HOW MUCH DOES YOUR HEAD WEIGH?

THE BIG BOOK OF FACTS

Marg Meikle

Illustrated by Tina Holdcroft

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256.

Why is red considered Stop, green considered Go, and yellow Slow Down? Why isn't blue Stop, purple Slow and orange Go?

Why not indeed? It seems random, but stoplights were purpose-built — designed with a purpose in mind. At the end of the horse-and-carriage era when cars came into the picture, traffic was a big mess with people stopping and going wherever and whenever they wanted. To bring some order to the roads, planners used the best idea they could come up with: copy what the trains were doing.

Railroads used red for Stop because in western cultures red has been a signal for danger, death and blood for thousands of years. Red seemed to be the obvious choice for Stop, but green and amber were just luck of the draw. Way back in the 1830s and 1840s when railroads had just gotten started, the colour for Caution was green, and Go was clear white. You can probably imagine the problems. If Go was white or clear, then occasionally when you saw any old white light, like a street lamp, you might think it was a Go signal. One time a red glass lens fell out of a Stop sign, leaving the white light bulb. The train engineer, seeing the white light, saw Go when it should have been Stop, and his mistake resulted in a horrible crash.

Railroads came up with their current signal system — no white lights, just red, green and amber — none too soon. That way, any time they saw a white light they would know that something was wrong. Traffic engineers saw

that the railway people had worked out the bugs in the system, and borrowed it for cars. The first traffic light was installed near the Houses of Parliament in London, England, in 1868.

The first electric traffic signals were installed in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1914. Planners thought they could get away with just red and green, but added the yellow for Caution a few years later because they needed to warn people that Stop was coming soon. Detroit, the home of automobiles, had the first modern four-way sign signals.

- How do colour-blind people distinguish red and green lights? They recognize the brightness, and know by rote that in vertical stoplights, red is on the top and green is on the bottom.
- If you're facing forward on a boat, the port or left side is marked with a red light, and the starboard or right side is green — you need to know the sides of the boat to follow the rules of navigating. (An easy way to remember which side is which is: *port* has four letters and so does *left*.)

257.

What was the first website?

As we learned in the answer to question #254, ARPANET was the predecessor of the Internet. The best-used part of ARPANET was email, which grew in popularity and spawned many other technologies. That was, until Tim Berners-Lee, an English particle physicist and computer scientist, working at the European Organization for Nuclear Research, or CERN, in Geneva, Switzerland, finally figured out a way to share more information between teams of researchers. (CERN is the world's largest particle physics centre. It's where physicists look into what matter is made of and what forces hold it together.)

Tim Berners-Lee posted the first webpage at 2:56:20 p.m. on August 6, 1991. Unfortunately this site is no longer accessible, but CERN has a huge history of the World Wide Web on their own website, since they consider the work of Berners-Lee and his colleagues one of their greatest achievements.

Berners-Lee proposed the idea of the World Wide Web in 1989, and it came together within two years. His contributions are many, but the four critical things he developed are:

- the very first Web browser
- HTML, the coding system for documents
- HTTP, the way computers communicate with websites
- URL, the way we address things on the Web

Paul Kunz, a research scientist at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center (SLAC) near Palo Alto, California, posted the first North American Website on December 12, 1991. It consisted of three lines of text and two hyperlinks — not much to show off. But others caught on to the idea fast. After 1993, when the first browser, Mosaic, was introduced at the University of Illinois, the Web spread more quickly than anyone could ever have dreamed. By 2009 there were more than 234 million unique Websites.

A group called Foundation Technologies has figured that the time it took various technologies to reach 50 million people was:

Telephone	75 years
Television	13 years
The Web	4 years

258.

Why are there no letters to go with the numbers 1 or 0 on a phone?

Phone designers kept the numbers *1* and *0* for what are called "flag" functions. The *1* is reserved for long-distance, and *0* is for dialling the operator. That's why area codes don't begin wiht 0 or 1.