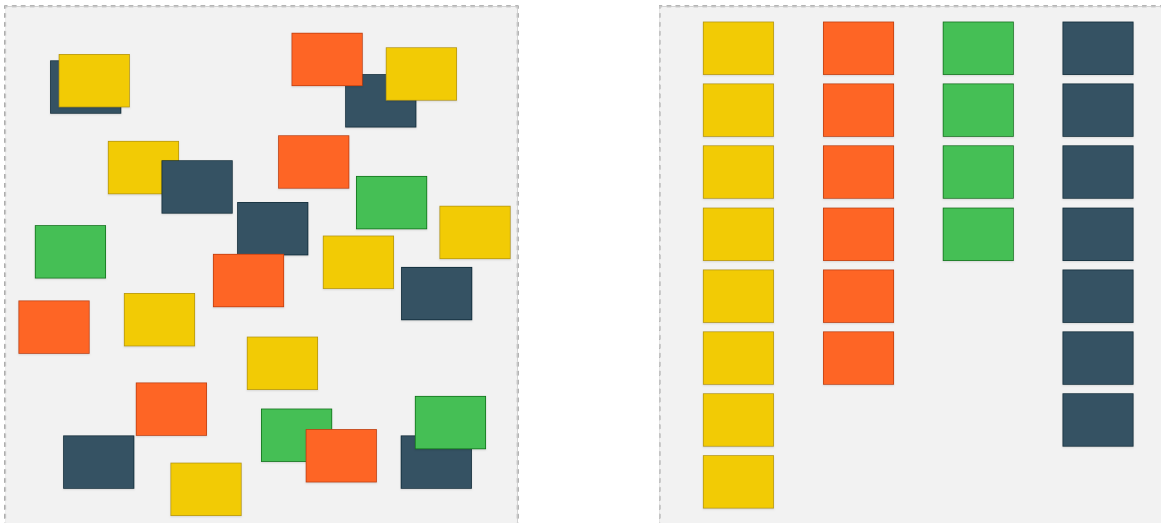# Information Architecture

Information architecture is the art of categorizing, organizing, structuring, and labeling content to make it easy for a user to find the information they're looking for. Consider any website you use regularly: when you navigate to the site's homepage, what information is presented to you right away? Most likely, you're offered a set of labeled navigation options, which take you to different parts of the site. How are these options labeled? Do they accurately describe what you'll find behind each one? Can you easily locate whatever information or function you came to the site for?

When a site has good information architecture, most users won't notice; navigating the site will be so intuitive, they'll hardly have to think about it. Nevertheless, information architecture is the most basic foundation of a well-designed website. Once the content is complete, it should always be the next step.

Organizing Content: The Card Sort Method

For the most part, information architecture can be designed without any technology at all. One simple and effective method is the **card sort method**. This involves writing content and headings on index cards, and arranging them by subject to model how content will be organized on your site.

After the card sort, your content should be substantially complete, and you should have a clear idea of what pages your site will include. From here, the first goal is to group pages by subject, according to a system that makes intuitive sense. Write down the title or subject of each page on a card. Then, try grouping them by categories, in whatever way looks most logical.

For example, if you're designing a site for a wedding planner's business, you might have one page describing the services they offer, one listing prices, one for photos from past weddings the company has planned, and one for customer reviews. You might decide that the pictures and reviews should go together under a "past events" category, while each of the other two pages should belong to a category of its own.

Whether you have your own idea of how to group pages or not, you should always run tests. Get as many testers as you can, and ask them to perform the same exercise, taking the cards with the page titles and grouping them into subjects the way they think is most logical. If they organize the cards the same way you did, your system is probably intuitive enough; if most of them take a different approach, consider organizing things more like your testers have. If you began without a clear idea of how to organize your pages, you can take cues from the way your testers do it.

Once you've done that exercise, you can then run the same test in reverse. Sort the cards by category, and then stack them accordingly with a label card on top of each. Show these stacks to a different group of testers and ask them to try to find a particular page. See which stacks they look in; if they find the desired page easily, that shows that your categories are logical and labeled clearly.

