

# COMPING & PROTOTYPING

## INTRODUCTION

In reality, your web design skills don't mean anything if you don't have strong ideas and concepts. The amount of time that you spend up front planning your ideas will pay off royally in the end.

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# 05

## MINING CREATIVE IDEAS

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If you are new (or even old) to design, you will likely find yourself creatively blocked from time to time. There are a variety of ways to gain inspiration, and not all of them obvious.

Most professional designers keep a tickler file of ideas. This can consist of magazine cut-outs, photographs, articles, and keepsakes. Looking through design annuals is one way to see what ideas others have had, but sometimes looking to things unrelated to web design per se—nature, fashion, science, and news—can trigger ideas that are more original than just copying what you've already seen.

It's very important to connect with the subject matter at hand. If you are doing a site about one thing, there are usually lots of related peripheral ideas that might support an interesting creative direction. It's a great idea to free associate and make a list of quick ideas.

Let's say that you were creating a site for a wedding photographer. I'm simply going to type out any thought that comes into my mind that's related. Some of the ideas might not make any sense—that's almost the point!

Photo paper	White	Cake
Cameras	Sheer fabric	Dancing
Hearts	Bridal bouquet	Celebration
Flowers	Promise	Friends
Darkroom processing	Sunset	Barbie and Ken
Lips	Sunrise	Lovebirds
Holding hands	Happiness	Ribbon
Rings	Locket	Eyelet
Lace	Security	Pink
Eyes	Family	Silhouette

With this collection of ideas, try to hone in on the ones that resonate most. Whether you chose one or a select few concepts, think of how that idea relates to a type choice, a color scheme, or a layout. The more attention you pay to the concept up front, the more developed your idea will ultimately become.

## WHY CREATE A PROTOTYPE?

The prototype process addresses many different purposes. It can establish the look and feel of the web site, determine what colors, typefaces, and image button treatments are to be used, and determine the different compositions for different levels of the site. Creating sample pages in an imaging program can point out design flaws or help a client buy off on a design direction for the web site. This process is usually conducted in an imaging tool, such as Photoshop or Fireworks.

### Tool Considerations

I recommend either Photoshop or Fireworks because they are flexible design tools. You want to use a tool that makes it easy to swap a color, change some text, and move images around. Standard page layout tools such as QuarkXPress, InDesign, or PageMaker are not ideal for this purpose. Photoshop and Fireworks allow you to do more than move blocks of text around on the page—you can also create the graphics and final typography from your prototypes once they are approved. Layout tools are intended to go to a printer or printing press; Photoshop and Fireworks are geared to create images for the computer screen.

### Size Considerations

One of the problems of designing a prototype for a web page is making sure that you work 1:1 for the final output. In order to do this, you need to make a decision about how big to target your web pages. For example, there are many different computer resolutions. The majority of people have their resolution set to 800×600 or 1024×768. Older machines might be set to 640×480; newer machines might be set to 1600×1200. Here's a chart that lists the common resolution settings:

Resolution	Comment
640×480	Most older computers were set to this resolution. This has not been a standard resolution since 1997.
800×600	Many laptops ship at this resolution in 2002; however, the current trend is toward support for higher resolutions.
1024×768	The most common resolution for machines that ship today.
1600×1200	A lot of computers are shipping today with this capability, but it is not as standard as 1024×768.

The decision to target a specific size screen resolution can be challenging! It's best to err toward the lowest common denominator because something that is too large for your visitors' screens will cause them to have to use scrollbars. For this reason, I recommend the conservative 800×600 resolution for most web presences.

## BROWSER CHROME

Once you decide on a target resolution, it's important to shave some pixels off to make room for something called browser chrome. Browser chrome is the space that is used by the required buttons, scrollbars, and title area of a web browser.



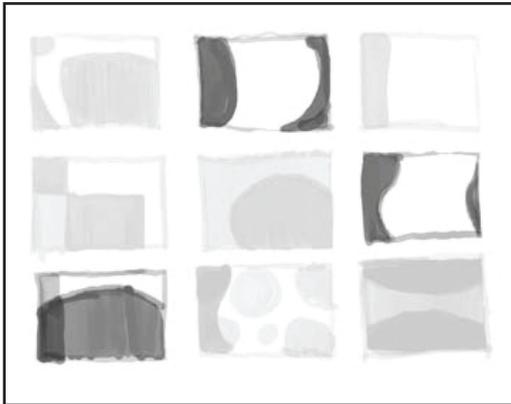
In this 800×600 resolution example, the browser chrome takes up 47 pixels right to left, and 173 pixels top to bottom. That leaves a usable area of 753×427! If you create a prototype that doesn't account for the browser chrome, you still might cause your visitor to scroll to see your important content.



