

To: Michelle Simmons
From: Katie Barton
Subject: Rhetorical Analysis and UX Heuristic Evaluation
Date: September 21, 2025

Introduction

The following memo will analyze the Clermont County Soil & Water (CCSW) Conservation District's website to provide recommendations for possible updates and improvements. Per our preliminary research on CCSW's brand style guide and correspondence with CCSW's communications director, Elea Cooper, we know that CCSW aims to improve the site's navigability, efficiency, credibility, and accessibility. For that reason, I conducted a comparative analysis between CCSW and Hamilton County Soil and Water Conservation District (HCSWC)'s website using a heuristic focused on UX principles, accessibility practices, and rhetorical appeals. This analysis has led me to two main takeaways for CCSW's improvement: creating and adhering to an updated web style guide and switching to an action-focused model, both of which will be highlighted and elaborated on in this memo's conclusion.

Methodology

To conduct my comparative analysis, I developed a heuristic with ten different areas of criteria to best assess CCSW's application of UX principles, accessibility practices, and rhetorical appeals. These ten areas are: Color and Aesthetics, Contrast and Readability, Consistency and Repetition, Fitt's Law and User Efficiency, Simplicity, Visible Navigation, Ethos, Pathos, Logos, and Kairos.

In addition, I also used this same heuristic on the website for the Hamilton County Soil and Water Conservation District (HCSWC) for the sake of comparison. I decided to use HCSWC for comparison because the two counties have similar audiences and after speaking with CCSW's Communications Coordinator, Elea Cooper, I already know what elements of this website that CCSW does and doesn't like.

Analysis

Color and Aesthetics

When observing CCSW's style guide, it is clear that the organization has the framework of a strong visual identity, complete with an established color palette, unique font choices, and consistent branding guidelines. However, the website itself doesn't seem to reflect the strengths of this style guide much at all. On the homepage, a lot of the primary colors seem to be ignored in favor of their secondary colors as well as some extra added tertiary colors. This new color palette can be seen most prominently on the three main containers featured on the homepage and the navigation bar. This creates an issue for new users as they're more likely to struggle in piecing together CCSW's brand identity. Furthermore, the logo showcased on the navigation bar as well as the tab in-browser belongs to the parent Clermont County website rather than the CCSW which bears much more of a resemblance to the website's new color palette than the CCSW logo does. This poses a major problem for new users who could potentially mix up the two organizations and confuse them for each other.

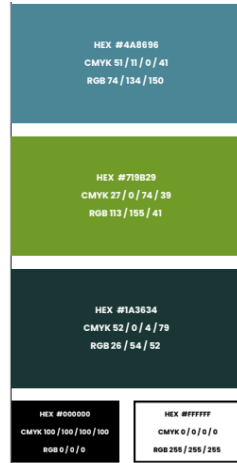
SECONDARY COLOR PALETTE

SUPPORT TO THE PRIMARY COLOR PALETTE

Our secondary color palette complements and extends our primary colors, providing flexibility and nuance to our visual communications. These colors support our brand identity while allowing creative expression across diverse applications and contexts.

Used judiciously, these secondary colors create visual interest, highlight information, and enhance storytelling without overwhelming our primary palette. They should always work in harmony with our core colors, never competing for attention but rather enriching the brand experience through thoughtful application and balanced composition.

CLERMONT SOIL & WATER



On the left is a photo from the official CCSW style guide. The secondary colors listed are #4A8696, #719B29, #1A3634. On the right is a photo from the CCSW's web homepage. The three main containers are have hex colors of #EEAF0F, #1EB53A, and #008ED6. While these colors do bear more resemblance to the secondary color palette than the primary one, they still do not match this palette at all.

Moving away from the homepage, the CCSW has many similar issues when it comes to their other pages on the website. Many of these pages don't seem to reflect any semblance of the styling guidelines and color palettes featured in the guide whatsoever and are rather much more akin to plain HTML. A lot of the information is presented in the server host's default font choices on top of a white background, failing to give a large chunk of the website any visual identity at all.

In contrast, HCSWC presents a rather simple yet still striking color palette of white, gray, and cool blue with a muted orange and green as accent colors. These colors are present throughout the entire website, making each page look cohesive and part of the same brand identity.

