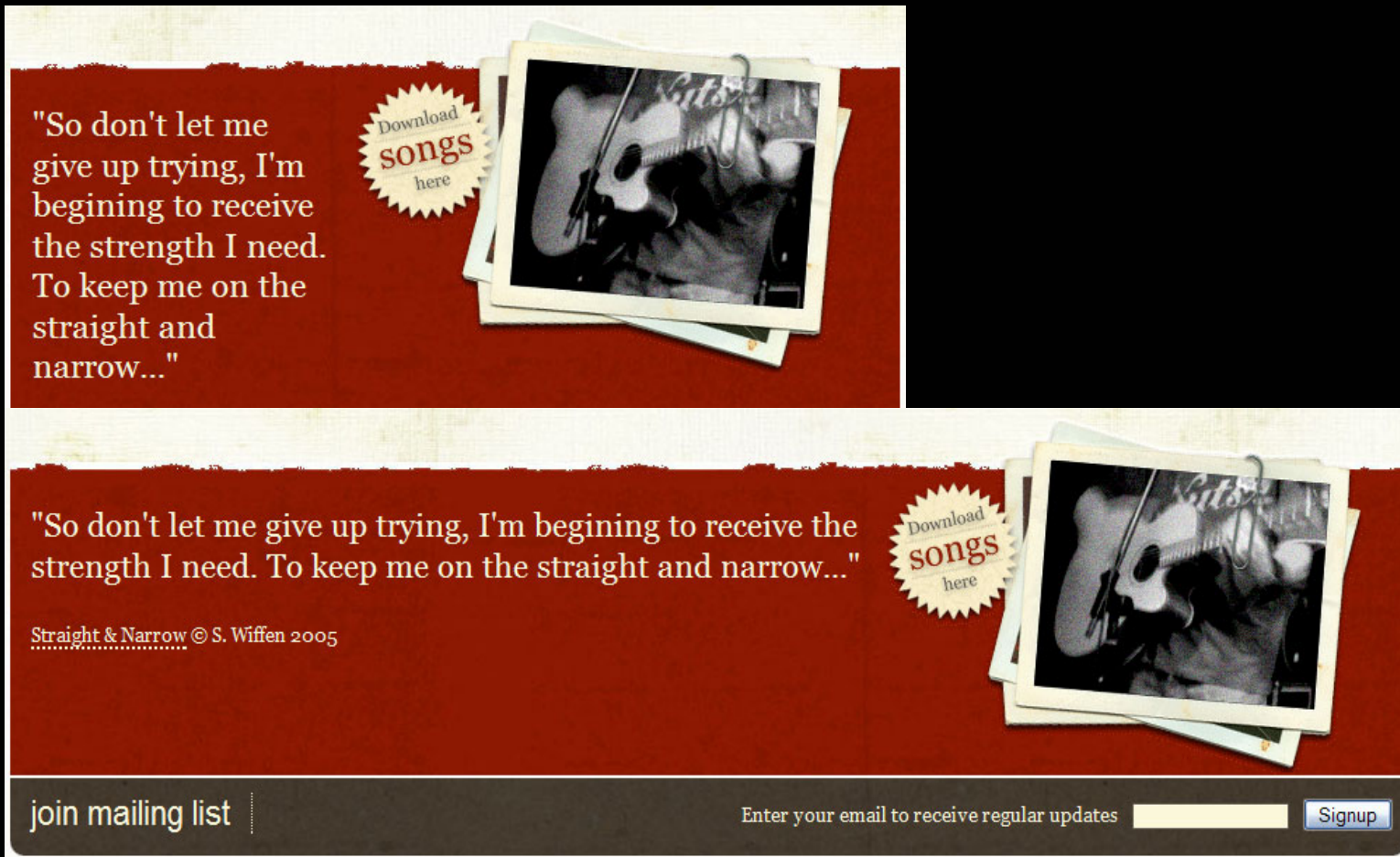
Irregular shapes defining a text area

# Solution: Tile irregular pattern



Irregular shapes defining a text area

# Solution: Tile irregular pattern



"So don't let me give up trying, I'm beginning to receive the strength I need. To keep me on the straight and narrow..."

Download songs here

"So don't let me give up trying, I'm beginning to receive the strength I need. To keep me on the straight and narrow..."

