Getting started with a web project

Web projects can take many forms:

1. Overhauling an existing site or app
2. Creating a new site or app from scratch
3. Consolidating several sites into one

Web products like the IU Web Framework and Rivet give web folks a great starting point for design. Both offer templates and page components, so many design decisions are already made for you. These products let you can **focus on what makes your site unique**—which is its **purpose**, **architecture,** and **content**.

No matter what kind of project you have, this document will guide you through the process of planning your site:

Topic	**Steps**	**If you're redesigning a site**	**If you're starting from scratch**
Purpose	Consider your users	✓	✓
Architecture	Inventory your site	✓	
	Analyze your competition	✓	✓
	Audit & simplify	✓	
	Create a site map	✓	✓
Content	Create a content strategy	✓	✓
	Write your content	✓	✓

Consider your users

Your user's needs and wants should guide your web project.

Your main audience may be well-defined (like "prospective students" or "incoming freshmen"). **If you already know who your audience is**, we highly recommend learning about their needs, wants, and motivations from them. If you have the time and resources, interview members of that audience and try to understand why they are visiting your site.

In many cases, **your audience may not be well-defined**, or your site may be for a very wide, general audience (like indiana.edu). In those cases, it's best to consider the following (in this order):

- What does your **audience need** to do or know?
- What does your **audience want** to do or know?
- What does **your organization need** your audience to do or know?

It's easy to let organizational goals dictate site architecture and content. But you should always be sure that your site provides value, is useful, and meets the needs of your users first.

Keep in mind that **you are not your user**. Think about what your audience may not know or why they're visiting your site—not what you'd want to see. Being objective and neutral can be difficult ("Everyone knows what this means!"), but it is so important to meet your audience where they are.

Use what you know about your audience to **inform what pages and content to include**.

Additional resources

- Start with user needs, Gov.UK's principles
- Learning about users and their needs, Gov.UK

Architecture

Typically sites have multiple pages and a hierarchy of categories; this is its information architecture. In a nutshell, it's **how your site is organized or set up**.

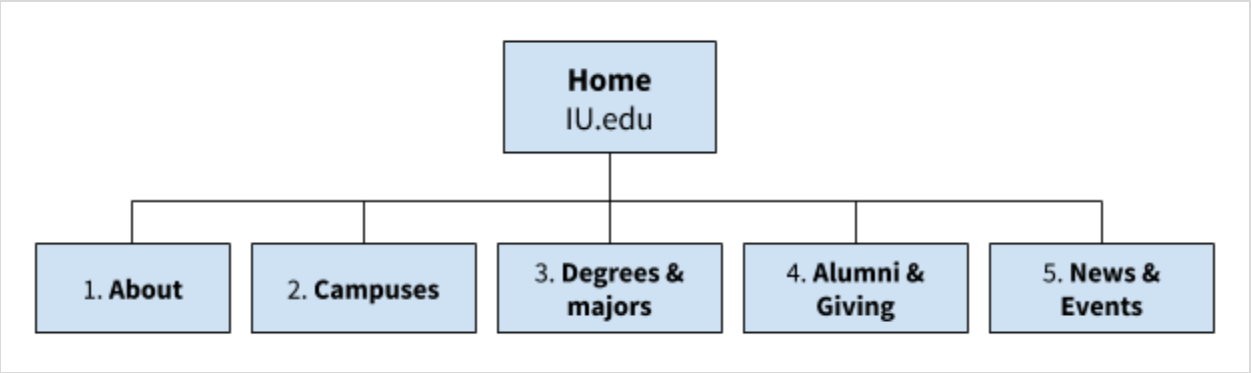

Image 1: IU.edu's architecture

We recommend you **start planning your site's architecture** before you start writing or designing pages, for a number of reasons:

1. It gives everyone a big picture view of the project
2. It outlines what pages you need to create
3. It helps you plan for the content you need

Additional resources

- IA basics, Usability.gov
- Information architecture, NN Group

FOR SITE REDESIGNS

Inventory your site

For existing sites, the best way to plan your site's architecture is to **learn what pages (and therefore content) already exist**. To do that, you can collect information about your site in an inventory. You can gather this data in a number of ways:

1. **Automatically**: You can use a tool like Screaming Frog to crawl your site and generate a list of page links and information (usually as a spreadsheet). It can give you a lot of information quickly—which may be helpful or overwhelming. We recommend using a crawler for larger sites.
2. **By hand**: It's more time-consuming, but a good way to get a handle on your current site is to navigate through the entire site and log each page yourself in a spreadsheet. We recommend doing an audit by hand for smaller sites.

