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Information Architecture Basics

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Agenda

What is information architecture?

Before you start

Organizing content

Labeling content

Building your site’s navigation

Information architecture checklist

What is information architecture?

The art and science of shaping information products and experiences to support usability and findability.

Morville & Rosenfeld

What makes a good information architecture?

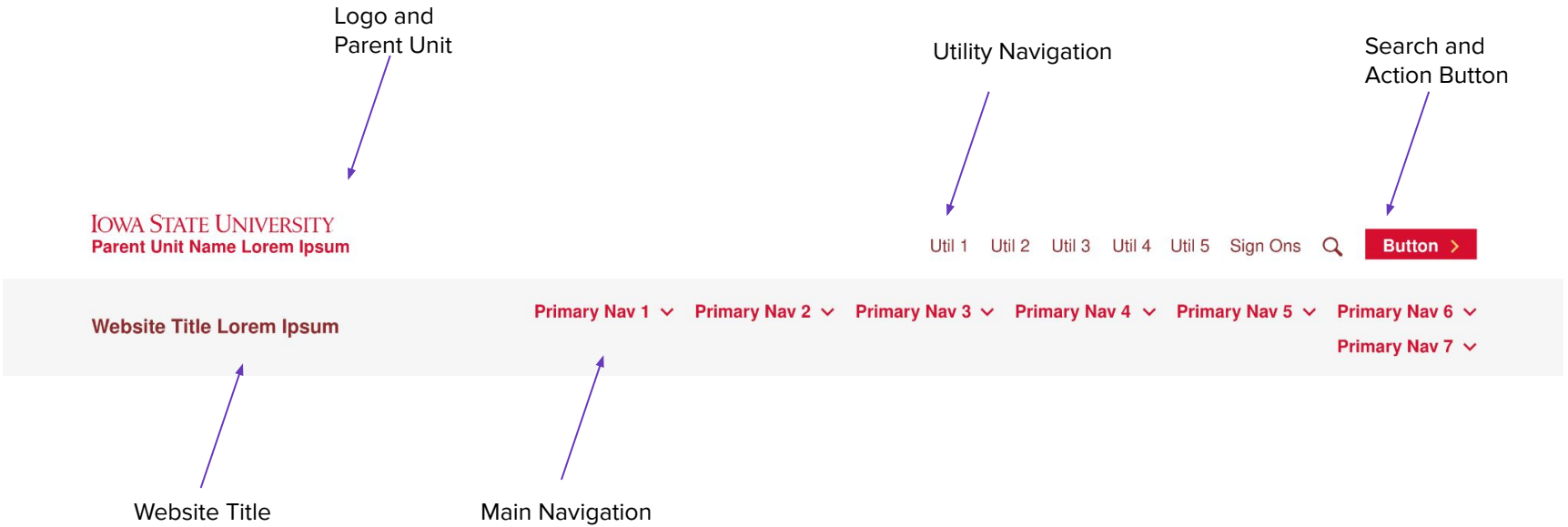
A good information architecture:

- Establishes a clear hierarchy of content
- Communicates “wayfinding” or where you are and where you can go
- Presents information in a way visitors expect and are most familiar
- Uses language and terminology appropriate for the target audience

IA for ISU

For all intents and purposes, when we talk about information architecture for Iowa State, we're referring to **how pages are organized and labeled on a website**.

When done well, visitors won't even notice. But when done poorly, a site becomes confusing, frustrating, or difficult to use.



Header Components

Before You Start

Before You Start...

Before you redo a site's information architecture:

- Consider your users and their goals
- Audit existing content
- Plan for new content and organizational priorities

Consider your users and their goals

When planning a new site, the first step is to understand the **needs and challenges of your target audience**. This can be accomplished many ways, including interviews, focus groups, and surveys.

If this upfront research isn't possible, at the minimum, use your team's experience and expertise to make an informed guess as to the primary reasons **why one might come to your website**.

Consider your users and their goals

This exercise will help to inform many of future decisions including:

- What content needs to be accessed the easiest?
- What words resonate most?
- What is the audience(s)' understanding of your organization and the services you provide?

