



## You don't need glasses

By Molly Morris, memDesigns, December 2007  
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Well, ok, I can't really say that you don't need new glasses - that's between you and your optometrist. And chances are your monitor's working just fine, although there's always a better model out there. But if the reason you're thinking of new glasses or a new monitor is because you're having trouble reading web pages, then there may be an easier and cheaper solution for you.

Did you know that, in many cases, you can choose how text is displayed on your web-browser?

First things first. For a good web page on which to run this test, go to <http://news.google.ca/>. Now, if you're using Internet Explorer, click on *View* in the toolbar, then *Text Size* and you should see this:



Netscape works in a similar way, but your choices are Increase, Decrease or Normal.

By selecting Largest, Larger, Medium, Smaller, or Smallest, (or Increase or Decrease) you are telling your web-browser how to display text. So, if you're having trouble reading a web page, simply increase the text size.

Unfortunately, this doesn't always work. If you've done this on a different web page, and the text size hasn't changed, it's because the author used absolute text sizes, rather than relative text sizes. Web designers can specify an actual font size on a web page (for example 10 pixels), or relative font sizes (a percentage of your browser's default text size.) But an absolute pixel-specific font size will look quite different on screens with different resolutions.

Up until fairly recently it was pretty easy to know what screen resolution to target a web page for, making it a reasonable practice to specify absolute text sizes. In the early Windows '95 days, most computers were using a resolution of 640 x 480 (pixels, that is). If you come across a web page now that was designed for that resolution, it will likely look huge to you, and you will definitely need to do a lot of scrolling to see the whole page. After the release of Windows XP, the most common screen resolution was 800 x 600, and web authors often fixed the font size to work best on that resolution. When larger screens became the standard, default screen resolution increased again to 1024 x 768.

Today, however, screen sizes are all over the map - laptop monitors can be 3840 pixels wide and more, and palmtops can be as small as 100 pixels wide. And therein lies the problem. A font that is set at 10 pixels, takes up a much larger percentage of a screen that displays 800 x 600 pixels than it does on a screen that displays three times as many pixels, thus looking much larger in smaller resolutions than in larger resolutions.

So why do web authors still sometimes impose an absolute text size on a web page? Usually it's because they are going for a very specific look and feel for their website, and having a fluid text size would compromise that look. They have probably analyzed web stats to determine the most commonly used browsers and resolutions being used to display their websites and designed a page that looks best in a specific resolution. But as the possibilities for screen resolutions are ever-increasing, it is less advisable to design a site that looks best in a specific resolution. Increasingly, we have to design sites that are simply more flexible and allow the user more control. And the way to do that is by using relative text sizes, and giving some control back to the user.

If you are embarking on your first website project, consider who will be viewing your website and on what equipment, and work with your designer to develop an approach to text size that will cater to your audience. If you have a website that's in need of some updating anyway, this may be a good time to look at how user-friendly your text is and make some changes if you think it will improve the viewing experience on your website.