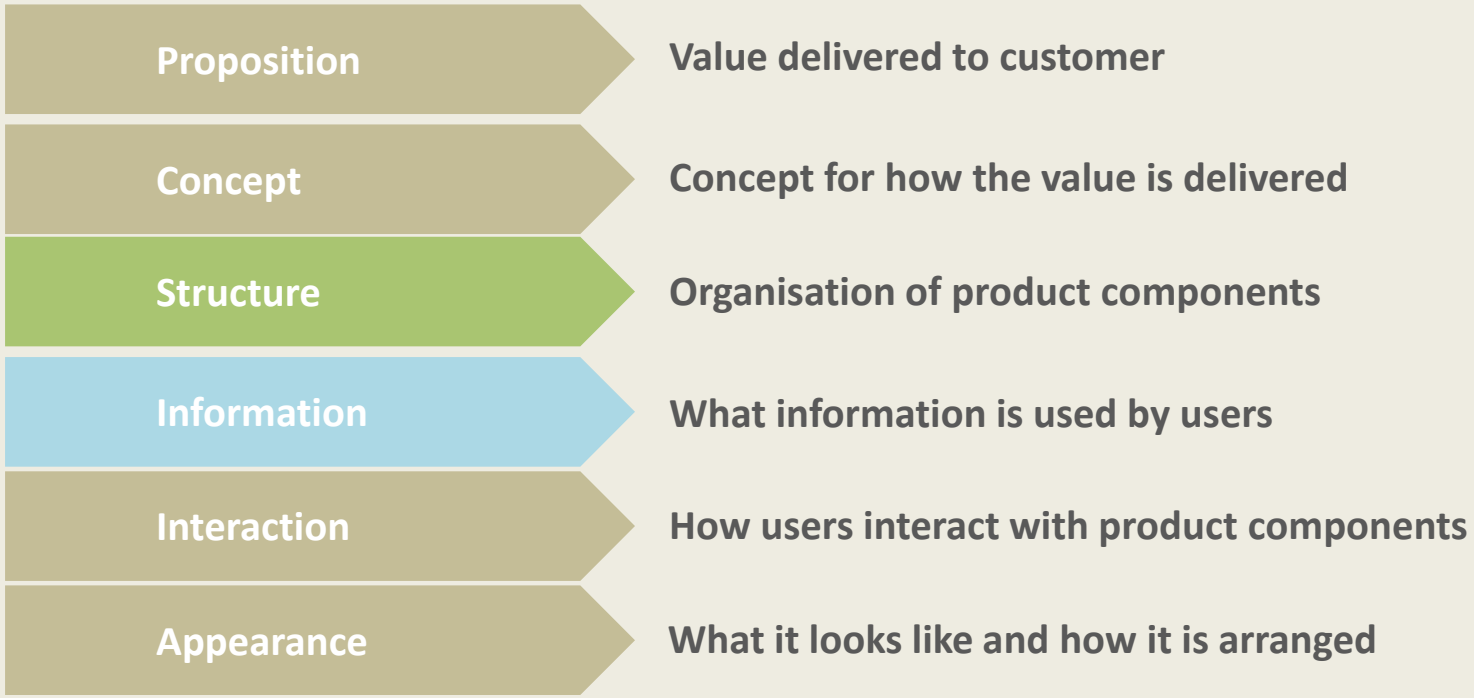
Organising Information

The elements of user experience



…one view of it. Here's another one

Organisational challenges

Organizing complex information on a web site presents huge challenges:

- **Findability:** Users need to be able to find what they want among a potentially huge numbers of items
- **Ambiguity:** Language is ambiguous, e.g. multiple definitions, cultural differences (the words "pitch", "catch")
- **Heterogeneity**: "Objects composed of unrelated or unlike parts" Most Web sites are very heterogeneous because they have multiple formats, usually all mixed up together
- **Differences in user perspectives**: Ignoring different user perspectives can make parts of your site unusable; make sure that you know your user!

Organising information

Information can be organized in the following ways:

- **Alphabetical,** e.g. Cambridge Uni
- **Chronological,** e.g. The food timeline
- **Geographical,** e.g. Twittervision
- **Topical,** e.g. DMOZ
- **Task-oriented,** e.g. Blogger
- **Audience-specific,** e.g UWE
- **Metaphor-driven,** e.g. JK Rowling, Hothorse's old site.

Classification and hierarchies

- **Taxonomy is the classification of things.** e.g. Dewey Decimal System, Linnaean classification
- **Not all taxonomies are hierarchical** e.g. days of week
- Classification schemes provide important metadata for a Web site. They provide the basis for (i) efficient search and information retrieval and (ii) sharing of data between Web sites.