Even if your site has more than two tiers of organization — for example, if opening a nav link from the homepage leads to another set of sub-headings, each of which contains another set of pages that can be navigated to — you can still use card sorting to develop and test your information architecture. Simply repeat the process at each level; for the above example, you can stack the sub-heading cards under the links that would lead to them from the homepage, and ask your testers to find a particular sub-heading.

For a more complete test, you could ask them to find a specific page; let them choose a link to follow from the homepage, then choose one of the sub-heading cards from underneath it, then show them the pages underneath that. Of course, keep in mind that many nested levels of organization generally make a site more difficult to navigate, and that keeping it as simple as possible tends to be the best approach.

The goal of information architecture design
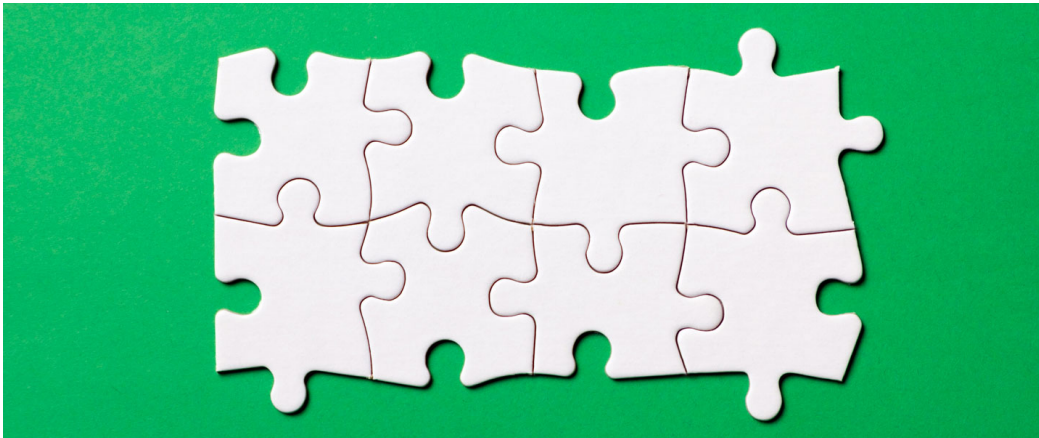
The purpose of all this sorting and testing is to develop a clear understanding of how your website will be structured before you start on visual design and development. In order to produce wireframes and mockups, you need to know how your pages will be laid out, and this will be informed by the structure of your site—what navigation controls to display on each page, how they should be placed, and so on. By the time you finish testing, you should:

- Know exactly how all your content will link together
- Be able to start considering how to represent those connections visually

Neglecting this work can result in wasted energy as you find yourself having to redo layout and design work mid-process, and worse, without thorough testing, you risk ending up with a site that's not intuitive to navigate, leaving users frustrated and confused.

Information Architecture: Best Practices

Remember: First, create a high-level overview of the content. The details should come second.

Interactive Game: Card Sorting

Cookie Time Bakery

Cookie Time Bakery is reorganizing the pages under their drop-down navigation menu. The drop-down menu has three main headings: About Us, Cookies, and Specials.

Using the card sort method, drag each of the following sub-pages to the appropriate main navigation headings to create an intuitive drop-down menu. Watch for feedback.

watch here for feedback

Christmas Eve Special

ABOUT US   **COOKIES**   **SPECIALS**

0/11 Complete!   Reset   Print   Sound on

Review Checkpoint

To test your understanding of the content presented in this assignment, please click on the Questions icon below. If you have trouble answering any of the questions presented here, you are always free to return to this or any assignment to re-read the material.

1. True or False?

Web designers should first design and develop a website, and then focus on the site architecture.

a. True

Incorrect. Try again.

b. False

Correct. This statement is false. Information architecture is the most basic foundation of a well-designed website. It provides a clear understanding of how your website will be structured before you start on visual design and development.

2. What is the last step in the card sort method?

a. Group pages by subject

Incorrect. Try again.

b. Identify content gaps

Incorrect. Try again.

c. Run the same test with different test takers

Incorrect. Try again.

d. Run the test in reverse

Correct. Once you've grouped your pages and run the same test with different test takers, you can then

run the same test in reverse.