Download songs here

.....  
Straight & Narrow © S. Wiffen 2005

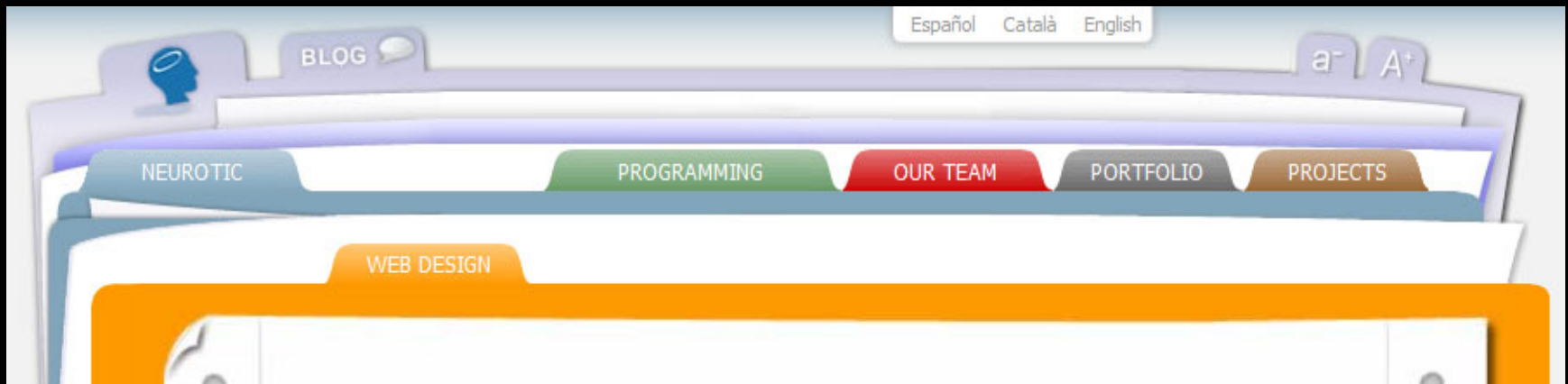
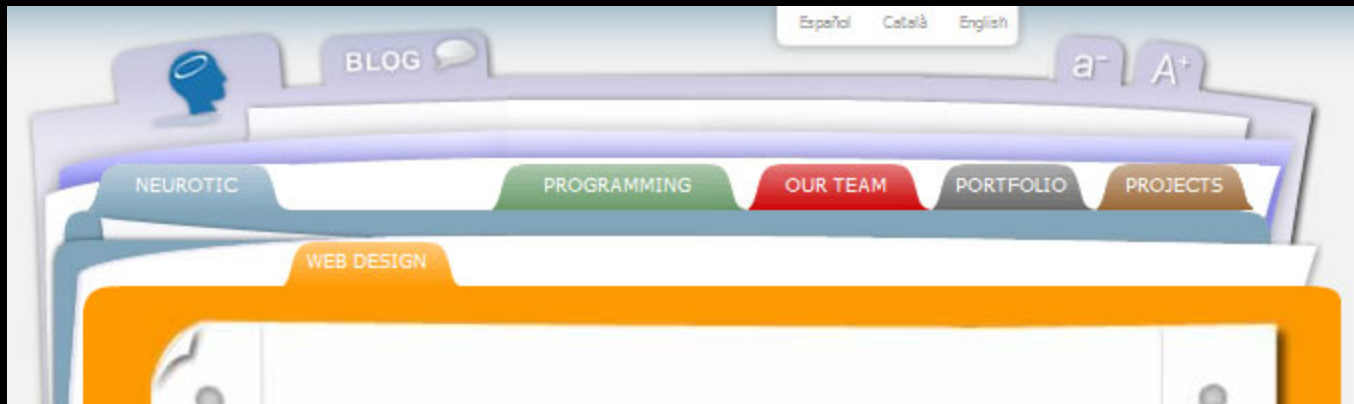
join mailing list

Enter your email to receive regular updates

Signup

Irregular shapes defining a text area

# Solution: Tile straight piece



**Avoid:**

**Text matched with images that can't expand**

Text matched with images that can't expand

# Example:

The screenshot shows the etonDIGITAL website with a navigation menu and a featured project section. The navigation menu includes links for Home, Why etonDIGITAL?, Services, Our work, Weblog, and Contact us. The featured project section is titled "Featured projects" and displays a project for pod3.tv. The project description states: "Here at etonDIGITAL we do everything web and more. From web design and development, to interactive Flash development, and everything in between - we deliver polished, professional, and affordable products that get you the attention you deserve." The project image shows the pod3.tv logo and a green card with the text "Because everyone's got a story to tell". The project details are: Website: [www.pod3.tv](http://www.pod3.tv) and We did: Design, XHTML/CSS, Drupal CMS.

**ED** etonDIGITAL  
WEB 2.0 EXPERTS

Home Why etonDIGITAL? Services Our work Weblog Contact us

## Web 2.0 experts at your service

*Here at etonDIGITAL we do everything web and more. From web design and development, to interactive Flash development, and everything in between - we deliver polished, professional, and affordable products that get you the attention you deserve.*

*Featured projects*

**pod3.tv**

*Because everyone's got a story to tell*

Website: [www.pod3.tv](http://www.pod3.tv)  
We did: Design, XHTML/CSS, Drupal CMS



A close-up photograph of a hand holding a single, ripe, dark red cherry. The cherry is the central focus, with its stem still attached. The hand is positioned to the right, with fingers gently gripping the fruit. The background is filled with out-of-focus green leaves, suggesting a cherry tree. The lighting is bright and natural, highlighting the texture of the skin and the gloss of the cherry.