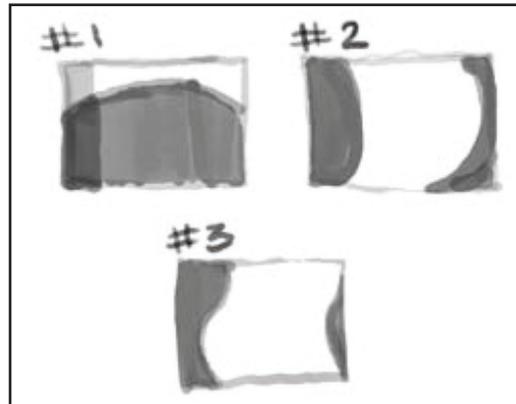
Browser chrome can take up more or less space, depending on how your end users have set their preferences. Here's a case in which the browser chrome takes up quite a bit less space. It's best to err to the worst-case scenario, however, so most web designers usually don't design for this best-case scenario.

## SKETCHES HELP!

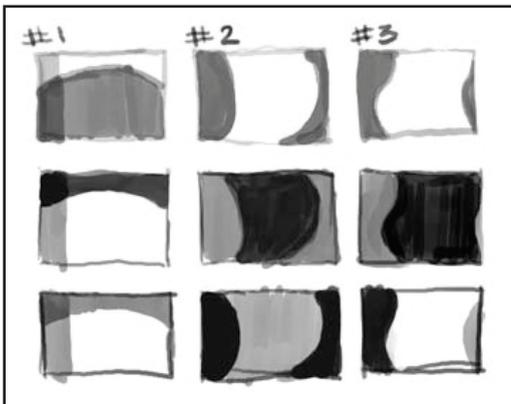
It's a great idea to sketch your idea first before you venture into an image editor. These kinds of roughs don't need to be beautiful—they just need to loosen up your brain for design ideas and directions.



Start with a rough composition and create a bunch of fast design ideas.



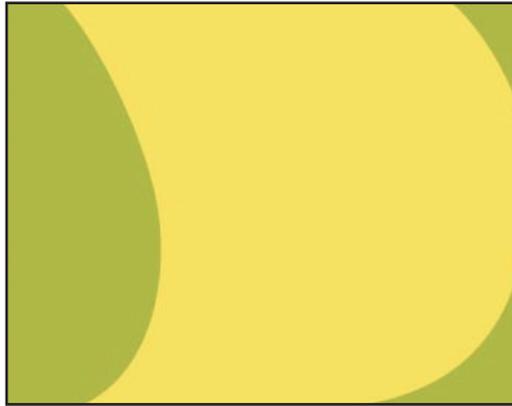
Hone in on what you like, and pick three.



With the three ideas that you like, try different variations by using a range values from light to dark.



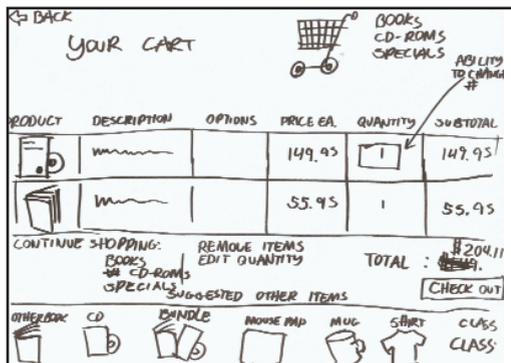
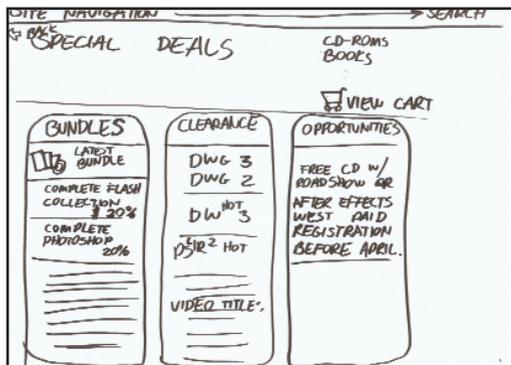
Hone in on what value and shape you like.



