## Best Practices Guide: Web Content & Information Architecture

Your website is a crucial communications tool. Prospective students, alumni, staff, current students, faculty, donors, job seekers, employers, peer institutions, and the general public interact with it on a daily basis. Why? To find information.

Your job is to help them find what they need and, along the way, connect with them in ways that help you achieve your own goals.

Making information easy to find takes time and the willingness to review your site with the perspective of someone outside your office or department and institution.

Presenting that information in a way that is understandable to a variety of people takes clear and concise writing, and a little empathy.

Start by asking yourself a few questions:

Who's coming to my site? What are they looking for? What do I want them to know? Is the site content meeting the needs of my biggest and most important visitors? (Do they keep calling asking the same questions?) Is there anything on the site that could meaningfully connect with those folks—keeping them interested and coming back again? More and more, websites must go beyond providing information; they must cultivate, maintain, and grow relationships.

This document offers some basic advice about how to evaluate and improve Web content and site organization, or information architecture (IA). We'll start by encouraging you to think strategically about your Web content, move into how to organize pages on your site for a more intuitive user experience, and finally, offer suggestions on how to write more effectively for the Web.

### **Content Strategy**

#### The Web is a platform for communication. But simply putting words on a page will not guarantee anyone will read or act on them.

Be thoughtful about what words you use and how you present them. Try to understand the perspectives and needs of your audiences. Consider how your Web content can cultivate relationships. To do this, you must think ahead, plan strategically, and act deliberately.

These steps can provide a strategic framework for creating and maintaining Web content.

#### 1. Identify your goals

What are you trying to communicate and why?

Before you begin wordsmithing, think about why you have a Web presence in the first place. What do you want your Web visitors to do? Apply? Find specific information? Learn about your programs or services? Choose to major in your department? Use your services? Stop calling your office?! Think highly of you? Support your efforts?

Clear goals help you focus and organize content, and communicate more clearly with your constituents. They will help you evaluate whether the content is working *for* you and ground you in the bigger picture when faced with information overload and/or requests to put content on the site. Remember, you are also part of the larger Lewis & Clark ecosystem and as such carry some responsibility for broader admissions and reputational goals as well.

#### 2. Understand your audience: Who are they?

Start by listing out the different groups of people visiting your site.

Likely your list of audience types will include some combination of people on campus (internal audiences)—students, staff, and faculty—as well off-campus (external audiences)—prospective students and their parents, alumni, job applicants, academics elsewhere, general public, etc. Each page/section of your site could have a different combination of audiences too.

Next, prioritize. You can't be all things to all people. For each page/section, figure out which group is most important to you and focus on them first, addressing your other audiences in lesser ways. Audience content needs do overlap, so you will likely be able to serve a few groups with the same information.

In the broadest sense, the primary audience for a school's main site is external prospective students, parents, alumni, peer faculty/institutions, and the general public. These are audiences that don't have pre-existing knowledge of paths to information, or your organizational structure (i.e., names and functions of offices), or go-to portals where links are collected. The school site will be where they go to learn more about what you have to offer and access the information they need to become interested, apply, donate, reconnect, learn more, and start exploring their options.

At the same time, the main site must also serve the needs of students, faculty, and staff—they should be able to access resources and information easily, and these pages should feel like genuine reflections of Lewis & Clark.

Sites that focus on student services or alumni or donors may seem to only serve a single group, but prospective students (and parents) frequent these sites too, curious to find "real" information about your school's services and offerings.

Academic departments carry the weight of being heavily trafficked by both prospective and current students as well as peers and colleagues across the country and world. One thing we know about prospective students—especially your highest quality candidates— is they pay close attention to faculty pages and department sites, often more so than to conventional "marketing" pages. Because department sites are such important sources of information for prospective students, their needs must be a priority.

#### 3. Understand your audience: Who are they really?

No one fits neatly into a box. Once you've listed audience groups, give them some nuance—identify their expectations, perspectives, and external pressures.

Also known as **context**, this refinement helps you communicate with your site visitors in a way that makes sense to them. You aren't just communicating with a parent of a prospective student, that parent is checking the site from their office close to the deadline for submitting financial aid forms.

