Site Design and Structure

Site Structure

Web sites are built around basic structural themes. These fundamental architectures govern the navigational interface of the Web site and mold the user's mental models of how the information is organized. Three essential structures can be used to build a Web site: sequences, hierarchies, and webs.

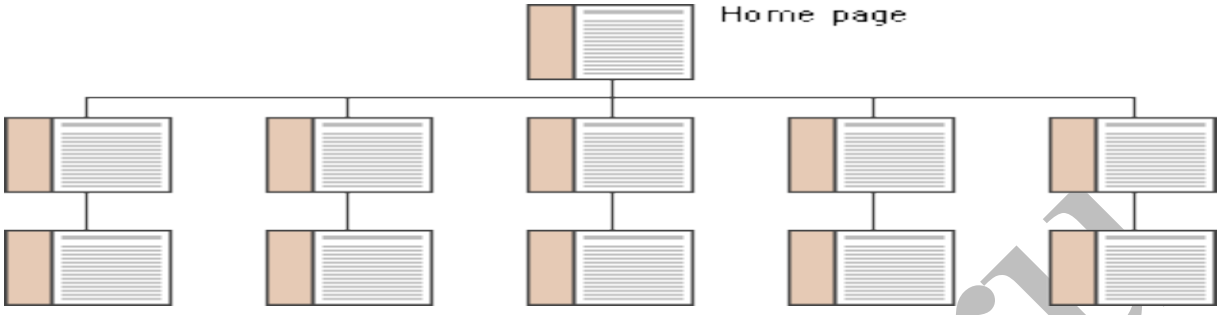
1. Sequences

The simplest way to organize information is to place it in a sequence. Sequential ordering may be chronological, a logical series of topics progressing from the general to the specific, or alphabetical, as in indexes, encyclopedias, and glossaries. Straight sequences are the most appropriate organization for training sites, for example, in which the reader is expected to go through a fixed set of material and the only links are those that support the linear navigation path:

2. Hierarchies

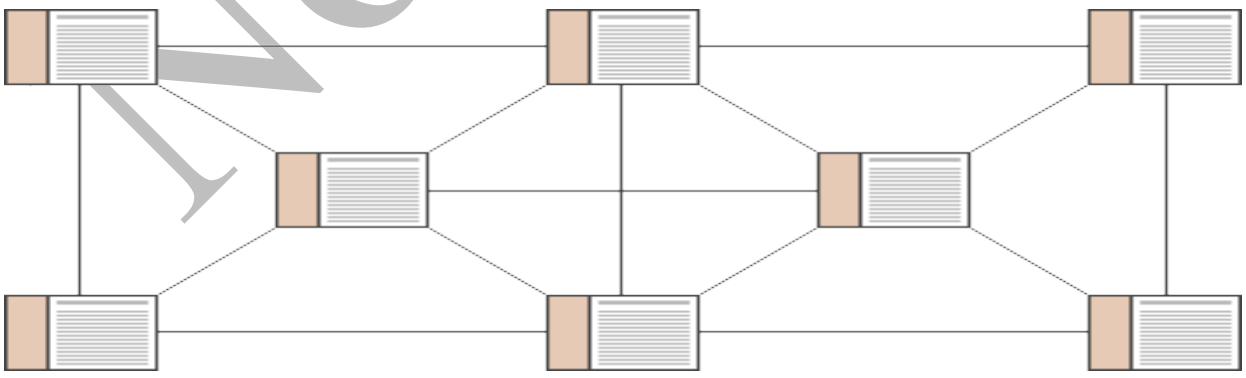
Information hierarchies are the best way to organize most complex bodies of information. Because Web sites are usually organized around a single home page, hierarchical schemes are particularly suited to Web site organization. Hierarchical diagrams are very familiar in corporate and institutional life, so most users find this structure easy to understand. A hierarchical

organization also imposes a useful discipline on your own analytical approach to your content, because hierarchies are practical only with well-organized material.



3. Webs

Web like organizational structures pose few restrictions on the pattern of information use. In this structure the goal is often to mimic associative thought and the free flow of ideas, allowing users to follow their interests in a unique, heuristic, idiosyncratic pattern. This organizational pattern develops with dense links both to information elsewhere in the site and to information at other sites. Although the goal of this organization is to exploit the Web's power of linkage and association to the fullest, web like structures can just as easily propagate confusion. Ironically, associative organizational schemes are often the most impractical structure for Web sites because they are so hard for the user to understand and predict. Webs work best for small sites dominated by lists of links and for sites aimed at highly educated or experienced users looking for further education or enrichment and not for a basic understanding of a topic.



Site Design

A Web page's structural elements are the basic parts that Internet users often expect to see when they visit a website. Understanding the location and purpose of the main structures can help you relay information about your small business and products or services in ways that attract visitors and retain their interest.

1. Page Header

The header is the area that runs horizontally across the top of a page and is commonly the same on most every page in the site. It helps make a website visually identifiable to visitors. Similar to a letter heading or letterhead at the top of stationery, the page header displays information about the person or company controlling the website via title text, logo, background images, tagline or a combination of these elements. Other elements often placed in the header include a site-search box, shopping cart link, site-access link and navigation tools.

