Washington College
Website redesign

Best Practices Guide:

Reviewing and Revising Site Information Architecture and Content

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. What your website says, and how it's organized, could not be more important.

College websites are often the product of a diverse community of authors where pages have been created and/or maintained by different people at different intervals over many years. Or they are frozen in time; the product of intense work at the time of a redesign, the site no longer reflects the real, living institution it should represent.

A redesign is the perfect time for everyone to sit down, roll up their sleeves, and examine their sections of the site. Making a website that is clear, concise, and easy to navigate takes time, and the willingness to review your site with the perspective of someone outside your office or department and institution.

Even if you've been actively maintaining your site, is it effectively communicating with your audiences? Is the writing web-friendly? Are you taking advantage of the various tools the web offers to interact in a meaningful way with your constituencies? More and more, web content is going beyond providing information and moving toward cultivating, maintaining, and growing relationships.

In addition to spending time on refining content and information architecture (IA) during the redesign process, it is important to implement systems for ongoing evaluation. Much of the work and energy put into updating and launching the new site can be wasted without a plan for regular site-wide updates and reviews—even if you are actively engaged in your site content.

This document offers some basic advice about how to evaluate and update content and IA. We'll start with a section on audience, then move into IA and navigation, and finally, content. We include an introduction to content strategy, tactics for reviewing and revising current information, and offer suggestions on how to write for the web.

Understanding your audience

Your website is not for you. It's for the people who come to visit it— and accordingly, the site should communicate in ways they understand and are comfortable with.

Who are they? You must start any web content review process by thinking through (and listing out and prioritizing) the different groups of people visiting your site. This helps you organize and present content more effectively. Likely your list 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, near-by community, academics elsewhere, general public, etc.

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; and well presented, interesting content is good reading for everyone, whether a young prospect, a Washington College staff member, or a retired alumna. The difference often lies in the specific information details sought out by one group versus another.

Beyond each group's particular information requirements, you should also consider web content in terms of its intended purpose. In particular, we often describe two *modes of communication* in web content: *emotional* and *transactional*. The former is often associated with "marketing," and by extension traditional "external" audiences, and the latter with current students, faculty, etc.

Emotional communications is about creating content and design that tell the story of the people, places, and qualities that make Washington College 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 as personal, authentic, and direct as possible, allowing site visitors to identify easily with the subjects and themes of the content.

When it comes to transactional communications, the principal objective is providing quick access to services, policies and procedures, internal news or resources, forms or documents, contact information, and how-to or FAQ-type information that your various audiences need.

Internal audiences are often associated strictly with transactional communications and external with emotional, yet you will reap great benefits if you can develop the right balance for both. Though students will tell you the only thing they really want is access to webmail and their course schedule, finding subtle ways to expose

them to stories of fellow students, faculty, or alumni doing interesting things can help foster a sense of pride in the institution and start to develop them as ambassadors. Prospective students and donors captured by emotional content should have a quick and easy pathway to applying and giving once they've made the decision to commit.

The primary audience for Washington College's main site is external—prospective students, 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 institutional site will be where they go to learn more about the school and access the information they need to apply, donate, reconnect, access information, and start to feel a part of the place. At the same time, these pages must certainly 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 Washington College.

Inside "information" pages and office sites have both emotional and transactional components as well. Some administrative offices may feel that they serve internal audiences exclusively, but many, like Office of International Programs, Student Health Services, and the Registrar, are visited by prospective students curious about WC's services and offerings and should consider that group when developing their web content. Academic departments carry the weight of being heavily trafficked by both prospective and current students as well as peer colleagues across the country and world.

As you review each page, start to identify its primary, secondary, and occasional visitors. Think about what they are looking for as well as what you'd like them to know, and how your content is meeting (or not meeting) those needs.

Information Architecture/Navigation

Definitions
Let's start with a few definitions. A website's **information architecture (IA)** is the structure of the site. The IA is often referred to as the navigation—as we do in this document—though the term **navigation** can also refer to other means of moving around the site, including additional highlighted links on a page (or in the footer), featured link lists, search, etc.

Think of the IA as a family tree where the first generation is the top-level navigation on the homepage. Those top-level pages have sub-pages, as do the sub-pages, and so on. A **site map** shows where each page "lives" in the IA and the hierarchy of pages within the site.

General IA principles and tactics
The primary principles and tactics we apply in developing/revising a site's information architecture are the following:

1. **Navigation should not reflect the institution's organizational chart.**
   Navigation should be designed to further the goals of the site. It should present information in a way that people with no special knowledge of your institutional structures can easily follow. With the exception of the people in your office, department, or school, many people coming to your site are most likely unfamiliar with the title and structure of the office. Plus office names change.

