

LATCH: THE FIVE ULTIMATE HATRACKS

Location
Alphabet
Time
Category
Hierarchy

LATCH

The ways of organizing information are finite. It can only be organized by location, alphabet, time, category, or hierarchy. These modes are applicable to almost any endeavor—from your personal file cabinets to multinational corporations. They are the framework upon which annual reports, books, conversations, exhibitions, directories, conventions, and even warehouses are arranged.

While information may be infinite, the ways of structuring it are not. And once you have a place in which the information can be plugged, it becomes that much more useful. Your choice will be determined by the story you want to tell. Each way will permit a different understanding of the information—within each are many variations. However, recognizing that the main choices are limited makes the process less intimidating.

If you were preparing a report on the automobile industry, you could organize cars by place of manufacture (location), year (time), model (category), or *Consumer Reports* ratings (hierarchy). Within each, you might list them alphabetically. Your choice would depend on what you wanted to study or convey about the industry. If you wanted to describe the different types of cars, your primary organization would probably be by category. Then, you might want to organize by hierarchy, from the least expensive to the most. If you wanted to examine car dealerships, you would probably organize first by location, and then by the number or continuum of cars sold.

After the categories are established, the information about the cars is easily retrievable. Each way of organizing permits a different understanding; each lends itself to different kinds of information; and each has certain reassuring limitations that will help make the choices of how the information is presented easier.

Location. Location is the natural form to choose when you are trying to examine and compare information that comes from diverse sources or locales. If you were examining an industry, for example, you might want to know how it is distributed around the world. Doctors use the different locations in the body as

n only be hierarchy. from your key are the versations, houses are

aring it are ion can be ice will be ill permit a h are many are limited

dustry, you year (time), ny). Within ice would he industry. our primary you might isive to the you would number or

n about the ts a different nformation; l help make er.

hen you are comes from industry, for uted around the body as

groupings to study medicine. (In China, doctors use mannequins in their offices so that patients can point to the particular location of their pain or problem.)

Alphabet. This method lends itself to organizing extraordinarily large bodies of information, such as words in a dictionary or names in a telephone directory. As most of us have already memorized the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, the organization of information by alphabet works when the audience or readership encompasses a broad spectrum of society that might not understand classification by another form such as category or location.

Time. Time works best as an organizing principle for events that happen over fixed durations, such as conventions. Time has also been used creatively to organize a place, such as in the Day in the Life book series. It works with exhibitions, museums, and histories, be they of countries or companies. The designer **Charles Eames** created an exhibit on Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin that was done as a timeline, where the viewers could see who was doing what, when. Time is an easily understandable framework from which changes can be observed and comparisons made.

Category. Category pertains to the organization of goods. Retail stores are usually organized in this way by different types of merchandise, e.g. kitchenware in one department, clothing in another. Category can mean different models, different types, or even different questions to be answered, such as in a brochure that is divided into questions about a company. This mode lends itself well to organizing items of similar importance. Category is well reinforced by color as opposed to numbers, which have inherent value.

Hierarchy. This mode organizes items by magnitude from small to large, least expensive to most expensive, by order of importance, etc. It is the mode to use when you want to assign value or weight to the information, or when you want to use it to study something like an industry or company. Which department had the highest rate of absenteeism? Which had the least? What is the smallest company engaged in a certain business? What is the largest? Unlike category, magnitude can be illustrated with numbers or units.

If you understand, things are just as they are; if you do not understand, things are just as they are.

— Zen proverb

That is what learning is. You suddenly understand something you've understood all your life, but in a new way.

— Doris Lessing

The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible.

— Albert Einstein

We already employ these modes almost subconsciously in many ways. Most of us organize our financial records first by time, then by category when we figure our taxes. We organize our CD and DVD collections, libraries, and even our laundry according to certain principles whether or not we are aware of them. But it is only the conscious awareness of these methods that will reduce the frustration of searching through information—especially new information. Uncovering the organizing principles is like having the ultimate hat rack. It is as essential when working with already existing bodies of information as it is in developing your own information programs. The time spent in comprehending someone else's method of organization will reduce the search time spent looking for individual components. When you arrange information, the structure you create will save you the frustration of juggling unconnected parts. Many people get into trouble when they mix the different methods of organization, trying to describe something simultaneously in terms of size, geography, and category without a clear understanding that these are all valid but separate means of structuring information. Understanding the structure and organization of information permits you to extract value and significance from it.