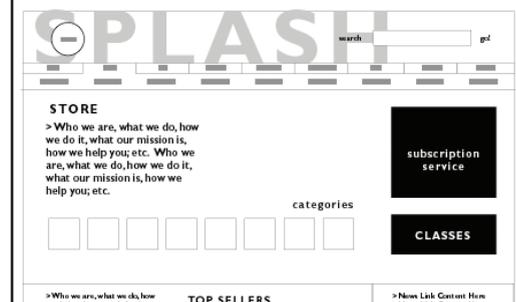
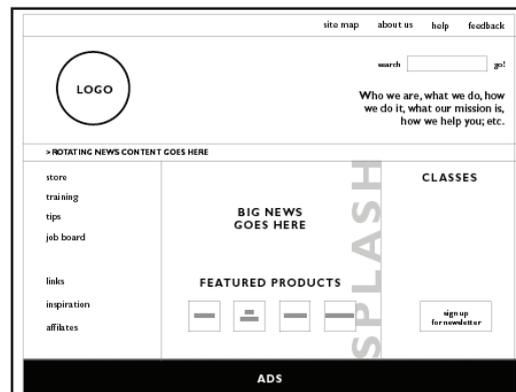
Convert the values to color choices.



Start laying your text and other graphic elements on top of your background image.



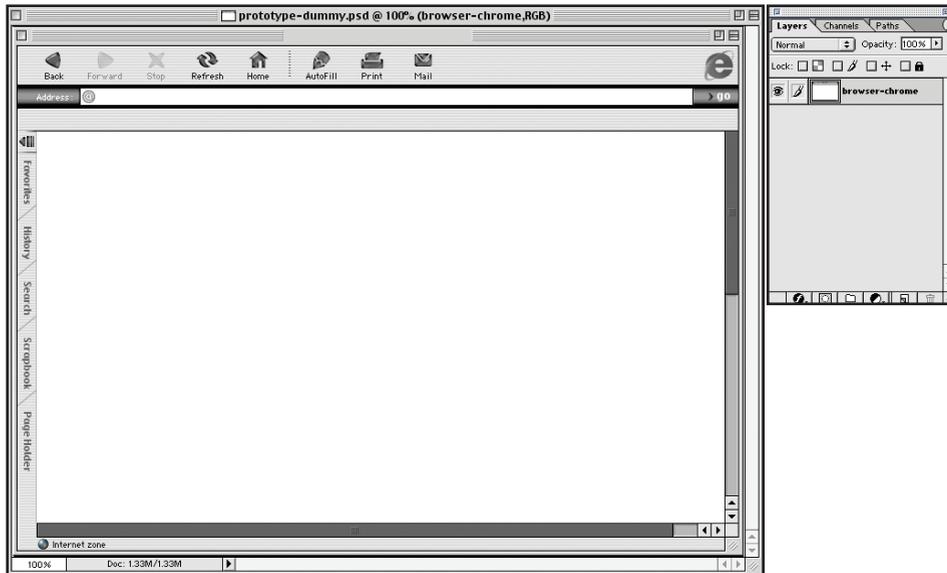
Rough your ideas out on paper before you open a graphics program. These sketches don't have to be beautiful or polished—they just loosen your mind up as you're problem solving.



Many designers create a wireframe version of the site before they introduce color or final graphic/text elements. This was created in Adobe Illustrator. The idea is to figure out the composition and layout before you start developing final artwork.

## START WITH A DUMMY

Once you've determined which resolution you want to target, create a dummy file in Photoshop or Fireworks. You can open this dummy and resave it with a different name so it can serve as a template for your web projects.



A dummy document can include the browser chrome as part of the image. This makes a realistic shell for your design roughs, so you are certain not to extend beyond the right amount of space.

I created this document by taking a screen shot. On a Mac, use the keyboard shortcut *Cmd+Shift+3*. This will create a file titled "Picture 1" on your hard drive. You can open this file in Photoshop or Fireworks to clean up the content so it appears as a generic window. On Windows, use the *Print Screen* key. This will copy the screen shot into your computer memory so that when you open a new file in Photoshop or Fireworks, the *Paste* command will paste the screen shot into the new document. From there, you can edit the image to remove specific content so it can become a generic shell for your prototyping needs.