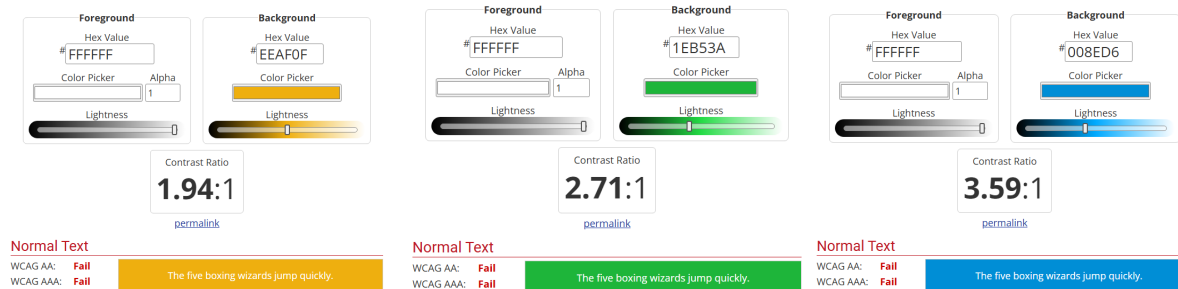


Both photos are from HCSWC's homepage. The left photo features the top of the homepage while the right features the bottom of the homepage. As discussed, both photos feature a very minimalist design utilizing white, grays, and blue to create a simple yet cohesive design and feel.

Contrast and Readability

Another problem presented with the website's new color palette is that many of these colors in combination fail to meet WC3's Web Accessibility Contrast Guidelines (WCAG) for color contrast levels. WCAG is an international set of standards established by World Wide Web Consortium (WC3) to ensure that digital content is accessible to users with disabilities. Their AA and AAA color contrast guidelines exist so web elements are legible to users with color blindness and low-light vision. Level AA requires a contrast ratio of 4.5:1 for normal text while

Level AAA demands a higher ratio of 7:1. The three main containers on CCSW's homepage fail both of these guidelines with contrast ratios of 1.94:1, 2.71:1, and 3.59:1. The orange text on the white nav bar also fails contrast guidelines with a contrast ratio of 2.33:1.



The following images are the contrast level checks for the three main containers on the homepage. The first image features the test for the first yellow container, the second image is the test for the second green container, and the third image is the test for the third blue container.

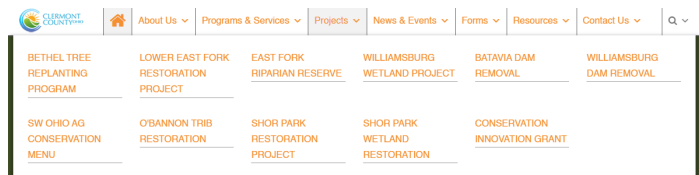
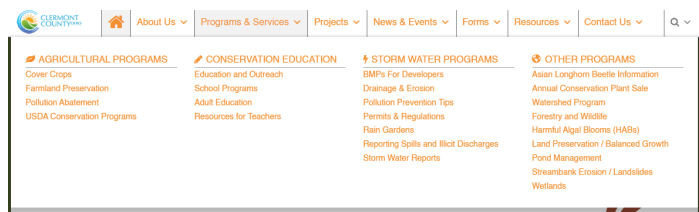
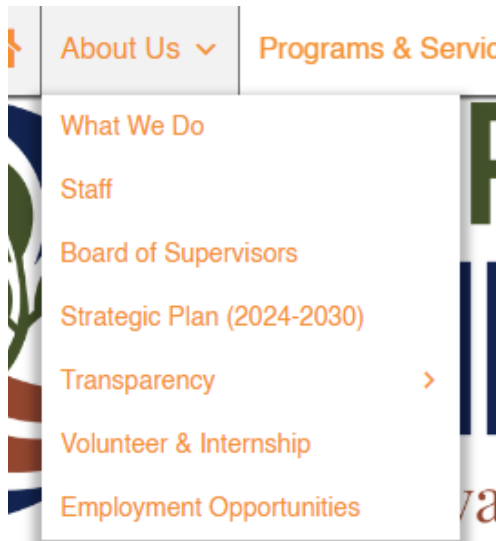
In terms of readability, another concern that presents itself is the lack of alt text on any images. Alt text is a feature that allows users with screen readers to read a description of what is being presented in each photo. This is useful in making a website accessible to those who are blind or otherwise vision-impaired.

In terms of contrast, size contrast is another point of concern. The home page utilizes this well, with its main logo and three main containers being much bigger than the rest of the elements of the page and therefore attracting the most attention. However, this isn't seen on many of their other pages. On their more general pages, very little headers are used and most of the information is presented in paragraphs. External links or buttons are presented in hyperlinks that offer no size contrast at all to the other text on the page, making important information harder for users to find at a glance.