**Pick the right images**

Text matched with images that can't expand

# Solution: Masked images

Get Inspired ▾ To the Point ▾ The Buzz ▾ Nuts & Bolts ▾ Behind the Scenes ▾ Home

**Maximize Productivity:**  
Please Choose: ▾

**Grow Your Practice:**  
Please Choose: ▾

**Get Found:**  
Please Choose: ▾

**See Solutions in Action: DEMOS**  
Please Choose: ▾

## Everything the Doctor Ordered!

Sesame is the one-stop communications solution connecting 1,000,000+ patients to their orthodontists and dentists online right now. Sesame keeps patients connected to your office, reminds them what's great about your practice, and makes it easy for them to spread the word.

[Meet your new patient ▾](#)

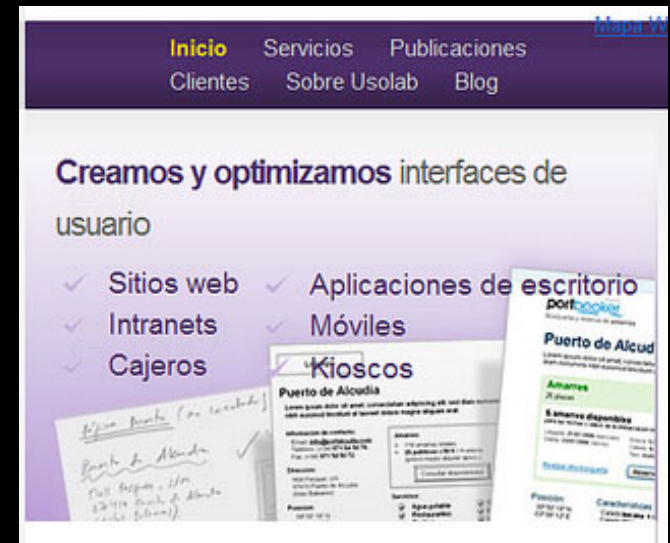
Home

Home

Text matched with images that can't expand

# Solution: Masked images

Use the proper CSS to ensure text has enough space to sit in




Text matched with images that can't expand


# Solution: Variable cropping

CSS technique, but requires designing with right type of images

**Case Studies**




**East Riding of Yorkshire Council: Play and free-time strategy**




**East Lindsey District Council: Play Strategy**

**Case Studies**



**East Riding of Yorkshire Council: Play and free-time strategy**



**East Lindsey District Council: Play Strategy**

Text matched with images that can't expand

# Solution: Variable cropping

## Background image:

```
div {  
  width: 50%;  
  min-height: 100px;  
  background:  
  url(image.jpg) no-repeat;  
}
```

```
<div></div>
```