Context is influenced by time of year; where a person is physically (office, library, at home on the sofa); the amount of time they have to spend online; where they live (in-state, internationally, across the country); other concerns in their lives (job market, nearing the end of first semester senior year, declaring a major); and so on. Though it seems like the possibilities could be endless, develop the most likely scenarios for your primary audiences and recognize that these can and will change throughout the year.

#### 4. Understand your audience: What do they need?

Your website is not for you. It's for the people who visit it – accordingly, the site should give them what they want and communicate in ways they understand.

Surprisingly, the needs of internal and external audiences are not that different when it comes to easy-to-use navigation and compelling content. Both appreciate clear pathways to information; you can't count on either to be familiar with certain terminology or the way an office or institution is organized. Well presented, interesting content is good reading for everyone, whether a young prospect, an L&C staff member, or a retired alumna.

The differences lie in the specific information sought by one group versus another. Identify the information your primary audiences are seeking most often and address it in a way that's sensitive to context—you may need to edit text or add something new depending on the time of year, etc.

Next, think about your secondary audiences. How can you serve their needs without overloading the page or taking away from the primacy you've given to another group? Small, call-out feature areas or sidebars are often good places to address them.

#### 5. Connect your goals to audiences

But then again, the website *is* for you. Beyond meeting your Web visitors' information needs, you have goals for the website too: qualities you'd like people to associate with you and actions you'd like them to perform.

Connect each goal with one or more of your audiences. You have the power to craft your content in a way that speaks more directly to one group or another. You also have the ability to choose what to show and what not to show. If your primary audience is prospective students and your goal is to have them contact you for additional information, it is easier to figure out what should be on that page—give them a reason to want to reach out, make it simple to do so, and remove information not directly related to your primary goal.

#### 6. Guide your visitors

Each page should present unique information and guide the reader to the next step. Use links in the text, headers, featured links, event titles, and captions to help move visitors through your content.

Top-level pages have the most varied audiences. Their content should link different

groups to the information they seek with minimal details.

Pages should work together to tell one story. Websites often grow in spurts, with various authors adding content at different points in time. The result is a site that is rife with duplicated information and pages that do not flow together. With few exceptions, the content of a page should be unique, adding the next bit of information to the greater story.

Nearly all pages should include 1-2 short opening paragraphs of text that introduce the content and link to key pages within the section. **Keep these short** (up to 30 words) so they can be read quickly and easily.

#### 7. Find your voice

Choice of words and how you convey them says a lot about your institution/department/office. Similarly, the tone you use can help connect with different audiences and achieve certain goals.

Think about who are and who you aren't. Develop a few keywords that describe your office's/department's character and share them with anyone contributing to your website. If you are a friendly, supportive group, craft your words to convey that message.

Though writing style should be relatively consistent across the site, the tone of each page can vary slightly depending on a section's target audience and their needs. For instance, the Student Life pages may be more playful than Academics; Alumni may foster school pride more enthusiastically than the Registrar.

Overall, the style of writing throughout the site should be smart, engaging, and straightforward. **One of the best ways to check the quality of Web writing is to read it out loud to yourself**. If it sounds natural, it's more likely to be good.

#### 8. Share stories

Stories about the people who make up your institution validate your claims and forge critical emotional connections with your constituents. Show, don't (just) tell.

Prospective students want to get an accurate sense of the Lewis & Clark experience, and direct exposure to your community is the best way to achieve that goal. Real life stories, student- or faculty-generated content, photos with descriptive captions, and video all communicate this. A story of a successful alum will have significantly more impact than a statement about the success of your alumni in general. For academic departments, showing real department activities, research, and events will ground abstract learning outcomes in reality and give prospects concrete ideas of what they will be doing while studying with you. And it will show the world the caliber of work being done in your department. Seek creative ways to incorporate recent faculty/student achievements or activities through stories, video, audio, candid photography (with descriptive captions), blogs, Twitter feeds, and so on.

