



State Papers Online Heuristic Evaluation

July 19, 2010

Mark Thompson-Kolar

*Severity key: **High-failure** (at top of report) | **Medium-confusion** | **Low-irritation***

Employs Jakob Nielsen's 10 general principles for user interface design (heuristics)

High-severity items

1. **Home page: Search box placement requires users to return to the Home page before executing the search. Recommend making Search box persistent by moving it to the top of the page. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.**
2. **Modal windows: The modal windows used to display information in the Research Tools/Calendar Prefaces and Key Documents, and "About State Papers Online" section look like popups and require additional learning for users; they also make reading the information more difficult than necessary because many of them open narrower than the information they contain. Recommend using the main browser window and move this information out of the modal window. Heuristic: User control and freedom, conventions and standards.**

3. **Search History: “Revise” control on this page delivered strange results when used from Advanced Search on “Spain”: clicking Revise put term “Elizabeth” into the search-term field. This seems an error.**

Home page

4. **Medium:** Search box is very stark and offers user no sense of what it includes or commands it accepts, such as Booleans. Recommend including short but informative descriptive text such as “Search the archive by full text, including And & Or. More options available in Advanced Search”.
5. **Medium:** Search History link is invisible until a user does searches. Recommend making this always visible, even if zero searches have been done, providing subtle clue to user that Search History is an available feature in site. Heuristic: Recognition rather than recall.
6. **Medium:** Name “Mark List” is different from the page the link goes to, “Marked Document”. It also is invisible until user has marked items. Recommend renaming it consistent to page and making the link always visible. Heuristic: Recognition rather than recall, error prevention.
7. **Low:** The design doesn’t convey obvious meaning of the site’s purpose, and the title, State Papers Online could present other meanings than British historical documents. Suggest considering new name (semiotic) and altering design so page carries prominent entry point that provides meaning “Research site containing 3 million pages of 16th- & 17th-century British government documents” and perhaps enlarge the thumbnail images to provide visual reinforcement of “history” and “royal”. Heuristic: Match between system and the real world.
8. **Low:** Puzzling that the descriptive text “State Papers Online is published in four parts. You have access here to: ...” only tells 3 parts but doesn’t explain why not the fourth. Link or more descriptive text to explain this. Heuristic: Match between system and the real world.
9. **Low:** Gray text against gray background or gray text against beige background is difficult to read. For design, lighten background or make text darker gray or black to enhance contrast. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.
10. **Low:** Images are completely static. Because they might inspire curiosity and subsequent action by site user, make them search aids by having a click on an image fill in a search – or make them navigation by having clicks on them take the user to the Image Gallery or to the appropriate Essays. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.
11. **Low:** The animated quotes at right side are interesting and also could inspire curiosity and subsequent action by the user. Make them clickable, linked to the documents in which they are based. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.
12. **Low:** The Search field offers the obvious starting point for action on the page, but many users new to the State Papers documents or to the site itself will require some background information to form intentions and determine subsequent actions. Some research hints or possible actions would help; the Using *State Papers Online* information from the “About” modal window could be used on the Home page in some form. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use, recognition rather than recall.

State Papers – About

13. **Medium:** Text requires use of scroll bar to move back to top. Add “Back to Top” links after each content item. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.
14. Low: Many items in the text would have heightened value if they were linked to the content they reference. (Example: “(The essays (under **Research Tools**) by Drs Bevan, Alford and Knighton provide further details on the State Papers and the Calendars.)” Add intra-site links to much more of this content. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use, recognition rather than recall.

Preferences

15. **Medium:** The controls are intuitive and work well, but the boxes related to it are intrusive. The Alert box that provides confirmatory feedback when Defaults are restored or Preferences are applied requires an extra step to dismiss it, and the Preferences box must be manually closed via browser controls to dismiss it. Recommend reworking these boxes to add feedback text rather than Alert box, and a “Close Window” button within the preferences main window. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.
16. Low: Related to prior item, to maintain site conventions and reduce users’ need to learn additional controls, recommend integrating Preferences window into main browser window. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.

Search History

17. Low: Link to Search History takes user to page with different title: “Previous Searches(ps)”. Recommend making both same for consistency.
18. Low: Search History/Preview Searches page offers misnamed “Revise” control, which actually takes user back to quick Search box, pre-seeded with search. When changes have been made and a search is executed, a new Previous Search item appears, and the “Revised” one hasn’t been actually been revised. Recommend renaming link “Return to Search”. Heuristic: Consistency and standards.