## Foreground image:

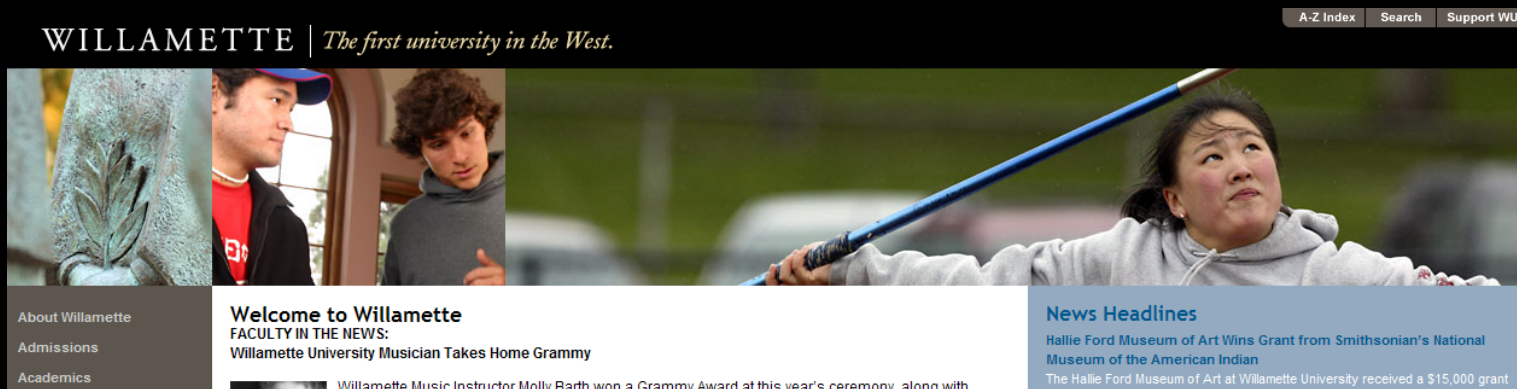
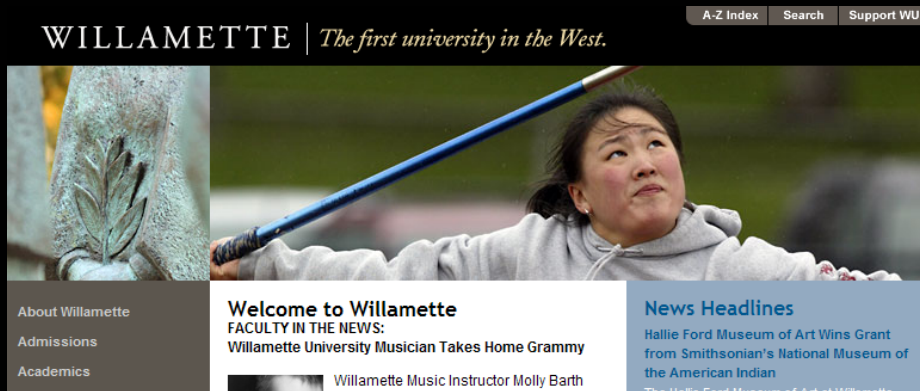
```
div {  
  width: 50%;  
  min-height: 100px;  
  overflow: hidden;  
}
```

```
<div></div>
```

Text matched with images that can't expand

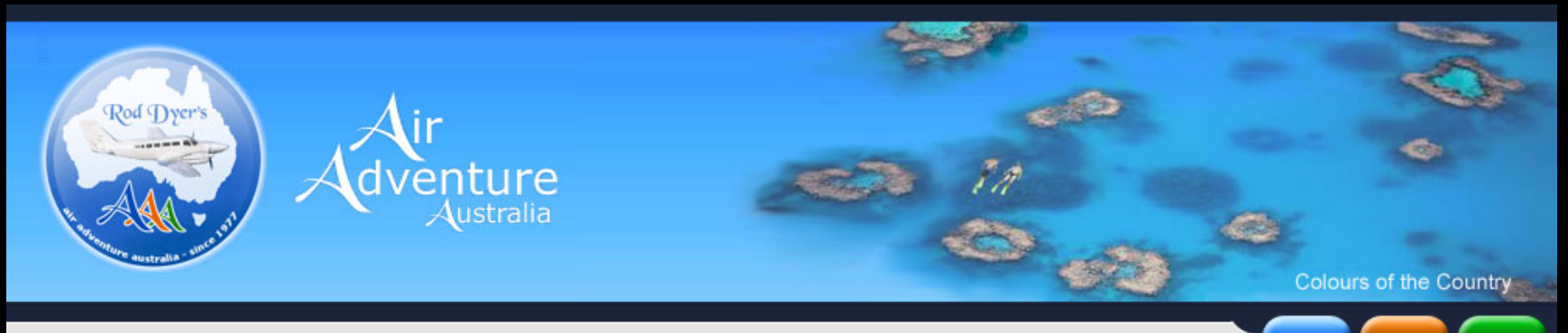
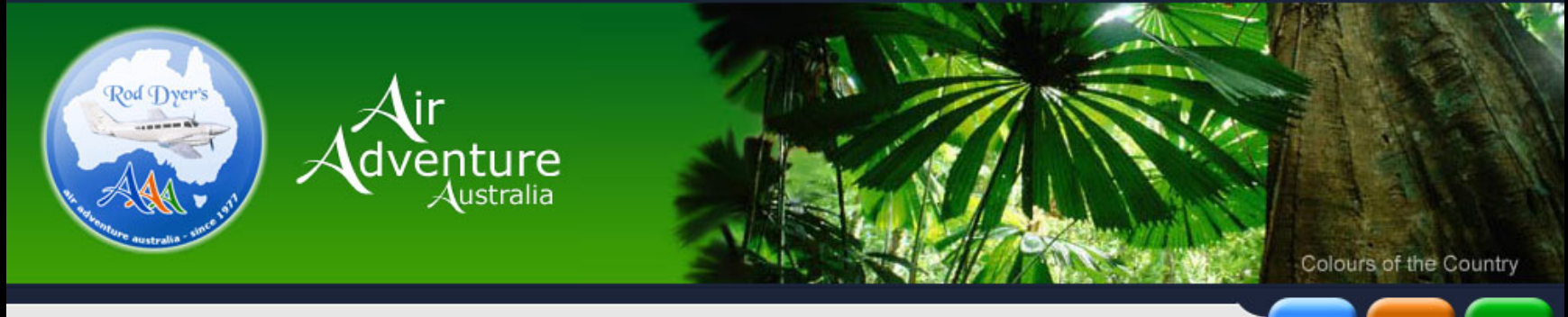
# Solution: Variable cropping