Audit Existing Content

While time-consuming, clicking all links on site and creating a **complete list by hand is the most accurate**.

If this is not feasible, it may be possible to get a list of all pages on your existing site from SiteImprove. Inquire about Iowa State's enterprise license through the digital accessibility office.

Compiling a list of existing content will give you a sense of **how many pages need to be organized** and where in the site you have the most content.

This exercise will also show **pages that can be retired or consolidated**.

Plan for new content and organizational priorities

In some cases, simply reorganizing and **relabeling content that already exists is not enough**. Recent organizational priorities and initiatives may not be represented on the site.

The site may need additional pages to address the goals of our target audiences. A site's structure will evolve over time, but a site redesign is the **best opportunity to accommodate any dramatic changes** to content.

Organizing Content

Organize Content by Topic

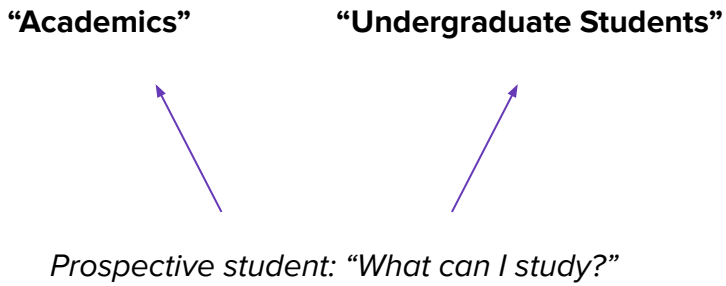
When building your site, **organize your content by topic**. The other natural way to organize content is by audience, but this often goes against how users will think and browse your site.

It is more likely a visitor will arrive thinking “How do I pay my tuition bill?” than “I am a current student.” In this case, “Costs and Billing” is a better label than “Info for Current Students.”

Create Distinct Categories

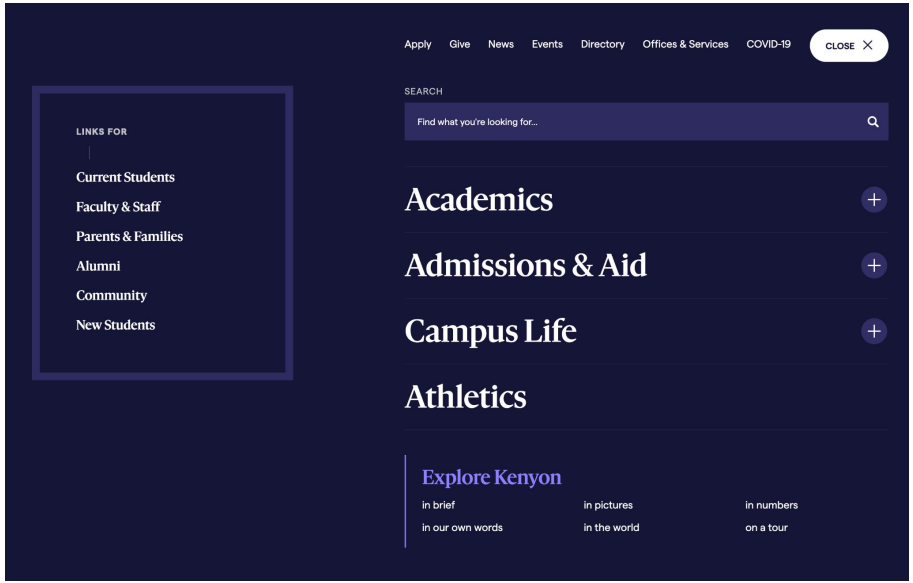
Users will have difficulties finding the content they need if there is significant overlap between categories.

Do not include the same links in multiple categories.



Including an Audience Navigation

Occasionally, organizing content by audience is needed. Rather than mix topic and audiences, use an “Info for…” section in your main navigation or use audience links in your utility navigation.



