

Tips for information architecture

Information architecture (IA) is a method of organizing and labeling a website structure to support usability. Careful consideration of the content and organization of a site is the first step to creating an effective user experience. Also referred to as *information design*, structuring is about connecting users to the content and organizing information intuitively. It is also about blueprinting the site from a functional perspective to communicate easily with a client and a team. Ultimately, understanding what users are looking for and allowing easy access to content and information is the overall goal. It's all about ensuring that users can get what they came for. A well-designed information architecture is similar to a table of contents. It helps improve discoverability, efficiency, satisfaction, and overall usability of a website.

[Information architecture is] creating consistent and functional systems for navigation, graphics, page layout and title languages, so that the user knows where to go, what to do, and encourages him or her to return.

- Web Review, *Peter Monville*

The information architecture step usually falls within the structure phase of web project production, before you create wireframes, design comps, and prototypes.

Consider the following best practices when creating a well-designed information architecture.

Research the needs of the audience and users

Who is your target audience? What kind of user are you trying to attract to the website? These important initial questions inform the way you structure content and information. You must create the information architecture of your site with your audience in mind.

Identify a clear purpose for the site

Always keep the goals in mind while you're creating the information architecture. Every website needs a clear goal: to educate, inform, entertain, market, sell, or any combination of these. Establishing clear goals helps you structure effective information architecture.

Inventory and assemble site content

You may be working on a new website from scratch or redesigning an existing website. Regardless, it's important to perform an inventory of content you already have and describe any new content to be created. The content is the core of the site, so you need to know if it is suitable for your audience and supports the overall goals of the site. Another consideration is presenting content across multiple screens and devices. You should structure content carefully so it presents well on a range of computers, tablets, and smartphones.

Assemble site content into logical groups

Content and structure are intertwined. Assembling content into logical groups helps establish clear and consistent site organization and facilitates the task of defining the information architecture.

Create a site map

Your site's structure is composed of the categories and logical groups you just created. A site map serves as a bird's-eye view of the project that enables you to see how the site is organized and how users will view the site's content and information. The site map becomes a blueprint that shapes the structure of the site during the development process. The site map should show main areas of content and represent all the pages within each section (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1 Example site map for Coast Middle School website

Design navigation systems

Clear navigation helps connect users with the content on your site. Buttons, links, and graphics can be used from each screen to maintain a sense of place. Users need to stay oriented to where they are in the site, where they need to go, and how to get back to where they came from. Having a consistent navigation helps orient users and keep them from feeling lost. As users move from page to page, make sure they find familiar visual cues and navigational aids.

Summary

The information architecture, a component of the structuring stage, is complete. You have created a content site map and designed a set of navigation elements. Don't underestimate the importance of the structuring phase, as it's crucial to successfully realizing the next phase: design and prototyping.