Can stitch together multiple to make longer



Text matched with images that can't expand

# Solution: Blend into background



Text matched with images that can't expand

# Solution: Blend into background





Text matched with images that can't expand

# Solution: Scalable images

## CSS technique, but requires designing with right type of images

### LA STORIA DEL CASTELLO DI BOLGHERI



Le origini del Castello di Bolgheri risalgono al 1200. Fin da allora proprietà della famiglia dei Conti della Gheradesca. Nella seconda metà del 1700 vengono effettuati restauri e migliorie al palazzo e la costruzione delle cantine. Nel 1895 viene modificata la facciata del castello, con la realizzazione della torre e dei merli così come ancora oggi essa appare. **La Storia del Castello**

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### VINO ED OLIO



\* CASTELLO DI BOLGHERI

### AGRITURISMO



\* PODERE SAN SEBASTIANO

### VINO ED OLIO



\* CASTELLO DI BOLGHERI

### AGRITURISMO



\* PODERE SAN SEBASTIANO

Text matched with images that can't expand

# Solution: Scalable images

## Liquid image:

```
img {  
  width: 50%;  
}
```

```

```

## Elastic image:

```
img {  
  width: 20em;  
}
```

```

```

**Avoid:**

**Fixed-width, full-width content**

Fixed-width, full-width content

# Example:

## What We Offer

Classes & Programs

**Personal Training**

Fitness Center

Aquatic Center

Child Care

Medical Services

Nutrition



*“My successes have been numerous and wonderful, I have lost 20lbs and many inches, I have cut my blood pressure*

## Personal Training



Quickly and safely achieve your fitness goals under the direct supervision of a qualified fitness professional with Roseville Health & Wellness' personal training programs. Train with some of Northern California's finest degreed and nationally certified professionals to fine-tune your fitness regiment.

Our personal trainers will help you decrease body fat, improve strength and increase coordination, flexibility and muscular balance. You'll learn the correct way to use equipment and the appropriate form and technique necessary to maximize your results.

Fixed-width, full-width content

# Example:

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Roseville Health & Wellness Center. The header features the center's logo on the left, which consists of a square containing the letters 'R', 'H', and '& C' with a stylized figure below. To the right of the logo, the text 'ROSEVILLE HEALTH & WELLNESS CENTER' is displayed in a clean, sans-serif font. A dark red banner in the top right corner states 'Voted Roseville's Best & #1 in Nation'. Below the header is a navigation menu with five green buttons: 'Home', 'What We Offer', 'Success Stories', 'Membership', 'About', and 'Contact'. A large, dark brown banner below the navigation contains the text 'it's all about total body wellness in a comfortable and supportive environment'. The main content area is divided into three columns, each with a photo and a call to action. The first column features a photo of two women and the text 'it is possible!' with a 'MORE' link. The second column features a photo of a diverse group of people and the text 'you can do it!' with a 'MORE' link. The third column features a photo of people swimming and the text 'feel your best!' with a 'MORE' link. Below these columns are three sections with titles and lists of services. The first section is 'Wellness Memberships for' with a list: 'Individuals', 'Families', and 'Seniors'. The second section is 'Whatever your' with a list: 'Age', 'Shape', and 'Size'. The third section is 'Our Wellness Center has' with a list: 'Fitness Center', 'Aquatic Center', and 'Personal Training'.

