



Information Architecture and Metadata Overview

Information Architecture

This section explains what information architecture is, why it is important, and how it structures the user's experience on your Web site.

What is information architecture?

Information architecture is the blueprint that drives your Web site. It is the underpinning of how users navigate and experience your content. Good information architecture is usable, accessible architecture and complements a well-executed design. Poor information architecture will seriously detract from even the most beautiful graphics and interesting content.

Information architecture also has an important relationship to metadata. If information architecture is the site's blueprint, metadata is the building block that helps the site take shape. It's important to know what kind of metadata will be associated with your content, because it will be used in a variety of ways in the site's architecture. Metadata fields will be used to create searches and forms, and as a form of identification for every item that you want to display.

Good information architecture is:

- **Flexible** – If the type of content that you want to display changes, or you want to present existing content in a new way, you shouldn't have to develop an entirely new Web site as a result. Flexible information architecture allows the site curator to make content changes without affecting the entire site.
- **Scalable** – If you want to add new content or remove sections that you've previously published, it's important that your site's architecture be scalable. You can add 5 pages or remove 500 if you've got a solid framework to work with.
- **Usable** – Content layout and navigation should make sense and be intuitive and easy for users to grasp on their first visit. The nomenclature and terminology that you use throughout your site should be concise, consistent, and thoroughly-explained. It should be language that inherently makes sense to your target audience, and reflects the way they would describe or talk about the content themselves.
- **Accessible** – Blind users, users with low vision, deaf users and people with other disabilities need to be able to access your content, too. Good information architecture takes their technology-specific needs into account and provides a method for them to do so.



A good glossary of information architecture terms is available at http://argus-acia.com/white_papers/ia_glossary.pdf.

For some examples of how good information architecture translates into a finished product, here are some completed UTOPIA grant projects which were built with sound, intuitive architecture. This architecture is critical to the success of these sites.

<http://www.cah.utexas.edu/ssspot/> This site uses a top-level navigation bar and is photograph-intensive, showcasing the works of photographer Russell Lee and George Sanchez in their landmark 1949 *Study of the Spanish-Speaking People of Texas*.

<http://utopia.utexas.edu/explore/clark/> This site focuses on the legacy of Justice Tom Clark and his contributions to the Mexican-American Civil Rights movement. Many of his legal papers related to famous cases are included on the site.

<http://utopia.utexas.edu/explore/txarch/> This site uses a left-hand side navigation bar and highlights examples of varying styles of building architecture throughout Texas.

How can you contribute to creating information architecture for your project?

One of the first steps in the UTOPIA project process will be to meet with the information architect assigned to work on your site. While the UTOPIA Web team will learn a lot about your content from meeting with you and working on your project, we can't possibly know it as well you do. You are the subject matter expert. Talking with the information architect in detail at the beginning of the project about the needs and wants of your users will improve the quality of the end result.

Be prepared to discuss and/or provide examples for the following kinds of questions:

- Who is the target audience or audiences for your Web site?
- Why are they interested in your content? Why are they visiting the site?
- What will they want to do with the content? (Research, general information, entertainment, etc.)
- How are they used to accessing this kind of content?
- Is there specific terminology or methods of classification that they will expect to find?
- Are there existing Web sites whose layout or structure you especially like? What do you like about them? What are their URLs?



- Do you have an idea about the kinds of colors or other aesthetic attributes that you'd like to see used on the site?

What will the information architect create for your site?

After meeting with you, the information architect will identify natural ways of structuring the content on your Web site and will work closely with the metadata librarian to identify the appropriate metadata to power searches, forms, and other ways of displaying data for the site. The architect will work with you to identify and collect the content for your site as well.

Templates

The information architect will create a template for each *type* of page that will be featured on your Web site. These templates are not mockups of the final design—they are the outline that the graphic designer will use as a starting point to create the design.

Architecture plan

The information architect will also create a detailed architecture plan describing the site's structure, goals, and content format that will be used by the graphic designer, programmer, and site builders. You may need to meet with the information architect more than once as you work together to refine the scope of the project and document it in the architecture plan. You will be able to read and contribute to the architecture plan on your site's project Web site.

