

Information Architecture for Web Designers

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Course Proposal

Information Architecture for Web Designers

This course introduces concepts of information architecture to web designers. It is intended for designers already familiar with basic concepts of screen design and interactive functionality (i.e., screen resolutions, web safe colors, rollovers, buttons, dropdown menus, etc). Depending on the needs of the overall curriculum, the proposed course schedule could be compressed and combined with a basic web design course.

The course work will focus on practical aspects of IA as it pertains to web design, such as site analysis, requirements gathering and usability as well as introducing more theoretical topics such as mapping, self organizing systems and visualizing abstract systems.

The term "information architecture" (IA) covers a wide range of fields including aspects of systems analysis and library science through principles of cartography. Common to all these areas of study is an awareness of the importance of organizing information in logical and effective ways.

Skilled analysis of information architecture is important to interactive design and can result in stronger and more logical screen designs. Designers who are familiar with the basic principles of information architecture can create more satisfying and usable sites. In addition, they can work more effectively and efficiently independently or with a development team.

Students will complete assignments such as:

- Weekly site reviews
- Reading assignments (see Reading List below)
- Mapping exercises (combined with design assignments)
- Analyze existing sites for information organization and user requirements
- Identify design specifications for specific sites and audiences, including creating comprehensive site map and wireframes
- Re-architect an existing site to improve usability or surface specific information
- Develop comprehensive navigation system
(in conjunction with other design assignments if combined course)

Suggested reading list

Edward Tufte,
Envisioning Information

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi,
Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience

Jef Raskin,
The Humane Interface: New Directions for Designing Interactive Systems

Louis Rosenfeld and Peter Morville (O'Reilly),
Information Architecture for the World Wide Web

Paul Kahn and Krzysztof Lenk,
Mapping Web Sites

Steve Krug and Roger Black,
Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability

Jakob Nielsen and Marie Tahir,
Home Page Usability: 50 Websites Deconstructed

Software application requirements

There are several options for this course. Depending on the skill level of the students and the available resources of the lab, one or more of the following applications could be used. Students are expected to already have basic skills associated with at least one of the following:

Adobe Illustrator
Adobe Photoshop
Macromedia Flash
Inspiration or Omnigraffle (Mac only)
Visio (PC only)
Quark

Tentative syllabus (10 week course)

This is a preliminary course schedule designed to introduce concepts of information architecture to beginning or intermediate web design students. Students will gain skills necessary to understand and create efficient and usable site structures and interface designs.

The class can be easily adapted to segue into an already existing design curriculum. Or it can be expanded to stand on its own as a more general course by incorporating some basic screen design principles and presenting IA concepts in more simplified terms.

However, this class is not intended to teach students the basics of applications such as Illustrator or Photoshop. Students are expected to have at least beginning level familiarity with these applications.

Introduction (Week 1)

- What exactly is IA?
 - What makes a site usable?
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Site analysis (Weeks 2 and 3)

- Map existing site
- Identify systems of navigation
- Identify goals of site
- Create visual representation of site organization

Related topic:

Cartography

Flow

Visualizing abstract systems

Deconstruct hierarchy of information to identify key content (entire site)

Identifying requirements through analysis of technology, graphic design, branding, etc

Interface analysis (Weeks 4 and 5)

- Analyze homepage designs for information organization, logic and usability
- Catalog icons and other visual devices
- Introduce ideas of screen real estate, internet conventions and the effects of backend technologies
- Describe navigation and analyze "ease of use" issues
- Gather list of sites to use for re-architecture project

Related topics

Audience Profiles

Human Computer Interaction

Vision and perception psychology

Convention vs. Innovation

Information hierarchy and structure (Week 6)

- Identify important page types including evaluating purpose and functionality
- Create library of wireframes that describe key page features for each page type

Related topics

Information hierarchy

High or low resolution of information

Connect overall site structure to individual page structure

Re-Architecture (Weeks 7 and 8)

- Re-organize site with a specific goal in mind such as:
 - Surface a specific category of information
 - Improve the brand positioning
 - Alter the identify of the site entirely by re-organizing the content
 - Hypothetically introduce new technology or functionality (i.e. wireless, dynamically generated content, account access...)
- Start with a general visual representation of how the site should change
 - Experiment with a number of solutions
 - Create graphic representations of the new structures to be considered
- Defend the logic of the re-architecture concept using principles discussed in class

Related topics

User Centered Design

Usability

Documentation (Weeks 9 and 10)

- Implement one re-architecture concept by applying it to the entire site
- Evaluate for inconsistencies or irregularities: Will it really work?
- Create new site map
- Create new wireframes based on new site outline
 - Add functionality if necessary
 - Remove redundancy
 - Analyze new configuration against original
 - Improve usability
- Review peer work using skills acquired throughout the class

Related topics

User testing

User Experience evaluations

Iterative development