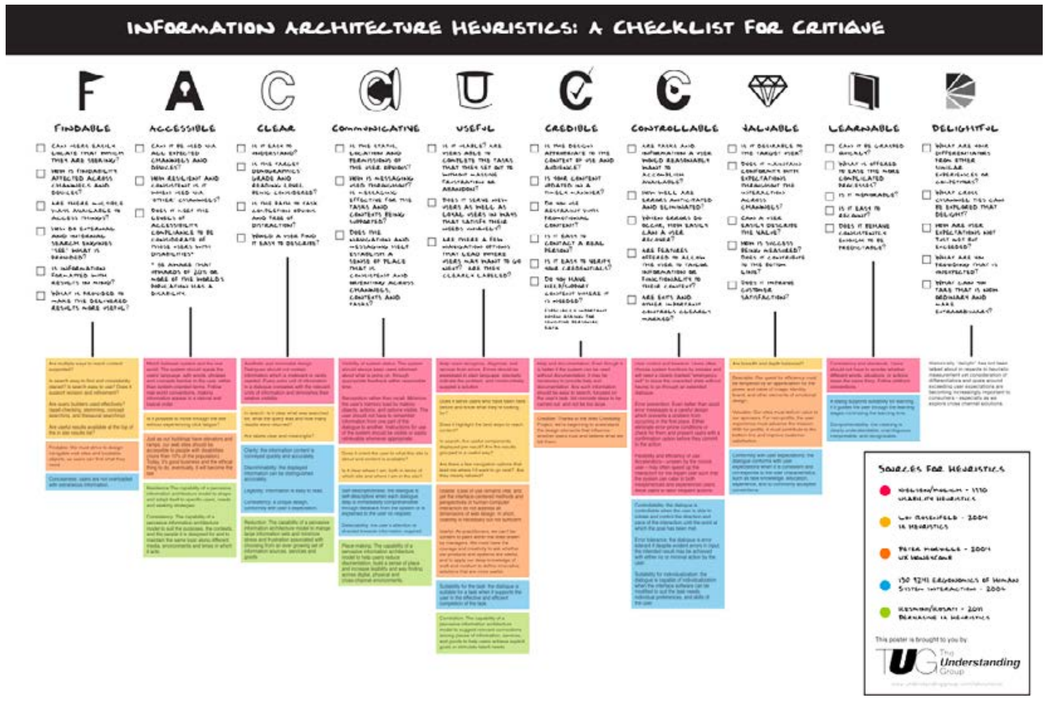
INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE CHECKLIST FOR CRITIQUE

eBook edition

The Understanding Group

Not long after we started The Understanding Group, one of our first employees, Abby Covert, and Dan Klyn started talking about the need for evaluation criteria, or heuristics, focused on information architecture. Abby went to work and created the checklist you find here. You can read her [story of the creation process] on her blog.

We first printed the checklist as a laminated poster. It eventually sold out, but the information continues to be useful, so we're sharing the contenxt here. We hope you find them valuable!



Sources for Heuristics

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- **Lou Rosenfeld—2004** IA Heuristics
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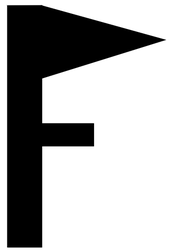

FINDABLE

- ☐ Can users easily locate that which they are seeking?
- ☐ How is findability affected across channels and devices?
- ☐ Are there multiple ways available to access things?
- ☐ How do external and internal search engines “see” what is provided?
- ☐ Is information formatted with results in mind?
- ☐ What is provided to make the delivered results more useful?

Are multiple ways to reach content supported?

Is search easy to find and consistently placed? Is search easy to use? Does it support revision and refinement?

Are query builders used effectively? (spell-checking, stemming, concept searching, and thesaural searching)

Are useful results available at the top of the in site results list?

Findable: We must strive to design navigable web sites and locatable objects, so users can find what they need.

Conciseness: users are not overloaded with extraneous information.

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ACCESSIBLE

- ☐ Can it be used via all expected channels and devices?
- ☐ How resilient and consistent is it when used via “other” channels?
- ☐ Does it meet the levels of accessibility compliance to be considerate of those users with disabilities*

* Be aware that upwards of 20% or more of the world’s population has a disability.

Match between system and the real world: The system should speak the users’ language, with words, phrases and concepts familiar to the user, rather than system-oriented terms. Follow real-world conventions, making information appear in a natural and logical order.

Is it possible to move through the site without experiencing click fatigue?