In general, you'll collect the site title, URL, and other information like a description or content owner/contributor. We recommend capturing this information in a spreadsheet. It's also helpful to number the pages in a way that shows their order or hierarchy.

Example of an inventory

Position	Title	URL	Description
0	Homepage	www.site.iu.edu	Main banner shows how to apply. Following sections are about faculty and research.
1	About	www.site.iu.edu/about	An overview of our services
1.1	Our staff	www.site.iu.edu/about/staff	Staff directory with contact info
2	Academics	www.site.iu.edu/academics	Introduction to programs

Make a copy of our inventory template on Google Sheets >>

Additional resources

- Content knowledge is power, Smashing Magazine
- Content inventory, Usability.gov

FOR ALL PROJECTS

Analyze your competition

This step is simple: **Look at what similar organizations are doing** on their websites, and see what they have in common—and what sets them apart.

You don't always have to look vertically at other higher ed institutions. For example, the UX Office often looks to Google and Apple for industry standards, and the Design System team often looks to Salesforce and Shopify for examples of components and documentation.

You can use any part of their site as inspiration for yours, but we recommend honing in on the following:

1. **Navigation**: Are there common sections? For example, does every competitor have an "About" section? What pages or content do they include?
2. **Homepage**: What are the immediate calls to action?
3. **Organization**: How are pages grouped together? Is that grouping logical?
4. **Labeling**: Is there standardized language in this industry or topic? Would an outsider understand your competitor's language, or would you need to define terms and phrases?

You may also find that you disagree with the way a competitor handles something. For example, you might find that their navigation is illogical or the visual design feels outdated. That's great! You can use that as **guidance for what not to do**—and then do it better.

Take note of patterns you find, what works, and what doesn't work. It likely will be helpful to record your notes somewhere so you can refer to them later. And remember: You are not your user, so try to look at these sites from the perspective of someone who doesn't know much about your topic.

Additional resource

How to conduct a website competitive analysis, MaryShaw.net

FOR SITE REDESIGNS

Audit & simplify your site

Once you've collected information about your current site, it's time to think about **what (if any) content you'll migrate to the new site**.

Using your current site inventory, review all the pages and delete (or strike) the ones that no longer exist or are duplicates. Then comb through the remaining links and consider the following questions:

- **Are there redundant pages?** For example, you may have multiple pages for contact information (main, department, etc.). Can you combine that information?
- **Do you maintain content that is already available** on another site? If so, can you link to that site?
- **What pages and sections have high traffic?** Which are unique to your organization, or let users accomplish important goals? These pages and sections are likely essential to your site.
- **What pages have low traffic?** Your organization may want those pages—but does your user need them?

Your inventory won't be published anywhere, so take notes and organize your thoughts in a way that makes the most sense to you.

Web spaces don't have to be big to be useful. In fact, we recommend only including the essentials to your school or group. Then link out to sites that house and maintain other information. (This can be especially helpful for content that may be difficult to maintain, like directions for applying or course fees.)

Simplifying and scaling down will also help reduce bloat; users tend to perform better when sites don't have "an abundance of choice" (NN Group).

Additional resource

How to do a content audit: Analysis & recommendations, Moz.com[1]

[1]We highly recommend looking under "Expand to learn more about quality, duplication, and relevancy issue" and "Expand to learn more about what to look for" for tips and further guidance.

FOR ALL PROJECTS

Create a site map

At this point, you should have an idea of the following:

1. The content that you want to keep from your existing site
2. The content that is standard to your industry or topic

Now you'll want to turn this content into **a blueprint for your new site**. In other words, you'll create a site map, just like what was included in Image 1.

Step 0: Review IA guidelines

The entire process can be overwhelming, but it doesn't have to be. IU Studios' Experience Architect has put together strategies that IU teams can use when architecting sites:

- Information architecture strategies for school websites
- Executive summary of the strategies

These set the foundation for school sites, but they can be helpful in learning about the creation process for other types of sites as well.

Step 1: Organize your content

We recommend that you start your own process with a big-picture view and **organize your content into general groups**. There are many ways to do this, but one of the best ways to start is with **card sorting**:

1. Write down your content topics on separate notecards ("Contact," "Career Services, "Center for Innovation," etc.).
2. With a group or by yourself, start grouping them together. What content goes well together? (This is similar to affinity mapping.)
3. Iterate until all cards are grouped together. How did your competitors group theirs? What would you do differently? Can you combine any? What size feels "right" to you?