HCSWC mostly uses white backgrounds with text that are various shades of gray. The darkest gray, #42514c, has a contrast ratio of 8.35:1 with the white background which passes both AA and AAA levels. The lightest gray, #8e8e8e, however, has a contrast ratio of 3.27:1. While this ratio doesn't pass the recommended contrast levels, it still has a higher ratio than the ones seen on CCSW's website. They also make good use of size contrast, with most interactable features being showcased in large buttons. HCSWC however does seem to lack alt text, yet we still believe this to be a good practice to abide by anyway.

Consistency and Repetition

Where CCSW faces the most issues with consistency and repetition is in its nav bar structure. The sections in the nav bar feature three main forms of organization: one where tabs are listed in a single-column menu, one where tabs are hyperlinked under four columns with headers, and one where tabs are presented as hyperlinked headers in a 6x2 table. These different forms of organization can bring a sense of confusion to the user as well as an impression of unprofessionalism.

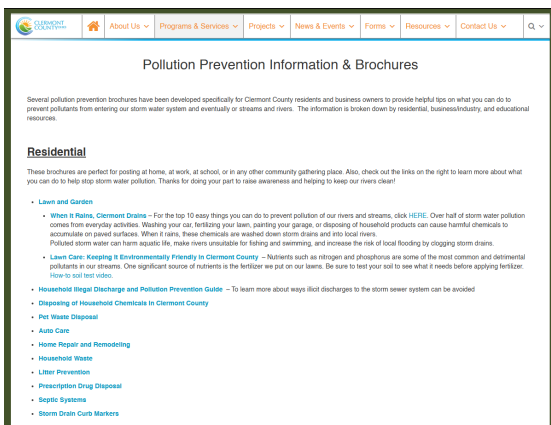


On the left is a screen capture of the “About Us” tab in the nav bar. This tab features the classic one column menu navigation. The top picture on the right is the “Programs & Services” tab which is displayed in four columns. The bottom picture on the right is the “Projects” tab which is displayed in a 6x2 table.

Conversely, HCSWC displays strong organization in their nav bar by presenting tabs in the same one column menu across each header. This makes it easier for the user to navigate as well as provide the website with a sense of polish and cohesion.

Fitt’s Law and User Efficiency

Fitt’s Law is a predictive model used in UX design that states “the time it takes to move a pointer to a target area is a function of the distance to the target and its width.” This model dictates that larger and closer targets are faster to acquire, meaning that the most important interactive elements of a page should be as large and close as possible. While this law is demonstrated quite well on prominent pages like the homepage, their form pages, and any page featuring reports page which displays more recent reports at the top, the interactable objects on most other pages are presented as hyperlinks near the bottom of the page. This adds additional strain on the user when it comes to reaching their target and this slow performance over time could eventually lead to the user becoming bored, frustrated, or dissatisfied and leaving the website.



Pictured to the left is a screen capture from the CSWC’s Pollution Prevention Information and Brochures page. Most of the information is provided through hyperlinks that are the same size as the rest of the next. Many other pages on the website are formatted similarly.

In contrast to CCSW, important links on HCSWC are frequently showcased in buttons, with the most important ones being placed further up the screen.

Visible Navigation and Explorable Interfaces

A lot of the elements on the homepage don't provide much indication on whether or not they are interactable. There are many elements such as the calendar and social media icons on the bottom of the homepage that can easily be misinterpreted for pictures rather than clickable buttons. In the same vein, there are elements such as the bottom halves of the three featured containers that look as if they should be interactable but aren't. There are also other interactable elements featured on other pages such as drop-down menus that don't give any indication of whether they've been activated or not.

On HCSWC's website, most interactable objects feature a change in either size or color when they are hovered over, indicating that they are interactable. This is a very strong practice for it can easily showcase to users what they're able to interact with on screen as well as which elements on screen aren't interactable.

Simplicity

While CCSW does a good job at maintaining simplicity when it comes to a majority of their pages, the amount of pages offered on the site through the nav bar can lend themselves to be quite overcomplicated and overwhelming. From the homepage, you can access a total of 96 pages with 66 of them just from the nav bar. This is a large number of pages that can be pretty overwhelming for a user who doesn't know what they're looking for or what page will get them the information that they need.

HCSWC on the other hand, has only 50 pages featured on their homepage. 42 of these pages featured in its nav bar with half of them only being featured in sub menus that the user has to hover over to access. This makes this website look more simplistic and easier to navigate in comparison to CCSW.

Ethos

Moving onto CCSW's use of rhetorical appeals, they do quite a good job of providing credible information on a lot of different topics. They also have records of where they got their information as well as hyperlinks to other credible sources. This establishes a lot of credibility for CCSW, immediately giving users the sense that they know what they're talking about. However, some areas where CCSW's ethos falls short is that their website contains quite a few outdated, broken, and questionable links that can hurt their professionalism and accountability. There are many buttons in deeper areas of the website that can take users to pages that don't work or older versions of the website from 2023.