Just as our buildings have elevators and ramps, our web sites should be accessible to people with disabilities (more than 10% of the population). Today, it’s good business and the ethical thing to do, eventually, it will become the law.

Resilience: The capability of a pervasive information architecture model to shape and adapt itself to specific users, needs and seeking strategies.

Consistency: The capability of a pervasive information architecture model to suit the purposes, the contexts, and the people it is designed for and to maintain the same logic along different media, environments and times in which it acts.

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C

CLEAR

- ☐ Is it easy to understand?
- ☐ Is the target demographics' grade and reading level being considered?
- ☐ Is the path to task completion obvious and free of distraction?
- ☐ Would a user find it easy to describe?

Aesthetic and minimalist design: Dialogues should not contain information which is irrelevant or rarely needed. Every extra unit of information in a dialogue competes with the relevant units of information and diminishes their relative visibility.

In search: Is it clear what was searched for, what the query was and how many results were returned?

Are labels clear and meaningful?

Clarity: the information content is conveyed quickly and accurately.

Discriminability: the displayed information can be distinguished accurately.

Legibility: information is easy to read.

Consistency: a unique design, conformity with user's expectation.

Reduction: The capability of a pervasive information architecture model to mange large information sets and minimize stress and frustration associated with choosing from an ever growing set of information sources, services and goods.

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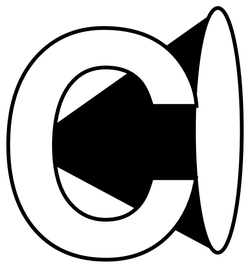

COMMUNICATIVE

- ☐ Is the status, location and permissions of the user obvious?
- ☐ How is messaging used throughout? Is messaging effective for the tasks and contexts being supported?
- ☐ Does the navigation and messaging help establish a sense of place that is consistent and orienting across channels, contexts and tasks?

Visibility of system status: The system should always keep users informed about what is going on, through appropriate feedback within reasonable time.

Recognition rather than recall. Minimize the user's memory load by making objects, actions, and options visible. The user should not have to remember information from one part of the dialogue to another. Instructions for use of the system should be visible or easily retrievable whenever appropriate.

Does it orient the user to what this site is about and content is available?

Is it clear where I am, both in terms of which site and where I am in the site?

Self-descriptiveness: the dialogue is self-descriptive when each dialogue step is immediately comprehensible through feedback from the system or is explained to the user on request.

Detectability: the user's attention is directed towards information required.

Place-making: The capability of a pervasive information architecture model to help users reduce disorientation, build a sense of place and increase legibility and way finding across digital, physical and cross-channel environments.

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USEFUL

- ☐ Is it usable? Are users able to complete the tasks that they set out to without massive frustration or abandon?
- ☐ Does it serve new users as well as loyal users in ways that satisfy their needs uniquely?
- ☐ Are there a few navigation options that lead where users may want to go next? Are they clearly labeled?

Help users recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors. Errors should be expressed in plain language precisely indicate the problem, and constructively suggest a solution.

Does it serve users who have been here before and know what they're looking for?

Does it highlight the best ways to reach content? In search: Are useful components displayed per result? Are the results grouped in a useful way?

Are there a few navigation options that lead me where I'd want to go next? Are they clearly labeled?

Usable: Ease of use remains vital, and yet the interface-centered methods and perspectives of human-computer interaction do not address all dimensions of web design. In short, usability is necessary but not sufficient.

Useful: As practitioners, we can't be content to paint within the lines drawn by managers. We must have the courage and creativity to ask whether our products and systems are useful, and to apply our deep knowledge of craft and medium to define innovative solutions that are more useful.

Suitability for the task: the dialogue is suitable for a task when it supports the user in the effective and efficient completion of the task.

Correlation: The capability of a pervasive information architecture model to suggest relevant connections among pieces of information, services, and goods to help users achieve explicit goals or stimulate latent needs

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CREDIBLE

- ☐ Is the design apptropriate to the context of use and audience?
- ☐ Is your content updated in a timely manner?
- ☐ Do you use restraint with promotional content?
- ☐ Is it easy to contact a real person?
- ☐ Is it easy to verify your credentials?
- ☐ Do you have help/support content where it is needed?
- ☐ Especially important when asking for sensitive personal data.

Help and documentation: Even though it is better if the system can be used without documentation, it may be necessary to provide help and documentation. Any such information should be easy to search, focused on the user's task, list concrete steps to be carried out, and not be too large.