VANTAGE POINTS

We come. We go. And in between we try to understand.

— Rod Steiger

Once you have a sense of organization, however casual, you can relax with that knowledge and begin to examine the information from different vantage points, which will enable you to understand the relationship between bodies of information. Ask yourself: How can I look at this information? Can I move back from it? Can it be made to look smaller? Can I see it in context? Can I get closer to it so it is not recognizable based on my previous image of the subject? Can I look at the detail?

Whatever problems you have in life—personal relationships, putting together a business deal, designing a house—can be illuminated by asking these questions. How can I pull myself out of the situation? How do I see it by changing scale? How can I look at the problem from different vantage points? How do I divide it into smaller pieces? How can I arrange and rearrange these pieces to shed new light on the problem?

Each vantage point, each mode of organization will create a new structure. And each new structure will enable you to see a different meaning, acting as a new method of classification from which the whole can be grasped and understood.

CLASSIFYING LASSIE: THE DOG STORY

I could contact Avanta, an Italian company that makes stuffed animals, and ask them to make me a set of 296 life-sized dogs representing a male and a female of each of the 148 breeds recognized by the American Kennel Club. (My book *Dog Access*, produced in 1984, the source of the following illustrations, showed all the approved breeds at that time, arranged by size.)

To make dogs understandable to people, I could put this extraordinary bevy of stuffed animals on a gymnasium floor and organize and reorganize them. I could put flags on them denoting their country of origin and tie ribbons around their necks, colored according to which of the six different major groups in which they belonged: sporting dogs, hounds, work dogs, terriers, toys, and nonsporting dogs.

Then I could arrange them from the smallest to the largest, from the shortest to the tallest, from the lightest to the heaviest, from the shortest-haired to the longest-haired, by their level of viciousness, popularity in the United States, population, price, and the number of championships they have won.