Aim for no more than 8-10 groups. This will form the foundation for your site map—and ultimately your new site's architecture.

Step 2: Label your groups

With your groups in place, you'll want to **label them as succinctly and descriptively as possible**. Consider the difference between "About" and "Our staff." "About" could refer to a tool, service, department, school, etc. But "Our staff" clearly refers to the org chart.

NN Group gives great tips for "category names that don't suck":

1. Choose descriptive words and phrases that your users relate to, even if the words sound boring.
2. Avoid made-up terms.
3. Check for overlapping categories.
4. Use classification schemes that communicate attributes your users can decipher.
5. Don't rely on your instincts when deciding label names.

Please note: We do not recommend using role-based ("For students," "For parents," etc.) labels, since it's common for people to fit into multiple audiences.

Step 3: Diagram your map

You'll want to **visualize your groups and labels** in some way. We recommend making a simple diagram (scroll for examples) to show the order or hierarchy of your groups and which pages will belong in each group. There are many resources for drawing diagrams:

- Figma
- LucidChart
- Creately
- Pen and paper

Step 4: Validate with users

You might consider testing your site map. Would your users expect to find the "Contact" page under "Team"? Interview them in person, or use a tool like OptimalSort to validate remotely.

Additional resource

- Sitemaps 101: An Introduction to Site-mapping Your Website, One Up Web

Content

Content refers to the text, calls-to-action, buttons, links, images, videos, and other elements on a site. In other words, if the information architecture is a site's skeleton, its content is the muscle.

The IU Web Framework and Rivet both offer sample page layouts, but it's up to you to decide how to use individual chunks and components.

As you plan your content, remember the following:

1. **People don't read on the web**. They skim. Break up your content so it's clear and scannable.
2. **Aim for simplicity**. Too many elements can clutter a page—and confuse your audience.
3. **Use chunks and components as intended**. Use a button for actions like submitting a form. Use a table to organize and compare topics. Use tabs for in-page navigation.

FOR ALL PROJECTS

Create a content strategy

You have your site's architecture outlined. Now it's time to think about what goes on the page.

A content strategy is similar to a site map in that it **gives everyone a preview of the site's pages**, and it **outlines what content you need** to create or migrate.

There are two ways you can create a content strategy:

1. **UX plans** outline each page, and they include descriptions of the sections, types of content you'll include, and instructions on content length. These are great for when you're working with a team of writers and you need to request new content.

   Make a copy of our UX plan template >>

2. **Page tables** are excellent for when you have a lot of pages that follow the same format (like news articles, blog posts, staff profile pages, etc.). Instead of planning for each individual blog post, you can use a page table to create a kind of template.

   Page tables typically break the page down into sections, with descriptions about what content goes into each section. These are great for migrating and maintaining existing content.

   Make a copy of our page table template >>

If possible, we highly recommend single-sourcing content or linking to existing content.

Additional resources

- Content strategy basics, Usability.gov
- Brain Traffic blog
- Using shared content, UXO blog

FOR ALL PROJECTS

Write your content

If you're part of a small team, you probably wear many hats. You've likely created content or written for your website.

As you may already know, **writing for the web is much different than writing for print**. People tend to skim the page, looking for elements that stand out: Headings, buttons, links, etc. That's why it's so important to **break your content up** into clear sections and to **write as succinctly and descriptively** as possible.

There are many things to consider when writing for the web:

1. **Your audience**: Are you writing for PhD or prospective students? Each audience's reading level, interest, and familiarity with the subject will be different. Write accordingly.
2. **Purpose**: Do you want your readers to complete an action, gain more knowledge, or accomplish both? Lead with the most relevant content. That typically means no more than 1-2 calls to action or topics per page.
3. **Voice & tone**: We recommend writing conversationally. That means referring to the reader directly ("When you come to orientation…") and using plain language.

Clear web content guides the user to the right task, goal, or destination—but it's also the law (for federal agencies). In 2010, Congress signed a bill into law that requires them to **use plain language** in their communications to the public.

Plainlanguage.gov includes excellent guidelines and examples of plain language. The UX Office refers to this site constantly. To create the best user experience, we recommend following as many of its principles as possible.

Conclusion

Your site's information architecture determines its usability—just as its content determines readability. When you focus on your site's purpose, IA, and message, you're designing a thoughtful, valuable experience for your audience.

About this document

The UX Office created this document as part of its "UX Fluency" series—which will become part of Rivet 2.0's documentation.

For feedback of any kind (questions, comments, and requests for clarification), please email Madeline Grdina, UX Office Manager, at mgrdina@iu.edu.