Kenyon College

Topic

About
Admission & Aid
Student Life
Research
Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

💃 **Great!**

Audience

Prospective Students
Current Students
Faculty & Staff
Alumni
Donors

🤷 **Ok...**

Mixed

About
Academics
Prospective Students
Student Life
Current Students

💩 **Avoid**

Organizational Methods

Labeling Content

Speak Your Target Audience's Language

A website's navigation should be free from jargon and insider terminology. **Avoid the grouping content according to organizational structure** or content ownership.

This is known as the "curse of knowledge," or the assumption that those you are communicating with have the same understanding and background as you do.

Labels should be self-explanatory to those with little familiarity with your organization.

Avoid insider terminology or branded terms

In the cases where a page is about a topic with a branded name, **avoid using the branded name as the page title**.

Instead, use on-page copy to introduce the proper names of programs, initiatives, and other content that is Iowa State specific. Users are much more likely to click on a link when they know what they will find.

Example

A university has a freshman rotational experiential learning program called the “Discovery Program.” Either:

- Use plain language to describe the page (“Freshman Rotational Program”)
- Use additional clarifying words in addition to the branded term (“Discovery Rotational Program”).

Use Consistent Labeling

Consistent, parallel language is an effective tool in ensuring users can find information on your site.

Proper labeling is akin to good writing – a clear format and cadence encourages comprehension and understanding.

Academics

Bachelor’s Degrees
Master’s Degrees
Doctoral Degrees

Great!

Academics

Majors and Minors
Graduate Degrees
Ph.D. Programs

Avoid

Labeling: Consistent Terms

Utility Links

Apply
Contact
Donate

Great!