#### 9. Mix up your approach

There are many ways to communicate your messages: static text, stories (headlines), lists, event titles, photos (and captions), video, and others. These all offer different ways to absorb information and help to form a richer, more realistic picture of your efforts.

Do not cram every bit of information into the main body (static) text of a page, especially for homepages and others at the top level. Use a story or a photo to connect a message (goal) with an audience. Provide information for a specific audience segment in a list of featured links.

We like to think of Web content as having two modes: emotional and transactional. The former is often associated with marketing and traditional external audiences, and the latter with current students, faculty, etc.

Emotional content tells the story of the people, places, and qualities that make your school unique. The goal of emotional communications is to attract the best applicants and faculty; connect with alumni, donors, and community members; and promote the school in the world. These communications should be personal, authentic, and direct, allowing site visitors to easily identify with the subjects and themes of the content.

The principal objective of transactional content is to provide quick access to applications, services, basic information, policies and procedures, internal resources, forms, contact information, and how-to or FAQ-type information.

Internal audiences are often associated strictly with transactional communications and external with emotional, yet you will reap great benefits if you develop the right balance for both. Though students will tell you they only want access to their email, finding subtle ways to expose them to stories about fellow students, faculty, or alumni will help foster a sense of pride and start to develop them as ambassadors. Prospective students and donors captured by emotional content should have a quick and easy pathway to applying or giving once they've made the decision to commit.

#### 10. Integrate key messages

Visitors will form opinions based on everything they read on the site. Each part should reflect the qualities of the whole as much as possible.

Think strategically about your news and feature story headlines, event titles/teasers, themes, examples, and general choice of words. Readers should come away associating L&C with some of its key values and characteristics.

#### 11. Keep it simple and clean house

A smaller website with fewer pages to maintain is infinitely better than a huge site that looks great this year, but quickly becomes dated because you can't maintain it.

More content is not necessarily better. Engaging and accurate content is better. It is more important that your pages be thoughtful, relevant, well written, and interesting to your audiences. Pages with little more than old print brochure copy are not going to excite people and won't compare well with another department (in another school) that is actively updating its content.

Just because it exists doesn't mean it should be on your site. Think about what information people seek, what you need them to know, and whether your presentation of such material is working. Official policies are often densely written and hard to understand. Pull out the most important points and make them easy to read. The official version can exist deeper in the site or as a downloadable PDF.

#### 12. Create a schedule

Whether you create a full editorial calendar or a simple plan to update your site on a certain day every week/month, the effort will pay off.

Saying you'll "update regularly" is not enough. Things happen throughout the year that should be featured on the website: program detail changes; activities and events; big news; faculty and student awards; publications; faculty and staff going on leave, etc. But if you don't plan for it, it likely won't happen.

Begin by thinking through the academic year and identifying times when you'll need to feature specific types of information—commencement and the beginning and end of a semester, for example. By planning ahead, you'll more easily be able to notice gaps in your content and give yourself plenty of time to find or create new stories.

Decide on a manageable publishing schedule and stick to it. You can even maintain multiple calendars: a master schedule and more detailed, specific ones for social media, student profiles, or news stories.

### Information Architecture/Navigation

A website's **information architecture (IA)** is the structure of the site. Like a family tree it shows how the site is organized, what pages have sub-pages, and so on. We see the IA in action as the site's main navigation links. The term **navigation** most often refers to the those primary links, but it can also refer to other means of moving around the site, including highlighted lists of links, links in text, and search.

Pages on your site should be organized in a way that meets your primary audiences' expectations while achieving your own goals. The following are general IA principles and tactics we apply in developing a site's structure.

#### 1. Keep navigation lists under control

Navigation lists should be 6-8 links long with no more than 8-10.

Long lists of links are simply difficult to read. In addition, section (office, department) navigation should be no more than 3 levels deep (homepage, second-tier pages, and sub-pages under the second-tier pages). In order to keep the navigation list shorter, develop a hierarchy of information, placing some pages under others (as sub-pages) in the structure. Not all pages can/should be accessible from the main page. The content, navigation, and other links on a page should guide visitors to information deeper in the site.