ROSEVILLE  
HEALTH & WELLNESS  
CENTER

Home What We Offer Success Stories Membership About Contact

Voted Roseville's Best & #1 in Nation

it's all about total body wellness in a comfortable and supportive environment

it is possible! MORE

you can do it! MORE

feel your best! MORE

**Wellness Memberships for**

- Individuals
- Families
- Seniors

**Whatever your**

- Age
- Shape
- Size

**Our Wellness Center has**

- Fitness Center
- Aquatic Center
- Personal Training

Fixed-width, full-width content

# Solution: Non-full-width images


**Recent Work**

 **Odyssey Learning Systems Inc.**  
XHTML / CSS


 **Vancouver Comedy Fest**  
Print Design

 **HMA**  
Print Design

**Recent Work**

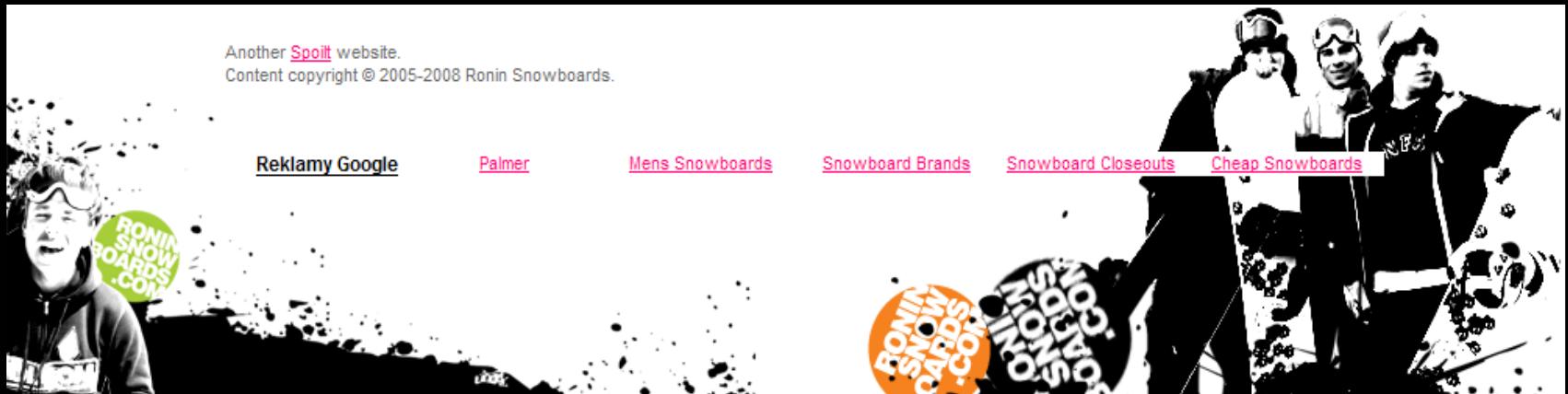
 **Odyssey Learning Systems Inc.**  
XHTML / CSS

 **Vancouver Comedy Fest**  
Print Design

 **HMA**  
Print Design

Fixed-width, full-width content

# Solution: Composite images



Fixed-width, full-width content

# Solution: Scrollbars for large content

CSS technique using overflow property

**Comic: Consumption** February 15th, 2008  
by [Joshua Porter](#) | [8 Comments](#)

**Consumption**

Since you bought "Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, & Swallow Citizens Whole" we recommend you buy...nothing. Nothing at all.

Now TH recomme

bokardo.com

Porter, a web designer/developer, researcher, and writer. I live in Newburyport, MA, USA.

WHAT IS SOCIAL DESIGN?

SOCIAL DESIGN is design that focuses on the social lives of users. It deals with the activities, behaviors, and motivations of people who work and play together through software interfaces. It is built on the observation that many of the decisions we make are greatly affected by those we surround ourselves with in our social lives:



Fixed-width, full-width content

# Solution: Scrollbars for large content

```
div {  
    overflow: auto;  
}
```

```
<div>  
  
</div>
```

**Avoid:**

**Horizontal alignment across columns**

# Horizontal alignment across columns

## Example:

The image displays two side-by-side screenshots of the Cafédirect website, illustrating horizontal alignment across columns. Both versions feature a consistent layout with a top navigation bar, a main content area with multiple columns, and a footer with social sharing options. The left version shows a 'VIEW BASKET' button in the footer, while the right version shows a 'More' button. The content includes a large hero image at the top, a navigation menu on the left, and several content blocks with titles, text, and images. The alignment of text and images is consistent across the two versions, demonstrating how content is structured to maintain visual coherence across different columns.

**Left Version:**

- Logo: CAFÉDIRECT BRINGING QUALITY TO LIFE
- Navigation: home, about us, our partners, our products, our business, shop, friends, annual reports, environment, foodservice, international, newsroom
- Hero Image: A man in a hat and a woman smiling in a coffee field.
- Section 1: **Celebrity wine expert Olly Smith loves our coffee!**  
find out more (with image of Olly Smith)
- Section 2: **Cafédirect and the environment....**  
Fighting poverty and protecting the environment go hand in hand. Because of this, from the lives of our grower partners to our business partners and our office in London, we take our environmental responsibility seriously.  
find out more  
watch our short climate change film
- Section 3: **Cafédirect in the news**  
The Observer Food Monthly visits Gumutindo  
read more  
Read Andrew Purvis' blog from his visit to Gumutindo  
click here  
Check out Karen Robinson's photos from the trip  
click here
- Section 4: **Cafédirect: the history**  
The collapse of the International Coffee Agreement in 1989 sent market prices plunging, putting the lives of millions of smallholder farmers around the world in jeopardy.  
find out more (with image of coffee beans)
- Footer: VIEW BASKET, Share this page, Send to a friend, Stumble Upon, My Space, Facebook