The hierarchy: a top-down approach

- A more rigid approach with usually **mutually exclusive categories**
- You can choose a **narrow and deep approach;** fewer sections, more levels of subpages beneath
- Or a **broad and shallow approach:** lots of section with fewer subpages.
- If you expect your site to grow, **it's easier to incorporate change into a broad and shallow design**
- **Don't feel trapped by hierarchies,** and don’t force topics in a hierarchy, hyperlinked or database driven approaches are useful too

Relational databases: a bottom-up approach

- Better where users want to retrieve information in different ways, having different starting knowledge.
- Content created "on-the-fly" depending on requirements
- Examples of a bottom-up approach are **search based** sites, or **faceted navigation** e.g. Amazon or Ebay

Folksonomies

As the web becomes more social and interactive, it becomes **harder to maintain formal taxonomies and structures.**

- Informal structures are becoming much more common and there's a move towards getting users to start tagging their own content e.g. Flickr or del.icio.us
- Tags are often visualised as a tag cloud
- See also: the Wikipedia entry for Folksonomy
- The implications of user-generated tags & content are huge!

Folksonomies

Sometimes the results of allowing users to tag content can be interesting…

Labelling systems

- **Can't present all information at once,** so need to use informative short cuts, i.e. labels
- These need to **communicate information effectively**

Why labels are important:

- Users have **short attention spans** (avoid high "cognitive load" for your users)
- **Bad labels make bad impressions;** they frustrate users
- **Self-centred labelling makes a bad impression** (avoid business-speak & terminology)
- Labelling systems need serious planning.

An unplanned labelling system…

- **Technology Interface Unit**
- **Project QA**
- **Business & Media Interaction**
- **Internal Services Office**
- **New Media Center**

These assume that the user knows what you are talking about!

A planned labelling system…

- **Arts & Humanities**
- **Business & Economy**
- **Computers & Internet**
- **Education**
- **Entertainment**
- **Health**

These might also make us wonder... e.g. what resources are contained within these categories? We do know what subject areas are covered, though. It's also a common system. Users have seen it before so they only need to learn the system, not individual labels (familiarity breeds contentment!)

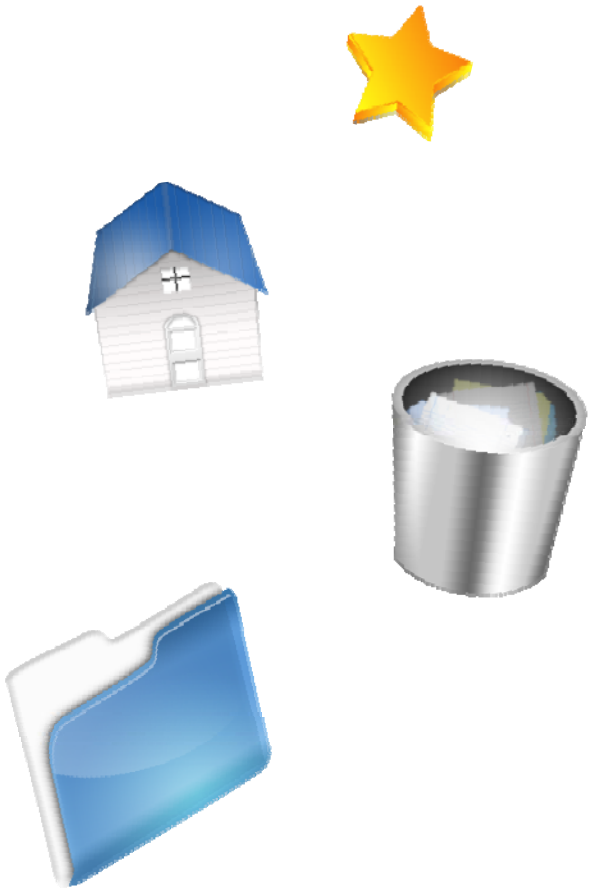
Common labels within navigation systems

- Home / home page / main / main page /
- Search / find / browse / sitemap / index / table of contents
- Contact / feedback
- Help / FAQ / frequently asked questions
- News / what's new

Some of these have clear user expectations attached to them; use these in your favour!

Using metaphors

- Sometimes the use of metaphors helps users understand things
- Use them wisely to support your navigation
- **Steer away from metaphors that are obscure or ambiguous,** or have different meanings in different cultures
- Common metaphors include: Checkout, Shopping basket, Home



Card sorting

- Card sorting is a simple, quick method for **understanding how site users classify content** (by shuffling cards around, hence the name).
- The method is used to generate an **overall structure for your information,** as well as **suggestions for navigation, menus,** and **possible taxonomies.**

- **See also:** Card sorting: a definitive guide on Boxes & Arrows and Information design using card sorting

Steps in a card sort

- **Select the content to be tested** (pages of existing site? new content?)
- **Find the participants** (should be representative of site users)
- **Prepare the cards** (write names of pages on cards)
- **Conduct the tests**
  - **Open sort** - participants create and label groups for the cards as they see fit
  - **Closed sort** - how do the cards fit into an existing classification? (validation of an existing classification)
- **Analyse the results** (common groupings? cluster analysis?)

Task: *Conduct a card sort*

Go to optimalsort.com

Working in groups of 3, conduct the open card sort on the site. Try to group the cards in a meaningful way (what is 'meaningful'?) and try to produce appropriate labels for the groups.