A Practical Guide to
Information Architecture

by Donna Spencer
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Part 1

About information architecture
What is information architecture?
IA in a project
Who does IA?
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Before you start
WHAT IS INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE

Imagine your local supermarket/grocery store has just been renovated. The owners have expanded it to include more items, and improved the layout so you can move around more easily. And you’re seeing it all for the first time.

You walk in craving chocolate, head to where it’s usually kept and realise that, wow, everything has been moved. Yikes! How can you quickly make sense of it and find the chocolate? After all, you don’t want to check every item on every shelf. You look at the signs, but they all point to where stuff used to be. No help there. You start looking up the aisles. No, this aisle is all canned food... this one is soft drink... this one is bread...

Aha! Here’s one that looks like it’s full of sweet things (the bright colours and everything at children’s eye level gives it away). You decide to give this one a go. And lo and behold, there’s the chocolate.

Why was this relatively easy, even though they’d moved everything around? It’s because they put similar things together into groups. And they put those groups into bigger groups, and those groups into even bigger groups. So they put all the chocolate – dark, light, white, bars and pieces – together. Then they put it near other sweet things, which are also arranged into groups of similar items. And so, when we glance down the aisle, we can quickly figure out what the whole aisle is about.

Now let’s extend that idea to our websites, intranets and other information systems. We could just list everything we have on the home page, but we usually don’t. Instead we put our content into groups, break those groups into sub-groups, and so on. This is much easier to use than showing all our content in one long list.

However, it isn’t just grouping items that make supermarkets and websites work well. It’s about creating groups that make sense to the people who use them. After all, supermarkets could group by colour, or even where things were made. They could put the chocolate with the gravy and other things that are brown. They could put the Swiss chocolate with the Swiss cheese, and the Belgian chocolate with the Belgian beer. But as tempting as that may sound, most times it won’t help anyone find the chocolate in their newly-renovated supermarket.
Even when we create categories that make sense to people, we need to describe them well. So no seacláid signs in a supermarket full of non-Irish speakers, or aisles called Sweeties Treaties.

We also need to help people find their way to the thing they want. In the supermarket this can be done with layout, signage and visual guides; on websites we use navigation bars, buttons and links.

**And that’s what information architecture is all about:**
1. Organising content or objects
2. Describing them clearly
3. Providing ways for people to get to them.

**Where we find information architecture**

While most information architecture work these days is used for websites and intranets, you can find it wherever you need to organise things (information and/or objects) that other people need to use.

So it’s just as useful for figuring out how to organise your music and movies, your file system at work, and even physical things such as your paper files at home or groceries on a supermarket shelf.

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1 The Information Architecture Institute define information architecture as:
   - The structural design of shared information environments.
   - The art and science of organizing and labeling web sites, intranets, online communities, and software to support findability and usability.
   - An emerging community of practice focused on bringing principles of design and architecture to the digital landscape.
“I file everything one way, my husband files it a completely different way. We nearly ended up coming to blows over the filing until we sat down together one day and went through a complete IA process on our own goals and content. We slowly worked out terminology and structures that worked for both of us and having documented it he went ahead and re-sorted our files accordingly. Now it works well and we both know where to find and file things - and what’s even better is he now understands what it is I do at work each day : - )”

Steph Beath, Information Architect/Interaction Designer

Throughout this book I talk about information architecture primarily in terms of content-heavy websites and intranets, and use a lot of examples from websites. I use the word ‘site’ as a convenient way to avoid saying ‘website, intranet, document management system, filing system, user manual or web application’. 

Oh, and from the next chapter I’ll be calling it ‘IA’ instead of ‘Information Architecture’. Not only is it shorter, it’s also a bit cooler, don’t you think?

**Why information architecture is important**

Information architecture has always been important. Whenever we create groups and describe things other people need to use, the information architecture (how things are grouped and labelled) directly affects how easy things are to use.

As the amount of information available to us keeps growing, information architecture becomes even more important. The more information there is, the harder it can be to sift through and find what you need. Good information architecture can help people find their way through the information, and ignore what isn’t relevant.
But good information architecture can do more than just help people find objects and information. It can empower people by making it easier for them to learn and make better decisions.