Here's where you can find more sophisticated screen capture software:

**Snapz Pro** (Macintosh only)

<http://www.AmbrosiaSW.com/utilities>

**Snag-It** (Windows only)

<http://www.techsmith.com>

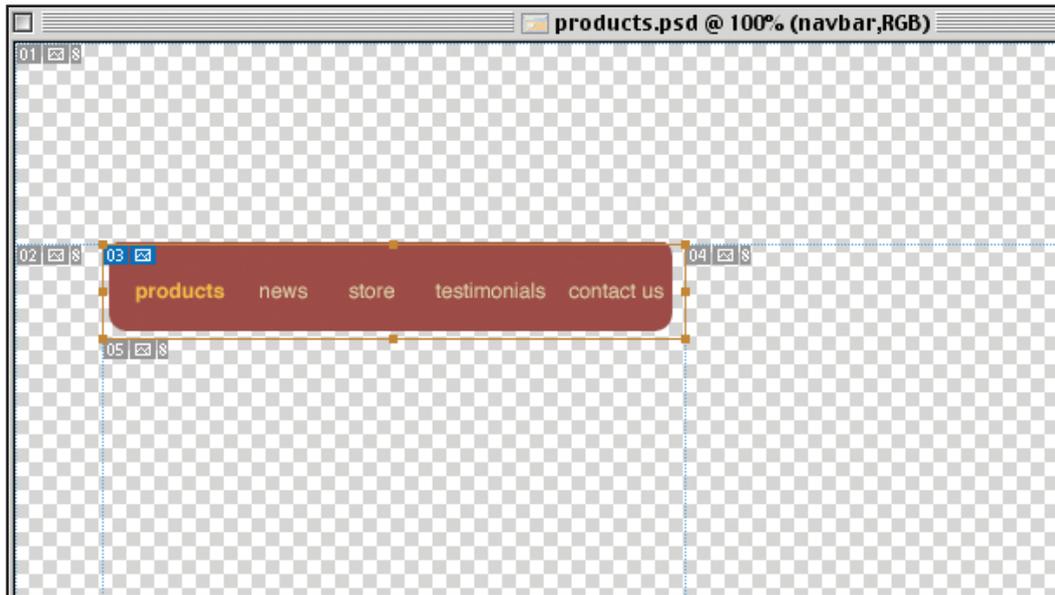
## USING LAYERS

When creating a prototype, it's best to separate content onto layers. This helps you isolate areas that you want to change. It also makes it easier to export images as final documents once you've settled on an approved prototype.



Setting up items on layers makes it possible to change ideas, fonts, and colors easily.

Once you've set up your prototype, you can turn layers on and off to isolate artwork for the final web page. This is when layers really come in handy! As well, both Photoshop and Fireworks allow you to slice images and export individual slices. All of these techniques combined are used to produce the final artwork for the site.



By turning off isolated layers and using a slice tool, it is possible to cut apart the prototype to produce final images. After they are sliced, they need to be optimized. Read Chapter 11, “Speedy Graphics” to learn about the criteria with which to optimize your graphics.