Utility Links

Apply
Contact Us
Giving

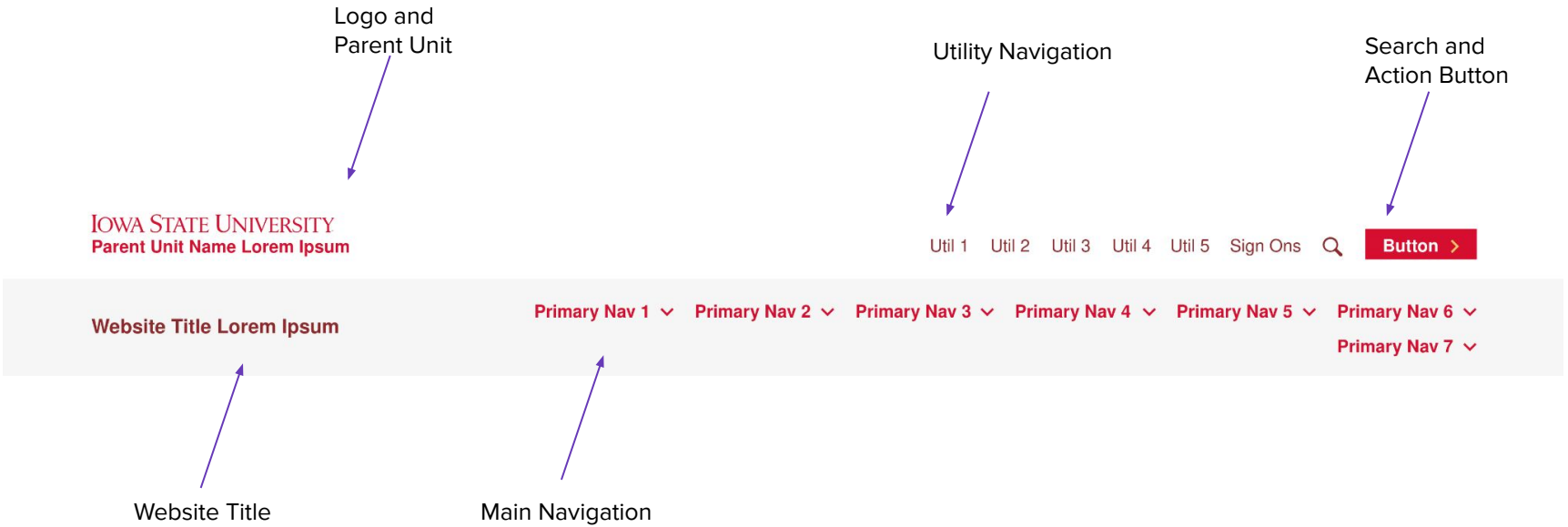
Avoid

Labeling: Consistent Syntax

Other Best Practices

- Avoid including the same idea or topic on more than one page.
- Avoid creating very short or very long pages. Create child pages only when the length of a page becomes overwhelming.
- Use the header and on-page subnavigation to link only to pages on your website.
- Do not use the header or on-page subnavigation to link to files, including PDFs, Word documents, Excel spreadsheets. Instead link to these in the body of the page.

Building Your Site's Navigation



Header Components

Website Title

Required. This is a text link that takes visitors back to the homepage of your site.

Website Title Examples

Civil, Construction and Environmental Engineering

Agonomy

Office of the Vice President for Research

Logo and Parent Unit

Required. The logo takes visitors to the Iowa State main site. This parent unit identifies the site to which the website belongs in the org chart (used most often to link back to Colleges). Clicking this takes users to that parent unit website.

Parent Unit Examples

Civil, Construction and Environmental Engineering
College of Engineering

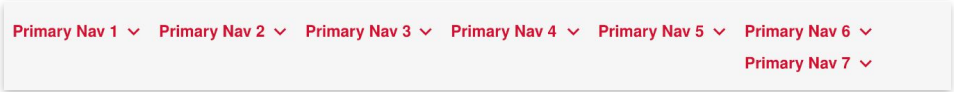
College of Engineering
None

Main Navigation

Required. These are the links to the main sections of the site. If a section has child pages, clicking will open a menu.

Main Navigation Examples

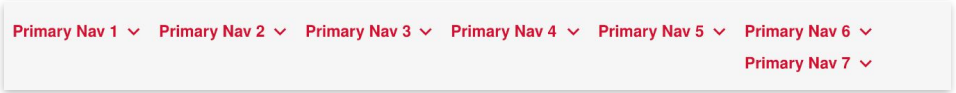
Sample Program Website
About, Academics, Admission, Student Life, Research



Main Navigation

Recommendations

Use between three to seven categories. The main navigation contains links in the website's header that are **most important to your target audiences**. This is so that the navigation does not get overwhelming.



Utility Navigation

Optional, though Sign Ons is required. These are supplemental links used for important pages, but less important than the primary navigation. This navigation does not have drop-down menus.

Utility Navigation Examples

Sample Program Website
Visit, Apply, Give

Another Sample Program Website
Current Students, Faculty and Staff, Alumni

Utility Navigation

Use the utility navigation for **only one** of the following these scenarios:

- Calls to action.
- Lower priority links. Use for pages you'd like to link to but want to be understated compared to the main navigation.
- Audience links. While audience links aren't recommended for the main navigation, use the utility navigation to provide quick access to pages for secondary or tertiary audiences.