2. Home link

Placing your organization or site logo in the upper left corner of the page—and linking that logo to the home page—is a widely used convention and one you should adopt. If you are not using a logo or graphic in your header, at least put a "home" link near the upper left corner of the page, where 99 percent of users will expect to find it.

3. Navigation Tools

Web-page navigation tools are located in several areas outside of the header including the right or left sides, center or bottom of the page. They offer page-to-page navigation or instant jump to the top of the current page. Designs feature text- or image-based one-click links organized standalone or in tab, drop-down or pop-up menu and list layouts. Some sites also feature breadcrumb trails — links to every page you would visit to reach the current page organized left-to-right on a horizontal line in the header or top center of the page in the order of your movement through the site, if you were to follow the site's organizational hierarchy.

4. Sidebar Columns

Sidebar columns, also known as sidebars, run vertically along the left or right side of Web pages. They usually provide primary or secondary site-navigation links and information you want to emphasize such as contact details or important updates about the site operator or the topic of the site. Other elements often placed in sidebars include personal or partner advertising, a site search box and search filter tools. Sidebars usually display information as an unbroken column or a column divided into sections or boxes.

5. Primary Content

The primary content area on a page is traditionally located to the left or right of a sidebar or between two sidebars. It provides main page information you want a visitor to focus on. The primary content area features a main title and content formatted into concise text paragraphs, images, videos or combination elements divided by spaces or subheadings. It also often features elements previously mentioned such as a breadcrumb trail and jump navigation links, as well as update information such as content publication or update dates and links to websites relevant to the content or that you think would interest visitors.

6. Page Footer

The footer runs horizontally across the bottom of pages. It provides navigation links visitors might find useful, as well as details about a page or website such as a logo, copyright date, website operator's name, page author name, legal statements and links to the site terms of use and privacy policies. Other elements often placed in the footer include links to the site operator's contact page or email address, job postings page, feedback-form page, support page and frequently asked questions page.

Principles of Good Website Design

1. Don't Make Users Think

According to Krug's first law of usability, the web-page should be obvious and self-explanatory. When you're creating a site, your job is to get rid of the question marks — the decisions users need to make consciously, considering pros, cons and alternatives.

If the navigation and site architecture aren't intuitive, the number of question marks grows and makes it harder for users to comprehend how the system works and how to get from point A to point B. A clear structure, moderate visual clues and easily recognizable links can help users to find their path to their aim.

2. Don't Squander Users' Patience

In every project when you are going to offer your visitors some service or tool, try to keep your user requirements minimal. The less action is required from users to test a service, the more likely a random visitor is to actually try it out. First-time visitors are willing to play with the service, not filling long web forms for an account they might never use in the future. Let users explore the site and discover your services without forcing them into sharing private data. It's not reasonable to force users to enter an email address to test the feature.

3. Manage To Focus Users' Attention

As web-sites provide both static and dynamic content, some aspects of the user interface attract attention more than others do. Obviously, images are more eye-catching than the text — just as the sentences marked as bold are more attractive than plain text.

The human eye is a highly non-linear device, and web-users can instantly recognize edges, patterns and motions. This is why video-based advertisements are extremely annoying and distracting, but from the marketing perspective they perfectly do the job of capturing users' attention.

4. Make Use of Effective Writing

As the Web is different from print, it's necessary to adjust the writing style to users' preferences and browsing habits. Promotional writing won't be read. Long text blocks without images and keywords marked in bold or italics will be skipped. Exaggerated language will be ignored.

Talk business. Avoid cute or clever names, marketing-induced names, company-specific names, and unfamiliar technical names. For instance, if you describe a service and want users to create an account, "sign up" is better than "start now!" which is again better than "explore our services".

5. Strive For Simplicity

The "keep it simple"-principle (KIS) should be the primary goal of site design. Users are rarely on a site to enjoy the design; furthermore, in most cases they are looking for the information despite the design. Strive for simplicity instead of complexity.

From the visitors' point of view, the best site design is a pure text, without any advertisements or further content blocks matching exactly the query visitors used or the content they've been looking for. This is one of the reasons why a user-friendly print-version of web pages is essential for good user experience.

6. Conventions Are Our Friends

Conventional design of site elements doesn't result in a boring web site. In fact, conventions are very useful as they reduce the learning curve, the need to figure out how things work. For instance, it would be a usability nightmare if all web-sites had different visual presentation of RSS-feeds. That's not that different from our regular life where we tend to get used to basic principles of how we organize data (folders) or do shopping (placement of products).

With conventions you can gain users' confidence, trust, and reliability and prove your credibility. Follow users' expectations — understand what they're expecting from a site navigation, text structure, search placement etc.

7. Test Early, Test Often

This so-called TETO-principle should be applied to every web design project as usability tests often provide crucial insights into significant problems and issues related to a given layout.

Test not too late, not too little and not for the wrong reasons. In the latter case it's necessary to understand that most design decisions are local; that means that you can't universally answer whether some layout is better than the other one as you need to analyze it from a very specific point of view (considering requirements, stakeholders, budget etc.).