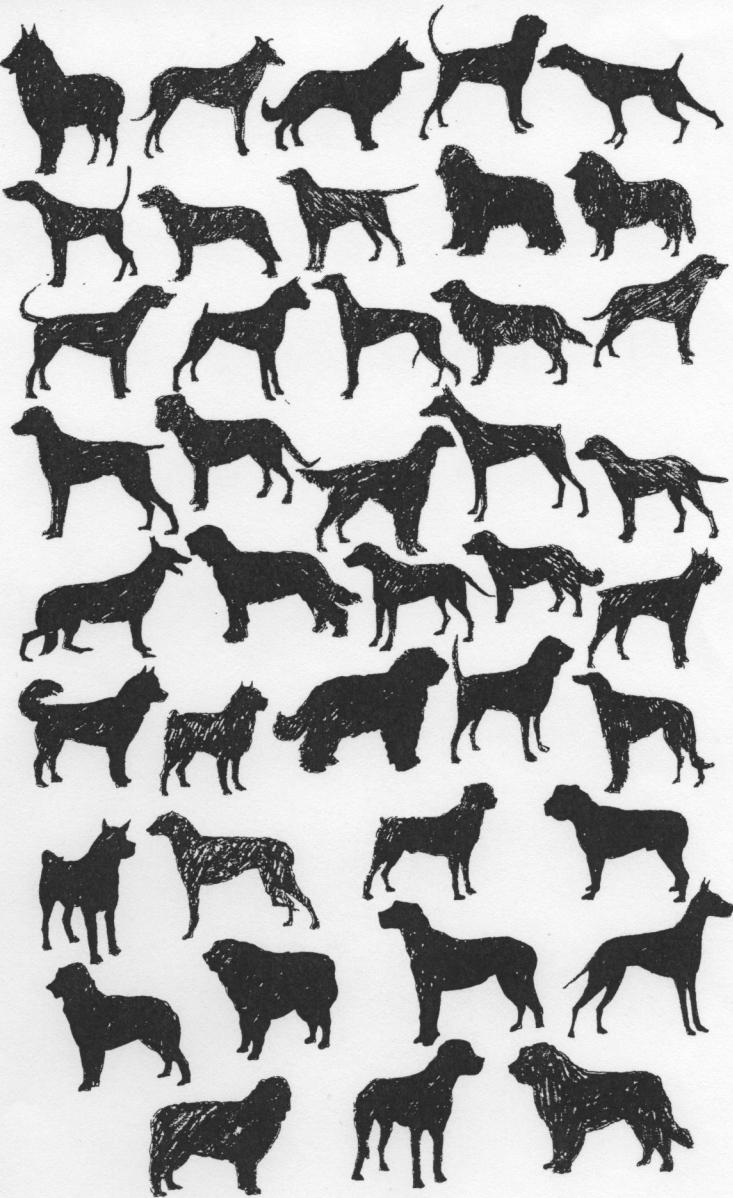


Illustrations by William McCaffrey

CLASSIFYING LASSIE: THE DOG STORY

Every time the dogs are arranged in a different way, you can start seeing new information about the relationships. You might see that the most popular dogs are the shorter-haired ones, or that the most expensive dogs are the small dogs, or that in certain breeds the females are bigger than the males. As you observe these different types of dogs, you'll discover patterns, and finding and recognizing patterns is what leads to understanding. Each way I arrange these dogs tells you something different about them; each mode of organization provides additional information. The creative organization of information creates new information. The dogs don't change, but the information about them does. And it takes no prior knowledge or understanding to comprehend.

You can do this with many things; it makes your mind work differently because it shows the importance of relaxing and thinking about the arrangement of information before you make it complex. It's a process of simplification, not complication. And you realize that by simplifying, by taking one point of view, one slice, you can make something absolutely clear. Whereas if you tried to say this dog is the most popular in Wisconsin, and is of medium height, and said all these things at once, you would never get the mental map in your head, nor would you retain the memory of the information. Each way that you organize information creates new information and new understanding.



I could organiz



Afghan
Hound

Or by categor



Egypt

Or by time (f



1885

Then again,



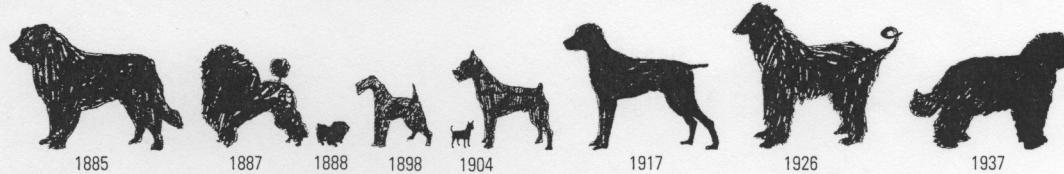
I could organize these dogs **alphabetically...**



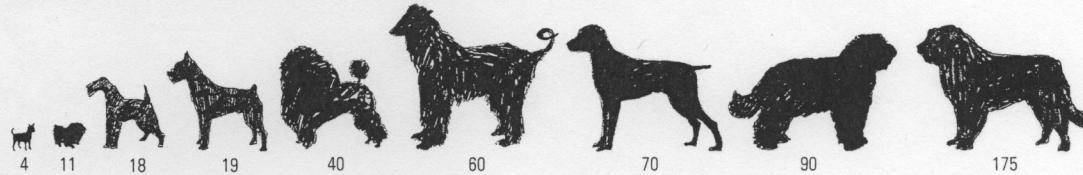
Or by **category** (country of origin, for example)...



Or by **time** (for example, the year in which the breed was officially recognized by the American Kennel Club)...



Then again, I might arrange them in a **hierarchy** by weight in pounds...



Real learning about the dogs comes from comparing organizations. For example, you can see that the Afghan hound is taller than both the Labrador Retriever and the Komondor, but is outweighed by both.