Credible: Thanks to the Web Credibility Project, we're beginning to understand the design elements that influence whether users trust and believe what we tell them.

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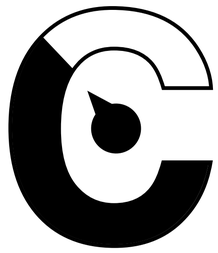

CONTROLLABLE

- ☐ Are tasks and information a user would reasonably want to accomplish available?
- ☐ How well are errors anticipated and eliminated?
- ☐ When errors do occur, how easily can a user recover?
- ☐ Are features offered to allow the user to tailor information or functionality to their context?
- ☐ Are exits and other important controls clearly marked?

User control and freedom: Users often choose system functions by mistake and will need a clearly marked “emergency exit” to leave the unwanted state without having to go through an extended dialogue.

Error prevention: Even better than good error messages is a careful design which prevents a problem from occurring in the first place. Either eliminate error-prone conditions or check for them and present users with a confirmation option before they commit to the action.

Flexibility and efficiency of use: Accelerators—unseen by the novice user—may often speed up the interaction for the expert user such that the system can cater to both inexperienced and experienced users. Allow users to tailor frequent actions.

Controllability: the dialogue is controllable when the user is able to initiate and control the direction and pace of the interaction until the point at which the goal has been met.

Error tolerance: the dialogue is error tolerant if despite evident errors in input, the intended result may be achieved with either no or minimal action by the user.

Suitability for individualization: the dialogue is capable of individualization when the interface software can be modified to suit the task needs, individual preferences, and skills of the user.

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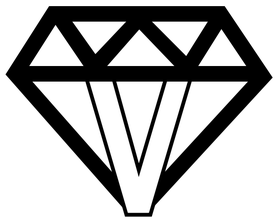

VALUABLE

- ☐ Is it desirable to the target user?
- ☐ Does it maintain conformity with expectations throughout the interaction across channels?
- ☐ Can a user easily describe the value?
- ☐ How is success being measured? Does it contribute to the bottom line?
- ☐ Does it improve customer satisfaction?

Are breadth and depth balanced?

Desirable: Our quest for efficiency must be tempered by an appreciation for the power and value of image, identity, brand, and other elements of emotional design.

Valuable: Our sites must deliver value to our sponsors. For non-profits, the user experience must advance the mission. With for-profits, it must contribute to the bottom line and improve customer satisfaction.

Conformity with user expectations: the dialogue conforms with user expectations when it is consistent and corresponds to the user characteristics, such as task knowledge, education, experience, and to commonly accepted conventions.

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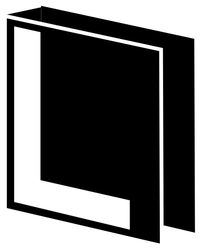

LEARNABLE

- ☐ Can it be grasped quickly?
- ☐ What is offered to ease the more complicated processes?
- ☐ Is it memorable?
- ☐ Is it easy to recount?
- ☐ Does it behave consistently enough to be predictable?

Consistency and standards: Users should not have to wonder whether different words, situations, or actions mean the same thing. Follow platform conventions.

A dialog supports suitability for learning, if it guides the user through the learning stages minimizing the learning time.

Comprehensibility: the meaning is clearly understandable, unambiguous, interpretable, and recognizable.

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DELIGHTFUL

- ☐ What are your differentiators from other similar experiences or competitors?
- ☐ What cross channel ties can be explored that delight?
- ☐ How are user expectations not just met but exceeded?
- ☐ What are you providing that is unexpected?
- ☐ What can you take that is now ordinary and make extraordinary?

Historically “delight” has not been talked about in regards to heuristic measurement yet consideration of differentiators and goals around exceeding user expectations are becoming increasingly important to consumers—especially as we explore cross channel solutions.

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Making the Complex Clear

The Understanding Group is a digital consulting practice that uses information architecture to make the complex clear and solve strategic communication problems for our customer partners. Based in Ann Arbor, MI, our team of information architects is the most experienced the world with skills in all forms of business modeling, search and findability, taxonomy development, qualitative user research, and content strategy.

Our services include strategic planning, site (re)design, expert reviews, user research, and a variety of training and workshop services. Since our founding in 2011, we have had the privilege of serving a variety of organizations, from small nonprofits to Fortune 5 enterprises, across a variety of industries.

Want to learn more?

Drop me a line! I'd love to hear more about your situation and explore how information architecture can help you deliver useful, scalable and delightful digital places:

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The Understanding® Group

www.understandinggroup.com