In contrast, mostly all buttons work on HSCWC's website function just fine. There doesn't seem to be any pages that are broken, any buttons that don't work, or any way to reach older versions of their domain. Their interactable elements all appear up to date, helping the website appear professional and polished.

Pathos

Out of all of the rhetorical appeals, CCSW displays the strongest use of pathos throughout their website. This is displayed the most in their “About Us” and “Projects” sections. In these sections, CCSW goes into a lot of detail listing the importance of their work, as well as the details behind each project and the positive impacts of it. The only way that I see that CCSW could strengthen their use of pathos is in providing more high quality pictures of their projects, programs, and accomplishments. It’s one thing to read about all the passion that gets put behind a project, but it’s another to see the faces behind it and the positive effects in the aftermath. They do provide some pictures in these pages, however I think it would be better if they were larger on the page and featured in more high quality.

Conversely, pathos seems to be one area where HCSWC seems to fall flat. During our discussion with Elea Cooper, she stated how she didn’t like the photos Hamilton chose for their website, such as the skyline and stock photos of rain and soil, because they felt too impersonal. This demonstrates the importance of considering pathos when choosing media and also highlights CCSW’s potential desire for it in their own website.

Logos

Logos is another rhetorical appeal where CCSW does quite well. Most of their pages take on an educational stance and provide a lot of information on each topic. A lot of quantitative data is provided in the form of dates and statistics and there are also many links provided to other external resources or avenues to additional information. The only area where CCSW seems to fall short is in the type of information that it provides with the user. While they do provide a large extensive network of helpful information, there isn’t much indication on what users can do with it. There doesn’t seem to be many calls to action on their site or any guide on how to solve a typical problem a resident of Clermont County would likely be on the CCSW website to solve.

In contrast, HCSWC provides its users with an action-based model rather than an education-based one. This means that tabs are structured according to common actions that a user may want to take while on their website. If a user is looking for more information on what the HCSWC is, they can refer to the “what we do” section. If they are looking for assistance on a specific problem, they can refer to the “how we can help” section. If they are looking for opportunities to help out with any of HCSWC’s projects, they can refer to the “get involved!” section. This makes it much easier for users to accomplish the exact actions they set out to do when opening the website. While HCSWC may not have as much information as CCSW, it does a good job at having the right information.

Kairos

In terms of kairos, the only main issues are seen in things that have already been discussed before: the outdated links and the lack of action-based information. The outdated links harm CCSW’s kairos because they can potentially prevent the user from receiving up-to-date, relevant information and the lack of an action-based model prevents users from finding information that is the most relevant to them in the given moment.

HCSWC once again provides an example of what a kairotic version of a soil and water conservation district looks like in providing fully functional, up-to-date links and objects as well

as an action-based model that can take a user to whatever information or resources they are seeking at that moment in time.

Conclusion

Create and adhere to updated web style guide

Based on the comparison between CCSW's branding style guide and the website, a lot of the website's issues have to do with parameters in the style guide not being upheld as well as many facets of the style guide not taking into account web-exclusive content. It's for that reason that I believe one change that will assist in helping the website become more navigable, efficient, credible, and accessible have to do with creating a new style guide with extra emphasis on web application and utilizing it as much as possible.

This new style guide will include rules for color choices, font face choices, font sizing, and use of images to ensure that each page is accessible and looks cohesive as part of CCSW's brand identity. It will also include guidelines on how to indicate something is interactable, design and placement of buttons, and guides on when to make something a hyperlink vs presenting the information in a button, menu, or a different way. This will assist users in quickly recognizing avenues for seeking out new information as well as using the website much more efficiently.

Switch to action-focused model

One major feature that makes HCSWC's website stand out when compared to CCSW's is the ease of navigability. It is much more simple for users to find information pertaining to what they need. This is done through HCSWC's use of an action-based model in comparison to CCSW's education and topic-based one. Rather than sorting things by topic, HCSWC's site becomes much more user-focused by organizing their pages on a system that tries to predict what actions a user on their website would like to do. I believe that adapting this model will make CCSW's site much more efficient, navigable, and helpful in providing users with the information they need.

This model also begs for the use of much more sub-tabs within landing pages in the nav bar, since most general actions a user of CCSW would want to take don't consist of every bit of information currently shown in CCSW's homepage. This change in simplifying CCSW's nav bar will help in preventing users encountering decision fatigue and getting overwhelmed.