Bottom of Home – Gale & Archive links: About State Papers Online, Contact Gale, Copyright, Terms of Use, Privacy Policy. Also, The National Archive

19. Low: These links all take users offsite to Gale corporate pages that lack the State Papers Online look and feel. Recommend adding hover text indicating offsite link (“Go to Gale Copyright site”, “Go to the UK government’s national archive site”, etc.) Heuristic: match between system and the real world.

Research Tools

20. Low: Links at bottom of Home page operate subtly differently from the Research Tools button atop the Home page; the button goes to a page with additional Research Tools controls, but the links at bottom do not take user to the other Research Tools controls. (Example: clicking “Reference and Links” link produces page that has only “Reference and Links” linkable header; however, Research Tools button displays “Reference and Links” header and these additional subdivisions: Essays, Calendar Prefaces, Key Documents and Image Gallery.” Recommend making both means of accessing the Research Tools pages

provide same results. Heuristic: Consistency and standards, flexibility and efficiency of use.

21. Low: “Save” control offers only html format, not .doc or .txt or even .xls (for tabular material). The html also leaves a large amount of space between lines on some of the files. Suggest offering .doc, .txt and .xls download options and adjusting the spacing between lines. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.
22. Low: Print Preview control requires user to use the browser controls to close the window. Recommend adding “Close Window” button. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.

Research Tools/References & Links

23. Low: The descriptive text’s look and feel of various pages is inconsistent (“• Abbreviations in the Calendars” look vs. “Glossaries”). Also, some descriptive text is underlined, which makes it appear to be linked when it’s not. Recommend reworking these pages. Heuristic: Consistency and standards.
24. Low: Most of the pages are very deep, with excellent content appearing quite far down. Recommend adding sublinks in left navigation, similar to the “Links to Related Resources”. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.
25. Low: Genealogical Trees and Diagram Maps are gems hidden among these pages. They also open as PDFs with no warning to the user. Recommend adding thumbnails of the images on the respective link pages, and add brief note that they are PDF files. (“Opens as PDF” or just “PDF file”). Heuristic: Visibility of system status, recognition rather than recall.

Research Tools/Essays

26. Low: It’s not clear what order the essays are in, chronological or otherwise. Clarify with descriptive text. Heuristic: Match between system and real world.

Research Tools/Contact the Publisher/Submit Annotations

27. Low: This page is an odd fit under Research Tools, because it doesn’t provide content like the other related links do but allows the user to do an action to provide information. Suggest moving this link to the bottom of the Home page or to the row of links along the top of the Home page. Heuristic: Match between system and the real world.
28. Low: Modal Feedback box has confusing title “Contact the Publisher”, which doesn’t indicate what user is seeing is feedback to recent action. Suggest rewriting descriptive text to: “Thank you for your message” or “Your message has been sent”.

Research Tools/Image Gallery

29. **Medium:** It’s not clear what the image gallery is. It has only 199 images, prompting the question whether there aren’t more images available among the 3 million pages in the database, or whether it’s a special selection of images. Recommend descriptive text on Home page and Image Gallery thumbnails page explaining the purpose and scope. Heuristic: Match between system and real world.

30. Low: Navigational pagination is only at the top of the page, which forces user to scroll up before moving to next page. Recommend adding pagination links at bottom of screen. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.
31. Low: Navigational pagination displays only a few links to the 14 pages in the gallery. With only 14 pages total, why show a subset? Recommend expanding navigation to show all 14 links at all times. Heuristics: Flexibility and efficiency of use, consistency and standards.

Research Tools/Image Gallery/Display page

32. **Medium:** Citation Tools link takes user to a page titled “Generate a Citation”. The page doesn’t offer an option to export to an MS Word document file or provide a way to let the user copy and paste the citation from this page. Recommend making link and page title the same, offer option to export to .doc, and provide the text for the citation in a complete, copyable way. Heuristic: Match between system and real world.
33. **Medium:** Email function doesn’t send an image when a user viewing an image in the gallery would expect an image to be sent. The resulting email displays text that is way too small to read easily, and provides a Document URL link that doesn’t link directly back to the image gallery document (it links to the Home page). Recommend sending the actual image as a PDF (cf: Print Preview and Download controls) or improving the email formatting so the text is readable and the link is back to the image display page. Heuristic: Match between system and real world, flexibility and efficiency of use.
34. Low: The actual % scale at which the image initially renders isn’t displayed, making the use of the dropdown menu more complicated than necessary because the user doesn’t know what baseline s/he’s starting from when changing the scale. Recommend displaying that scale figure persistently. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.
35. Low: Scaling function works slowly, making user wonder if anything is happening after controls are pressed. Recommend adding time indicator. Heuristic: Visibility of system status.
36. Low: Print Preview control gives only one option, “PDF”. It also confuses the workflow by implying the user will print from the first modal window, but an Acrobat Reader opens up instead. Recommend adding brief descriptive text (perhaps similar to the Download window’s) explaining how Print operation works and use of PDF in the flow. Heuristic: Match between system and real world, consistency and standards.
37. Low: Download similarly only offers a lone option. It also opens the image in an Acrobat window. Recommend combining the Download and Print operations in a “Open PDF in Acrobat” control. Heuristic: Match between system and the real world.