2. Use easily identified, descriptive words for IA link titles Categorize and convey info in terms that do not require special knowledge of your acronyms, internal jargon, or office names.

Does your navigation contain specific names of offices, initiatives, or events? Think about how you might generalize the link title to fit into a broader category. Don't leave your Web visitors guessing which office deals with a certain issue when a link title could simply do it for them. There is some leeway: branded programs and facilities can be listed by name, but keep these to a minimum.

# 3. Organize your IA to meet audience expectations, not mimic the institution's organizational chart

People with no special knowledge of your institutional structures should be able to navigate your site easily.

With the exception of people on campus, most coming to your site will not know the name and mission of your office/division and its services. They will have no idea (nor should they) that your department belongs to one division or another.

#### 4. Order links based on use, with room for strategic organization

If pages correspond to steps in a process—and should be viewed in succession—list them in the appropriate order. The most sought-after information should usually be first. Group pages with related content together.

Don't let politics rule your link order. Remember: it's not for you (or your boss); it's for the people coming to your site. Revise the navigation list to reflect your primary users' needs, but balance this with internal knowledge of what you'd like people to see first (your strategic goals). Alphabetical lists should only be used if the links all have the same level of importance. Contact information is usually last.

#### 5. Use the same link titles for similar content across like entities When navigating between departments or offices, site visitors will be able to find the same information easier if you use consistent labels.

Conform to the approved set of link titles for general categories of information, working your pages into the standard system.

#### 6. Tell a story with your navigation

The pages in a top-level navigation should work together to tell a story or present the key aspects of the institution.

Users will frequently click through all top-level links one after the other, so they ought to work together to give a sense, however abbreviated, of the overall content to be found throughout the site. This is a less important issue for administrative office sites.

#### 7. Ever-present navigation

Institutional navigation should be accessible from every page of the site, as should all links within a page's own section.

#### 8. Link only to pages within the section

With few exceptions, primary navigation links should lead to internal pages only and not take the user to another site (external or internal) or to a pdf (or other) downloadable file.

Links that lead elsewhere or to a download should be incorporated as links in the text and/or as part of a "Related/Important Links" call-out section. With the "elsewhere" links, the rule is not as rigid; occasionally cross-listing pages in two places is acceptable when the page should clearly be in both.

- 9. Stop and think before adding a new page to your navigation When someone has information to be "put on the website," it's easy to simply create a new page. But a few questions ought to be asked first:
  - Is this an event or news? If yes, it should <u>not</u> be a page, it should be entered into LiveWhale as content that can be shown on more than one page and repurposed in various contexts. (We often call this dynamic content.) The exception is for annual or larger events that require a mini-site to contain all related event information. These should be considered permanent and during times of year when they are not of immediate importance, content should be edited to maintain some relevance (recap of last year's event, save the date for next year, etc.).
  - Is this information (or a class of information) that should exist in one place on the site and won't change frequently? If the answer is yes, then it might be worthy of a page.
  - **Does this information exist elsewhere on the site?** And related, is someone else more directly in charge of this content? If the answer is yes, then briefly mention the information and link to the existing page. This extra step cuts down on redundant and out-of-date information throughout the site. And makes for less work for everyone.
  - **Is the information seasonal?** Could it replace current page content for a time and be swapped out as other information becomes more important?

### Writing for the Web: General Principles

# The words on a webpage are just as important as the look and feel of the page, if not more important.

People absorb information differently on the Web; it is important to approach writing for the Web in a different way than you would write for print. In writing, re-writing, or editing your site, here are eight things to keep in mind:

#### 1. Be concise

Keep word counts low, especially on top-level pages that should be guiding your audiences rather than conveying lots of detailed information.

Most basic informational pages ought to be no longer than 400-500 words, and top-level pages and section homepages should aim for **100-300 words**. This word count includes both static and dynamic (news and event) content.

Heavy blocks of text are difficult to read (often the result of transferring content from print to Web). Pages deep in the site with very technical information may be longer than 500 words, but even lists of policies and procedures lose their usefulness (i.e., no one reads them) when they run down a long page without use of headers, bullets, or other ways to break up the information.