So what’s a good information architecture? It’s one that is both easy for people to understand and works well for whatever is being grouped. A bad one is just the opposite – it’s hard for people to use, and the content doesn’t easily fit. For example, an online supermarket with a good information architecture may put all the chocolate together and group it with other snack foods. One with a bad information architecture may group all grocery items by manufacturer, making people check every manufacturer to see who produces chocolate.

This isn’t easy. For any set of things:

- There will always be more than one way of organising them. Unfortunately it isn’t always clear which way is the best way.
- People have different needs.
- People often have different ideas about what goes together and what doesn’t.
- Some people may know a lot about a topic, while others may know nothing at all.

As you can see, three of these reasons relate to people. If you’re organising things that will be used by other people, you’ll need to do it in a way that makes sense to them – that fits with their idea of what goes together, and is described in a way that makes sense to them.

This can be easy if they think the same way as you, but that’s rare – I’ve only worked on a couple of projects for people just like me. It’s far more likely that whoever’s using your information will think differently to you – sometimes very differently.
What you need to create a good information architecture

You need to understand three very important things before you can design an IA that works really well:

- **People**: What they need do to, how they think and what they already know
- **Content**: What you have, what you should have and what you need
- **Context**: The business or personal goals for the site, who else will be involved and what your constraints are.

Figure 1 – IA is all about meeting the needs of people, content and context
Without a good understanding of these three things, you simply can’t create a good IA.

- If you **don’t know enough about people** you won’t be able to group content in ways that make sense to them, or provide ways for them to find it easily.
- Without a good **understanding of your content**, you won’t be able to create an information architecture that works well for current and future content.
- And if you **don’t know all about the context**, you won’t be able to create something that works for people and the business, and you’ll have endless trouble in the project.

Don’t worry. I’ll be talking about all these things in this book. Part 2 is all about the people who will use your site. Part 3 is about the content itself. And parts 4 & 5 are about actually designing an information architecture (the groups and labels) and navigation (ways for people to get to it). Context is covered in chapter 5 (Before you start).

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**Chapter summary**

- Information architecture is all about organising content or things, describing them clearly and providing ways for people to get to them.
- A lot of information architecture work relates to websites and intranets, but is just as relevant for music and movies, a computer file system, your paper files at home or even groceries on supermarket shelves.
- Good information architecture helps people to find information they need. It can also help them learn and make better decisions.
- You need to understand three things to create a good information architecture: People, content and context.
- The term is often abbreviated to ‘IA’ (just as I’ll be doing from now on).
WHO IS DONNA SPENCER?

Donna’s a freelance information architect, interaction designer and writer. That’s a fancy way of saying she plans how to present the things you see on your computer screen, so that they’re easy to understand, engaging and compelling.

Things like the navigation, forms, categories and words on intranets, websites, web applications and business systems.

Most of the projects Donna works on are large, messy monsters, like government websites and intranets, internal business applications and web applications. But she still gets to work on something small and funky too. So she’s intimately aware of the challenges of both long-term, ongoing projects and short-burst, agile programming type engagements. She’s also an old hand at sketching screens, drawing wireframes and building prototypes.

But whatever sort of job Donna’s working on, there’s one common requirement. She has to comprehensively understand the needs of the user. Only then can she make the system as usable as possible. Luckily, she’s also quite fond of people, so doing user research and running usability tests is a pleasure, not a pain.

Not surprisingly, given Donna’s obsession with usability and fondness of people, she’s also quite the teacher. She’s a very experienced speaker and regularly holds workshops and speaks at local and international conferences, on the topics of information architecture, interaction design, the web, writing and more. She even runs a user experience conference (UX Australia).

Donna’s been doing this since 2000. She’s worked on the boards of the Information Architecture Institute (international) and Web Industry Professionals Association (WIPA). She’s also written a book on card sorting (http://www.rosenfeldmedia.com/books/cardsorting/)