Advanced Search

38. **Medium:** Fuzzy Search is a very useful feature, but this page provides no guidance for what it does or how user should use it. Recommend providing hover text, descriptive text or a link to a modal “help” screen with brief explanation. Heuristic: Help and documentation, flexibility and efficiency of use.

39. **Medium:** Advanced Search doesn't retain search terms but does retain date dropdown information when "Back to previous page" or "Back" button is selected. Recommend this be changed so terms are retained. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.
40. **Low:** "Search" button near the top, above the section of limiters, appears to only include items entered in those rows because of its location and the horizontal line beneath. Recommend redesigning to remove horizontal line and slightly moving Search button so it encroaches on Limiters space. Heuristic: Visibility of system status.
41. **Low:** Page requires slight scrolling to show all of its fields. Recommend small layout revision to move items and address spacing so whole field fits on screen without scrolling. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.

Search Results page

42. **Medium:** The Essays do not appear searchable via quick search despite their possessing vast amounts of interesting content. Recommend including all Research Tools material in Search, and provide Limiter to allow users to include only specific Research Tools content or the images in search if so desired. Heuristic: Consistency and standards.
43. **Medium:** Navigation requires user to scroll back to top to access the tabs to choose different type of content or add/remove limiters. Recommend adding "Return to Top" link at bottom. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.
44. **Low:** If Relevancy capability can be added to Search, it should be, to provide best results at the top of search. Heuristic: Consistency and standards, flexibility and efficiency of use.
45. **Low:** Providing thumbnails of manuscripts in the search results would provide context and recognition. Recommend it if possible. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.
46. **Low:** Mark All control doesn't mark all the documents found in search, but only the ones displayed. Recommend changing to "Mark All on Page". Heuristic: Match between system and the real world.
47. **Low:** Navigation pagination shows only a few page numbers, and doesn't show the total number of resulting documents on pages beyond the initial Results page. Recommend displaying 10 or more, always with the total number. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.
48. **Low:** "Expand" control sometimes provides several screens of information, requiring large amount of scrolling. Recommend Expand display only a set number of possible lines, 15 or 20. Heuristic: Consistency and standards.

Calendar & Full Citation view page

49. **Low:** Bookmark nicely allows user to copy for pasting into browser. Recommend adding control "Copy to clipboard" that copies the bookmark text to the computer clipboard so user doesn't have to drag mouse over the whole bookmark link. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.
50. **Low:** Control for Switch to Compare View and Switch to Single View doesn't give user clear idea what that control does. Recommend hover text to provide a brief description. Heuristic: Help and documentation.

Marked Documents

51. Low: The way controls on page work isn't naturally clear. Recommend adding brief descriptive text indicating how Compare Documents, Remove, Download and the check-box fields work together to provide functionality. Heuristic: Consistency and standards.
52. Low: Check-boxes appear to work with only the Compare Documents control, but could be misunderstood to work with any of the various commands, Download, Remove or Compare Documents. Recommend reconsidering this form to allow check boxes to work with Download, Remove or Compare. Heuristic: Consistency and standards.
53. Low: The Download control downloads **all** the Marked documents. Recommend renaming "Download All" or incorporating recommendation on prior item. Heuristic: Flexibility and efficiency of use.
54. Low: Page offers Compare Documents link even when only 1 document is on the Marked List, and also when no documents are checked. Recommend making this link "grayed out" to indicate that it won't activate unless documents are checked to be compared, and hover text with the current alert popup's descriptive text "Please select exactly two items to compare". This will eliminate the need for the alert popup. Heuristic: Aesthetic and minimalist design, visibility of system status.

Browse Manuscript/Catalog

55. **Medium:** Notepad is a powerful feature but is relatively hidden and underdocumented even on the pages on which it appears. Recommend making it more prominent in the site, with controls on the Home page and elsewhere (perhaps accessed like Marked List or Search History or from the page header).
56. Low: Several controls and labels aren't naturally understood, including "Notepad," "Sequence No" and "Recto Folio No". Recommend adding hover text to explain. Heuristic: Help and documentation.