Utility Navigation Examples

Calls to Action
Visit, Apply, Give

Lower Priority Links
News, Events, Directory

Audience Links
Current Students, Faculty and Staff, Alumni

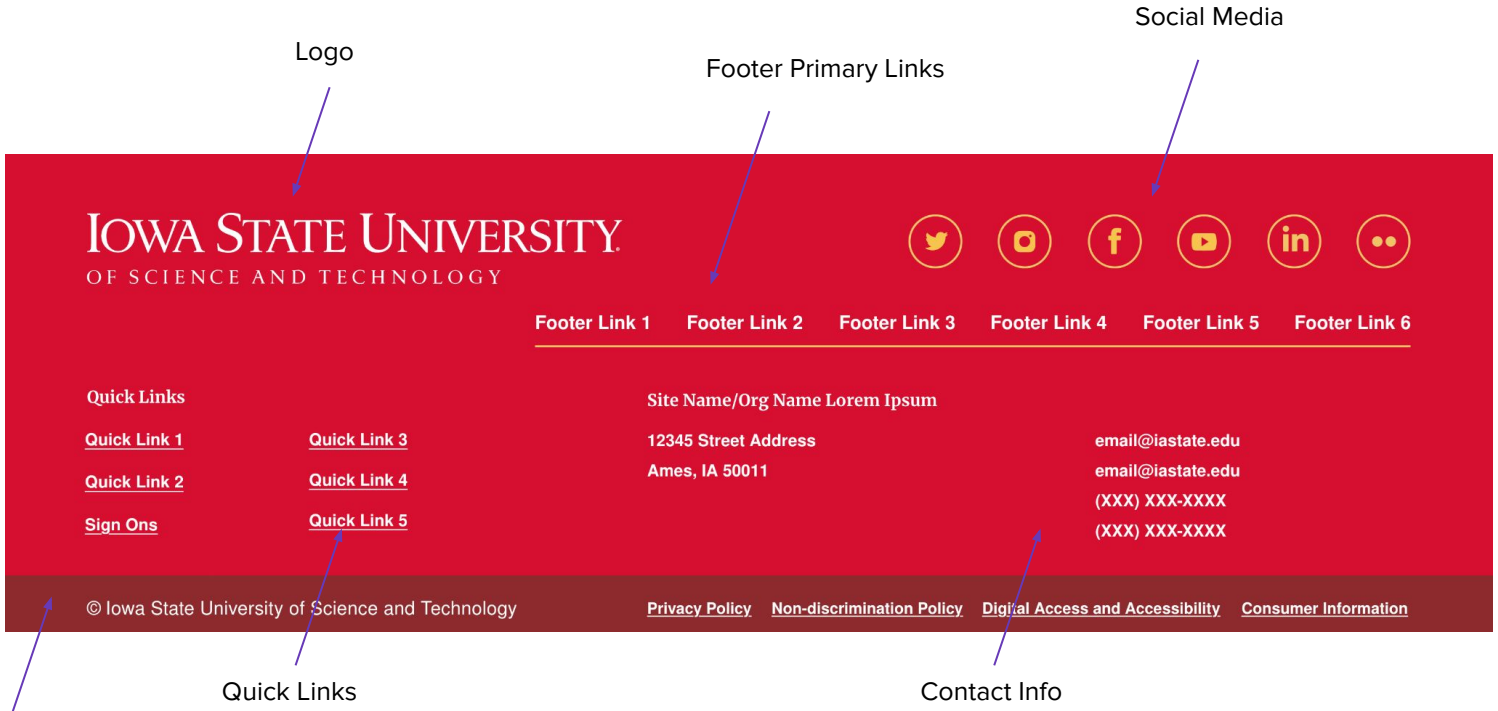
Search and Action Button

Optional. Not all sites are large enough to need search. The last item in the utility navigation can optionally be styled as a button.

Action Button Examples

Capital Campaign Site
Donate

Newsroom or Magazine Site
Sign Up



Footer Components

Logo

Required. This is a text link that takes visitors back to the Iowa State main website.

Footer Primary Links

Optional. These are different from the main navigation. Often is it is a good practice to repeat the main navigation in the footer, but these links can be used to link to call out other high priority pages.

Footer Primary Links Examples

Main Header Navigation Links
About, Academics, Admission, Student Life, Research

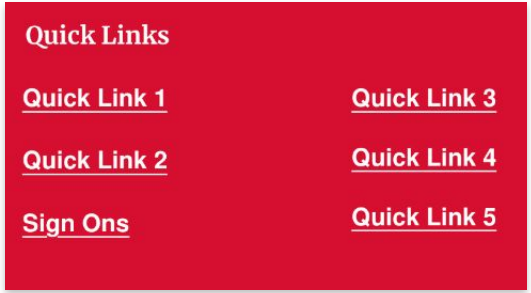
Audience Links
Current Students, Future Students, Alumni

Social Media

Optional. These social media links should not be the Iowa State main social media properties but instead social media links for the unit.

Quick Links

Optional, though Sign Ons is required. These are additional links in the footer, styled differently than the primary links. These links are a good option to link to the multiple parent units for interdisciplinary units.