**tip**

#### RESOURCES FOR PHOTOSHOP & FIREWORKS

##### **Learning Photoshop and ImageReady for the Web CD-ROM**

By Lynda Weinman and Bruce Heavin

<http://www.lynda.com/products/videos/ps6ir3cd>

##### **Learning Fireworks**

By Donna Casey and Lynda Weinman

<http://www.lynda.com/products/videos/fw4cd>

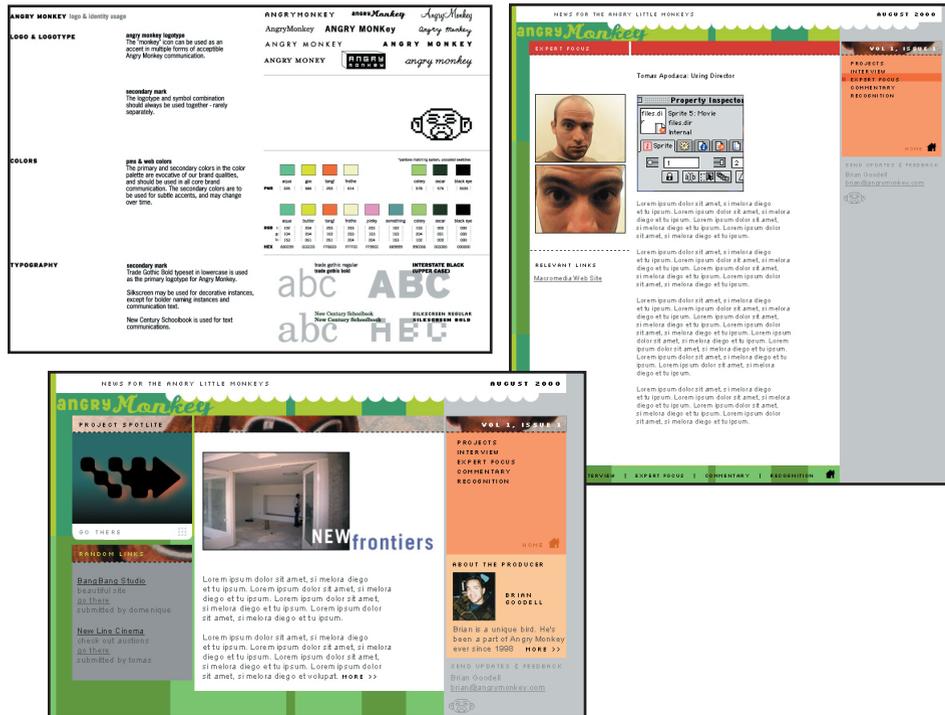
##### **Photoshop/ImageReady Hands-On Training**

By Lynda Weinman and Jan Kabili

<http://www.lynda.com/products/books/ps6ir3hot>

## MAKING STYLE GUIDES

A style guide is useful for prototyping because it reinforces what the format should be for different design elements. This guide can also help other team members know how to create sub-pages for the site, or it can help clients understand how the web site relates to other identity elements in their own branding system.



While working at Angry Monkey, a web design firm that unfortunately is no longer in business, Dominique Sillett created this style guide for their web site. You can see here how the style guide relates to a finished web page with the applied styles.

## DDNGERS OF PROTOTYPING

Without understanding how web pages are constructed or optimized, it's entirely possible to design something that is difficult or impractical to execute. Here are some pitfalls to be aware of:

### **Can't be done in conventional HTML.**

When images overlap, or edges of text intersect with other page elements, you might be forcing your design to be constructed as an image instead of in conventional HTML. In general, if you avoid overlapping shapes and text, you have a better chance of using standard HTML. If accessibility isn't an issue (see Chapter 8, "Accessibility Issues"), then publishing a lot of images might not be a problem.

### **Need to generate a transparent.**

In the event that you have a non-rectangular shape for your graphic, you will likely want to create a type of graphic that can include a mask. The most common format for this type of graphic is a transparent GIF. Read Chapter 16, "Transparent GIFs" to learn how to make these critters.

### **Background image will repeat.**

Whatever graphic you insert into the background element in HTML will repeat unless you use CSS techniques to prevent this. To learn more about background images, read Chapter 15, "Background Tiles."

### **Graphics can't compress well.**

There are two primary types of graphics on the Web: GIFs and JPEGs. Understanding how the file format is affected by the type of images you create can help reduce the file size of your graphics. To learn about optimizing graphics, read Chapter 11, "Speedy Graphics."



#### **HOW MUCH DETAIL?**

Prototypes usually begin with little detail and slowly evolve toward a final result. There are different levels of prototypes that you'll create at different stages. Don't make your initial efforts too detailed, as you can expect they'll need to be changed over and over again. You shouldn't be doing finals until the necessary people have gone through the review process with you.

# COMPING & PROTOTYPING

## SUMMARY

Prototypes help you work out your ideas and allow you to troubleshoot potential problems. Here's a short list that outlines the workflow advocated in this chapter:

- > Use a flexible image editor, such as Photoshop or Fireworks, to create your prototypes.
- > Establish a target size before you begin, and take browser chrome into account.
- > Set up artwork on layers for maximum flexibility.
- > Develop a style guide.
- > Be aware of authoring pitfalls and don't design yourself into a corner that you can't work your way out of.

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