Assets sheet

The information architect also creates an assets sheet, which is a complete inventory of every single page that needs to be created for your site. The assets sheet lists each page's name, the graphics that should be included, the name of the file to be used for text, and the path that the page should take in the site's directory structure. You will be able to read and review the assets sheet on your site's project Web site, too.

The information architecture process can take anywhere from a few weeks to a few months, depending on how large and detailed your site is, and how quickly you are able to deliver the content.

It is important for you to understand, agree to, and approve the information architecture before moving on to the next stage of the project. Since the IA is the backbone of the site, this will save time and effort should you decide that changes are needed. The time to make comments and revisions about the structure of the site is during this period, not after the project is sent to the designer and builders.



Metadata

When proposing a project for UTOPIA, grant seekers should be prepared to discuss metadata on a basic level and should know how they are going to handle creating metadata for their project. Metadata will be required of every UTOPIA project. This document provides guidance about what metadata is, why it's necessary, how it makes your site/project work and how to approach it for the grant application.

What is metadata?

Metadata is essentially information about information, or data about data. For example, a library catalog contains metadata that helps users find items they want. Metadata can do more than describe items, though. Metadata can help control access to, discover, manage and preserve items that are available digitally.

Why should you use metadata?

Metadata gives people access to your content and helps make your site work. Beyond that, metadata helps the Libraries and UTOPIA manage digital assets by providing information about the format, availability and location of a specific item.

How does metadata help your site function?

Once you have defined metadata for your project, you can create a site search. Users can use the site search to find items on your site that are identified by their metadata. The UTOPIA site search can also access your metadata so users visiting the main UTOPIA site (www.utopia.utexas.edu) will arrive at your content if it's relevant to their search. In addition, people using outside research tools such as OAIster can find your material through that same metadata.

To see how this works, try the following exercise:

1. Go to the AILLA website (<http://www.ailla.utexas.org/search>) and do a search (I chose Achuar). Note that you get all the items related to that term, both audio files and transcripts of those files. In addition, you see a description of the material.
2. Now go to the UTOPIA site (<http://utopia.utexas.edu>) and search for the same term. This gives you a direct link back to the materials on the AILLA website.
3. Finally, go to OAIster (<http://oaister.umdl.umich.edu/o/oaister>) and do the same search again. Again, you are lead back to the AILLA site and its related content.



Another way metadata adds functionality to a site is through *site metadata*. Site metadata allows programmers to create headers and other items on the fly for objects to be displayed. An example of this can be found on the Tom Clark site (http://utopia.utexas.edu/explore/clark/view_doc.php?id=c67-02-44). Notice that for the object displayed, there is a header that tells the user where the object is in the site (what section or theme), the name of the case and year, the kind of document and the title of the object. These things are part of the metadata and they allow programmers to create captions or headers for objects without having to hand code this information for each item. Metadata was also used to display the number of pages in an object and give the user navigation options for that object.

Other benefits of metadata

There are many more benefits to having good metadata, and one of the key ones is the ability to manage and preserve digital objects for future use. For example, perhaps a particular file format will soon be obsolete, and your collection has a lot of items in that format. Without intervention these items will become unusable, but if you have good metadata, we could notify you about the upcoming extinction and help you move those items into a better format for long term use.

It's important that some metadata is provided for all UTOPIA sites, but the amount and quality of that metadata will determine how well your site can be accessed by users, found by outsiders, and managed by either you or the Libraries.

What about standards?

The University of Texas Libraries use many metadata standards. For descriptive metadata we use MARC, MODS, Dublin Core, VRA Core and TEI headers. However, we don't expect you to be experts on any of these standards. If you receive a grant you will meet with a metadata analyst in order to determine the critical descriptive elements you need to capture for your content. The Metadata Analyst will then map those elements to one or more of the Libraries' standards.

In addition, if your project is preservation-oriented we will work with you to come up with preservation and technical metadata. This will be mapped to the appropriate standard (PREMIS, MIX, etc.).

If you do have a specific standard or standards that you use or that are important to your target community we will be happy to use that standard.



How is metadata related to my grant application?

For the grant application you need to demonstrate that you understand the following:

- 1) What metadata is on a basic level
- 2) How you are going to handle creating metadata for your project
- 3) If you receive a UTOPIA Grant you will be required to provide metadata for your materials

We will provide plan questionnaires for you fill out in order to make the process as easy as possible.