Footer Quick Links Examples

Calls to Action
Apply, Request Info, Contact, Visit

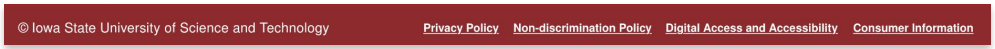
Department of Software Engineering
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, College of Engineering

Contact Info

Required. While this is required, the exact content (number of phone numbers, email addresses, etc.) is customizable.

Supplemental Footer

Required. This has the copyright and the four links required on all Iowa State websites.



Information Architecture Checklist

Does the menu account for all existing content?

If not, what must be added or relabeled so that all pages can be found?

Does the menu account for known future content?

If not, what must be added or relabeled so that all pages can be found?

Can each piece of content be found in only one section?

If not, how might the pages be relabeled or regrouped so that each section is distinct?

Does the main navigation have between three and seven links?

If not, can any sections be combined?

Does the main navigation have the content most important to your target audiences?

If not, which sections are less important than the others and can be omitted?

Does the utility navigation have only call-to-action links?

If not, are the links only audiences or lower priority than those in the main navigation?

Do all links and page titles use words that the target audience understands?

If not, how can they be rephrased?

Are all links and page titles free from jargon and branded terms?

If not, how can they be rephrased?

Is content grouped so someone doesn’t have to be familiar with your organization?

If not, how might the pages be relabeled and regrouped so this isn’t the case?

Are all labels consistent and follow the same format?

If not, how can they be reworded so that they follow a similar structure?

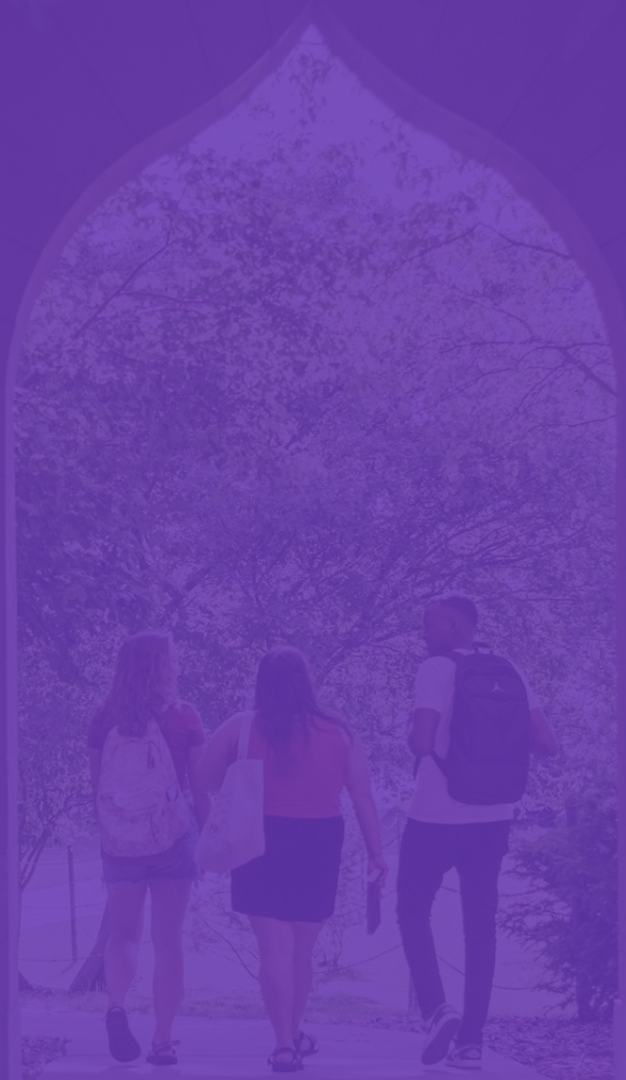
Can all content and ideas be found on only a single page?

If not, what can be combined or reorganized?

Are all pages of an appropriate length?

If not, what can be consolidated with its parent page? What can be moved to a child page?

Do all menus only include links to pages on your site?

If not, how can you link to external websites or files within the body of the page?

Thanks!