Remember: The more prominent a page is, the more carefully you must consider quick readability, style, and message.

#### 2. Use an opening paragraph to summarize page content

Flipping through the site, any visitor should be able to quickly absorb the most important information on the page to determine whether she needs to take the time to read the entire page.

An opening paragraph should be **no more than 30 words**. Think of this as the way you catch the attention of that person flipping through. An interesting 5-word sentence could do the trick too.

On primary public-facing pages (that is, all pages one click from the homepage), the text should be written specifically with a first-time visitor in mind. The prevalence of search also means that nearly every page could be a first entry point. This doesn't mean all pages should focus on first-timers. Just know that yours could be a landing page too. How easy is it to navigate out to more general information?

#### 3. Use plain language

Reading through a webpage, any visitor should be able to quickly understand what you are communicating to them.

Use concrete, common words. Use the simplest tense of a verb possible. Use an active voice. Use descriptive headings.

The benefits of plain language are both tangible and intangible: Plain language gets your message across in the shortest time possible. More people are able to understand what you are saying. There is less chance that your content will be misunderstood. If your document gives instructions, your readers are more likely to understand them and follow them correctly.

#### 4. Be conversational, but not glib

Part of this is convention: Web writing is generally more conversational than other forms. And part is strategic: Conversations build relationships; relationships build trust and active, interested constituents.

# Again, one of the best ways to check the quality of Web writing is to read it out loud to yourself. (We really mean <u>out loud</u>.)

Some of the rules that apply to formal writing don't apply as strictly to Web writing. For example, if the natural rhythm of a sentence is best suited by ending it with a preposition, so be it. Use contractions and words like "our" and "we" to mimic a personal conversation.

#### 5. Use meaningful subheadings to guide a reader through content

Along with short paragraphs, breaking up a page with subheadings helps a reader quickly determine what information matches her needs.

'Overuse white space' is a good rule of thumb for Web writing. **Reading from computer screens is on average 25% slower than from paper**. Short paragraphs and frequent subheadings give users more room to read.

As a general rule, there ought to be a subheading every 125+ words. Top-level pages often benefit from liberal use of subheadings. This is a good general principle for all content pages of a site though; for long, policies-and-procedures-type pages, it's absolutely essential. Organize your text so that the hierarchy is no deeper than two levels.

# 6. Use text formatting, like bulleted lists, pull quotes, and paragraph breaks, to quickly convey information

Most basic content pages shouldn't have more than one or two bulleted or numbered lists. If you have a page that is burdened with lots of lists, you may want to consider alternative ways of presenting that content.

#### 7. Use links in text to guide readers around the site

In-text links are an important means of limiting duplicate information and directing visitors to key content throughout the site.

On section homepages these links should complement the navigation as a secondary means of directing readers to section sub-pages. Links to external sites are okay, but should be carefully considered and not overused.

Be judicious: Too many links within a paragraph also diminishes their effectiveness as content guides.

# 8. Refrain from using internal jargon or acronyms on your site (without introducing the terms first)

As we noted in the IA section, you should not expect anyone to be familiar with language you use within your department or profession.

Though we certainly want to make your visitors feel like they are "in the know" and part of your community as soon as possible, this can be accomplished by using the appropriate writing style rather than leaving them guessing.

### It's a garden not a painting

The day your site launches is the first day of the rest of its life. It is important to implement systems for ongoing evaluation and maintenance. The work and energy put into updating and launching the new site will be wasted without a plan for regular site-wide updates and reviews.

The goals, audiences, and strategies you identify now should help you continually evaluate Web content. Keeping the website up-to-date is critical and should be a regular part of someone's job.

### Additional Resources

2012 E-Expectations Report: The Online Expectations of College-Bound Juniors and Seniors. Noel Levitz, Inc, 2012. <u>https://www.noellevitz.com/papers-research-higher-education/2012/2012-e-expectations-report</u>

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#### **WEBSITES**

http://meetcontent.com/ http://blog.braintraffic.com/ http://voiceandtone.com/