**Right Version:**

- Logo: CAFÉDIRECT BRINGING QUALITY TO LIFE
- Navigation: home, about us, our partners, our products, our business, shop, friends, annual reports, environment, foodservice, international, newsroom
- Hero Image: A man in a hat and a woman smiling in a coffee field.
- Section 1: **Celebrity wine expert Olly Smith loves our coffee!**  
find out more (with image of Olly Smith)
- Section 2: **Cafédirect and the environment....**  
Fighting poverty and protecting the environment go hand in hand. Because of this, from the lives of our grower partners to our business partners and our office in London, we take our environmental responsibility seriously.  
find out more  
watch our short climate change film
- Section 3: **BEST EVER TASTE CLASSIC BLEND!**  
Great tasting coffee or your money back until 31st August!  
click here to find out about the great new taste.... (with image of coffee tin)
- Section 4: **Cafédirect in the news**  
The Observer Food Monthly visits Gumutindo  
read more  
Read Andrew Purvis' blog from his visit to Gumutindo  
click here  
Check out Karen Robinson's photos from the trip  
click here
- Section 5: **Cafédirect: the history**  
The collapse of the International Coffee Agreement in 1989 sent market prices plunging, putting the lives of millions of smallholder farmers around the world in jeopardy.  
find out more (with image of coffee beans)
- Section 6: **join friends of Cafédirect...** (with image of a woman holding a cup)
- Footer: VIEW BASKET, Share this page, Send to a friend, Stumble Upon, My Space, Facebook, Digg, Delicious, More

Horizontal alignment across columns

# Example:

The image shows a screenshot of the UX Magazine homepage. The layout is a grid of article cards. The top row features a large featured article on the left with a red background and a black and white illustration of Scylla and Charybdis. To its right is a 'UX SNAPSHOT' section with a white background and a blue header, containing a 'Last updated 5 hours ago' notice and a list of hot topics. Further right is a 'THING@BEAUTY' section with a dark blue background and a white pixelated skull icon. Below these are several smaller article cards, each with a white background and a blue header. The cards are arranged in a grid that demonstrates horizontal alignment across columns. A 'SHORTNEWS' section is visible on the right side of the page, featuring a vertical scrollbar. At the bottom, there is a 'MORE' button and a list of recent articles.

**SCYLLA & CHARYBDIS**

Users rule the experience. Advertisers pay for the experience. And trust me, your internal constituents are not afraid to remind each other.

CONTINUED...

**UX SNAPSHOT**

Last updated 5 hours ago.

Hot topics: [Marketing \(23\)](#), [Common sense \(17\)](#), [Human Behaviour \(13\)](#), [Web \(6\)](#), [Psychology \(5\)](#), [Branding \(5\)](#), [Web 2.0 \(3\)](#), [Applications \(3\)](#)

HOSTING BY **(mt) mediatemple**

**THING@BEAUTY**

First appearing in Toshihiro Nishikado's genre-defining Space Invaders in 1978 this tiny sprite has since become synonymous with video gaming.

**IN TECHNOLOGY**

**Java now with added Yahoo!?**

Sun is the latest to bundle it's free download with a toolbar. Good idea?

**IN STRATEGY**

**Investing in UX**

Jon Lax shares the results of the UX Fund. Does great UX equal stock price growth?

**Trust me on this. If audiences had an unlimited attention span, I'd be in my second term as President.**

[Al Gore](#)

**Our bitesized update.**

**SHORTNEWS**

Timothy Pynchl can teach you how to become a [Productive Procrastinator](#). Pretty sure we could all use the advice.

[Permalink](#) | [Read comments \(1\)](#)

Obama once again goes online but this time to [Fight the Smears](#). This is going to be interesting.

[Permalink](#) | [Add comment](#)

Start-up [Viewdle](#) has developed a services that can recognize faces in video. Will be interesting to see how this type of technology gets integrated into mainstream video services over the years. Came across it while checking out [Elevator Pitches](#) — a must visit for anyone pitching a business.

[Permalink](#) | [Add comment](#)

**IN TECHNOLOGY**

**Google vs. Zoho Notebook**

Michael Stiso compares two web notebook heavyweights.

**IN TECHNOLOGY**

**The Dark Google Myth**

Kevin Muller looks at the technology behind the myth.

**IN DESIGN**

**Re-thinking the Medicine Cabinet**

Brandon Schauer interviews Deborah Adler on the Clear RX bottle design and her inspirations.

**IN DESIGN**

**Don't let branding kill your brand**

Damon takes a look at brand guidelines and how they counteract with the User Experience

**IN TECHNOLOGY**

**New Google Docs Released**

Another day, another UI update. We look at Google's decision to go "classic".

**IN DESIGN**

**Hit The Blue Up**

When we get worried about dumbing something down, whose intelligence are we worried about insulting?

