Effective structure and information architecture

Structure is your content roadmap – if the structure of your document or website is effective, users can easily find what they want. Like a good roadmap, pathways are clear, titles are understandable, and key destinations are signposted.

Effective structure is:

- logical – similar topics are grouped together, and the order of the sections and headings is meaningful
- understandable – headings use language that the users understand
- intuitive – the groupings, order and language all make sense to users, so they can navigate easily.

Categories are not 'right' or 'wrong' but depend on the needs and understanding of your users.

Any category that helps the user to find what they need is 'right'.

Effective categories also help artificial intelligence (AI) models find and select your content to answer user questions and searches.

Logical information architecture

Information architecture (IA) means the structure of a website, including how information is grouped and labelled. Good IA is usually achieved through an iterative process of drafting, testing, updating and retesting.

Good IA and content should be built from 3 complementary perspectives:

- **Users**. This looks at who the main users are and their
  - needs (i.e. what they want to know or do)
  - expectations and understanding (i.e. what they might already know about a subject)
  - behaviour (i.e. what pathways they are likely to use to find information).

  These are usually discovered through user research.
- **Context.** This is about the goals and constraints for the site, such as
  - what the site owner wants to say or achieve with the site
  - whether there are any rules about content, such as accessibility requirements
  - whether the site will be updated or expanded.
- **Content.** This looks at whether
  - the groups and labels will work well for the content (i.e. whether they reflect the site's aims and messages, and the breadth, depth and meaning of the content)
  - there will be a good spread of content in each category (i.e. not 60 pages in one category and 2 pages in another)
  - the structure is robust enough to allow content to be expanded without decreasing navigability (e.g. if a heading is too general, it may be added to over time and become a long list of subsections that is harder for users to navigate).

Relatable categories

Categories are the headings placed on content pages. IA categories can be:

- topic based – these are usually nouns that break the main topic of the website into subsections (e.g. services, projects, news)
- task based – these are usually verbs that guide users to pathways about particular activities (assessing your home, designing for sustainability)
- audience based – these labels usually reflect groups of users (e.g. consumers, healthcare professionals, researchers).

You don't have to choose only 1 of these approaches – for example, you can use 2 sets of navigation menus (e.g. topics on the top of the webpage and tasks in the left-hand menu).

Use categories that will be meaningful to your audience. For example, they will not know an internal departmental structure, but will know the services they want.

Some useful tips when drafting categories for general audiences are to:

- use general definitions, not technical (e.g. tomatoes go in 'Vegetables', not 'Fruits')
- use common terminology, not technical (e.g. 'Rain', not 'Precipitation')
- use concrete terminology, not abstract (e.g. 'Patent applications' not 'Innovation')
- use categories that are specific enough not to become a dumping ground for content (e.g. 'Research projects', 'Training programs' and 'Community outreach', not 'Our work')
- check that your categories work well as a set (consistent where appropriate, distinct enough from each other to avoid confusion about where to find information).

Shallow and deep structures

Content structures can be shallow, deep or mixed:

- Shallow – many categories with fewer levels. The '3-click rule' suggests that no content should be more than 3 clicks away. Users will usually find a reasonably shallow structure easier to use, as long as category lists are not too long.
- Deep – fewer categories that go down through many levels. A deep structure can work for sites with extensive content. However, users may be sent down 'rabbit holes' as they click down through many levels, and these can be difficult to navigate out of. To manage larger websites, it can be useful to think of other navigation aids, such as menus in multiple locations (i.e. a top navigation and a side navigation).
- Mixed – some websites have some shallow categories and some deep categories.

Drafting IA

The first step of drafting IA is sorting the content into logical category groups. There are various methods to achieve this, including:

- writing likely category headings and sorting your table of contents into a logical structure
- open card sorting – put example content on a set of cards and ask users to sort the cards into groups of similar content; label the groups when users have finished sorting
- closed card sorting – develop a set of categories and put example content on a set of cards; ask users to sort the cards into the predetermined categories.

You can also test draft IAs with users, by giving them scenarios and seeing where they would look for relevant content.