**IN TECHNOLOGY**

**Conversion Rate Optimization - Part 2**

Part 2 explores even more benefits of the Google Optimizer

**IN STRATEGY**

**Check Your Disciplines At The Door**

Taking a look at collaboration across disciplines.

**IN STRATEGY**

**Conversion Rate Optimization - Part 1**

Frederick Towne looks at converting site visitors to buyers

**IN STRATEGY**

**Abundance and UX**

Is abundance necessary for user experience to thrive?

**IN STRATEGY**

**What Is Holding User Experience Back Where You Work?**

Richard Anderson looks at what propels the user experience "boat" forward?

**IN DESIGN**

**Mar02 The Panhandler User Experience**

**Mar01 No Business Is Perfect**

**IN DESIGN**

**New Google Analytics: First Impressions**

**IN STRATEGY**


**Stop Using Your Shoppers**

**IN STRATEGY**

**Greatness and Uniqueness Are Symbiotic**


Horizontal alignment across columns

# Solution: Accept misalignment




Bringing a world of learning to the world of work

Bringing a world of learning to the world of work




The Open University (OU) caters to the continuing professional development (CPD) needs of thousands of executives and professionals by offering flexible, accessible and value-for-money courses which they can study in and around their workplace. Every one is based on our ability to blend

Improving your professional skills



Discover how The OU at work can help you take your **professional skills to a new level** and your career to new

Developing the skills of your employees



A well-trained workforce is **a more productive workforce**. So why not take a look at what The OU at work has to offer your

Sponsorship advice

Many OU Students are sponsored by their employers

Find out how

Why distance learning works at work

Alumni click here

# Summary of what to avoid:

- Irregular shapes defining a text area
- Text matched with images that can't expand
- Fixed-width, full-width content
- Horizontal alignment across columns

# What's wrong with this picture?

**Beechwood Animal Shelter**

Search:  go [Skip to Main Content](#)


[Home](#) [Adopt a Pet](#) [Get Involved](#) [Our Programs](#) [News and Events](#) [About the Shelter](#)


Beechwood Animal Shelter is a no-kill animal rescue and adoption center that works tirelessly to help rescued dogs and cats find loving adoptive parents. Find out more [about us](#), our [programs and services](#), and [how you can help](#).


*you* can help  
please donate today


*meet us*  
May 10  
next adoption fair


**Another happy ending**  
"We adopted Dutch earlier this spring. Dutch is doing great and loves to play in the yard with our other two dogs. Everyone he meets wants to take him home. He's very well behaved, great around children of all ages and loves giving doggie kisses."

 **Styx**  
Shorthair, black  
Male, 2 years

 **Shelby**  
Yellow lab mix  
Female, 8 years

 **Picasso**  
Shorthair, orange tabby  
Male, 10 months

 **Alley**  
Longhair, gray  
Male, 5 years

 These are just a few of the hundreds of dogs and cats we have available for adoption right now. You can use the form at right to find your perfect pet. Please also consider fostering a pet until it can find a permanent home.

Type:  
 Dog  
 Cat

Breed Type:  
 Any  
 Purebred  
 Mixed Breed

Sex:  
 Any  
 Male  
 Female

Length of Care:  
 Adopt  
 Foster


# A more flexible-friendly version

**Beechwood Animal Shelter**

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Beechwood Animal Shelter is a no-kill animal rescue and adoption center that works tirelessly to help rescued dogs and cats find loving adoptive parents. Find out more [about us](#), our [programs and services](#), and [how you can help](#).




**Another happy ending**


"We adopted Dutch earlier this spring. Dutch is doing great and loves to play in the yard with our other two dogs. Everyone he meets wants to take him home. He's very well behaved, great around children of all ages and loves giving doggie kisses."




**May 10**  
next adoption fair  
*meet us*




*you* can help  
please donate today




**Styx**  
Shorthair, black  
Male, 2 years




**Shelby**  
Yellow lab mix  
Female, 8 years



**Picasso**  
Shorthair, orange tabby  
Male, 10 months



**Alley**  
Longhair, gray  
Male, 5 years



These are just a few of the hundreds of dogs and cats we have available for adoption right now. You can use the form below to find your perfect pet. Please also consider fostering a pet until it can find a permanent home.

**ADOPT ME!**

Type:  Dog  Cat

Breed Type:  Any  Purebred  Mixed Breed

Sex:  Any  Male  Female

Length of Care:  Adopt  Foster



# How it might look narrower

*Beechwood*  
Animal Shelter

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ADOPT ME!

# Flexible design inspiration

[www.zomigi.com/blog/inspiration-for-flexible-web-design](http://www.zomigi.com/blog/inspiration-for-flexible-web-design)

# Questions?

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