   Categorize and convey information in ways that do not require special knowledge of your acronyms, internal jargon, or organizational chart. Text used for navigational links should typically NOT reflect the exact name of your office or department. You do not want to leave your web visitors guessing which office deals with a certain issue when a link title could simply do it for them. Use descriptive words or generalized versions of a full office name.

2. **Order links based on use, leaving room for strategic organization.**
   Navigation should be user-centric, listing the most sought-after information first (for many offices that offer services, these are useful at the top). Exceptions should be made for strategic reasons, i.e., listing high priority pages first with other sub-pages presented in order of agreed-upon importance. It is convention to put contact information last.

   Revise the navigation list order to reflect your primary users' needs, but balance this with internal knowledge of what you'd like people to see first. Alphabetical lists should only be used if the links all have the same level of importance.

3. **Organize links intuitively.**
   Homepage, section, and office/departmental top-level navigation should be organized into intuitive groupings.

   If possible, list the navigation in an order that places similar categories together or in a list which steps through the information logically.

4. **Navigation link names tell a story too.**
   The pages linked from a top-level navigation should work together to tell a story about the institution (or section/office); users will frequently click through all top-level links one after the other, so they ought to work together and ought 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.

5. **Keep navigation lists under control.**
   Navigation lists should be 6-8 links long with no more than 8-10. Long lists of links are difficult to read. Ideally, section (office, department) navigation should be no more than 3 levels deep (homepage, second-tier pages, and sub-pages under those 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 IA structure. Not all pages can/should be accessible from the main page.

6. **Navigation link titles should represent categories of information and remain consistent across major areas of the site.**
   This is most important at the top levels of the IA, but still relevant deeper in the site. This allows the content to shift and change while the IA remains the same. When similar information is represented by the same link titles, users can find information easier as they navigate across departments or offices.

   Does your navigation contain specific names of offices, initiatives, or events? Think about how these might be generalized. There is some leeway on this, but as a general rule it is important to keep these types of link titles at a minimum. Review link titles—is there a broader category that can encompass the information?

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

   Review content for duplication elsewhere on the site. If your office is not the original source of the information, link to its source page within the text. Likewise, is some information buried under links that do not directly correspond to the link title?

7. **Do not repeat link titles within the same section navigation.**
   While maintaining link title naming consistency across similar units (departments, administrative units) is important, pages within the same section should not have the same name. For example, if the top-level navigation has a page entitled “Research,” no other page within that area of the site should be named “Research.”

8. **Ever-present navigation.**
   Institutional navigation should be accessible from every page of the site, as should all links within a page’s own section.

9. **Link only to pages within the section.**
   With few exceptions, a page’s main navigation should link to internal pages only and should not take the user to another site (external or internal) or to a pdf (or other) downloadable file.

   Click through your site to test all links in the navigation, removing those that lead elsewhere or to a download. These should be incorporated as links in the text and/or as part of a “Related/Important Links” area of the page. With the “elsewhere” links, the rule is not as rigid; occasionally cross-listing pages in two places in the IA is acceptable when the information should clearly be in both places.

10. **Years/Dates should not be used in IA link titles.**
    It is far too easy for these to become dated.

Content Strategies

The web is a platform for communication. But simply putting words on a page will not guarantee anyone will read or act on them. We must be thoughtful about what words we use and how we present them. We must endeavor to understand the perspectives and needs of our audiences. We must consider the relationships we are trying to build and find ways to cultivate them. To do all of this, we must think ahead, plan strategically, and act deliberately.

We offer these content strategies as a framework to use when creating or editing any content on the Washington College site.

1. **Identify your goals**
   What are you trying to communicate, to whom, why? Before you get into 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 services? Use your services? Stop calling your office?! Think highly of you? Support your efforts?

   Also remember you are part of the larger Washington College ecosystem and as such carry some responsibility to the admissions, development, and reputational goals of the institution.

   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.

   Understand where your audience is coming from
   Begin by listing your basic audience types— prospective students, parents of current students, sophomores, job applicants, etc. Then start to identify the mindset, expectations, or perspectives for each. Also known as **context**, this refinement helps you communicate with your site visitors in a way that makes sense to them. Give audience types nuance: It's not just a parent of a prospective student, but a parent 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, home); the amount of time they have to spend online; where they live (in-state, international, across the country); other concerns in their lives (job market, summer vacation, declaring a major); and so on. Though it seems like the possibilities could be endless, it is important to do this only for the most likely scenarios of your primary audiences. Finally, don't forget: anyone could land on your site, so it should be minimally helpful to the broadest audience.

2. **Find your voice**
   Choice of words and how you convey them can say a lot about your institution/department/office. Similarly, the tone you use across different pages can help you communicate and achieve different goals.

   Washington College is a warm, intimate community where people are familiar and friendly with one another, and are genuinely enthusiastic about their various projects and causes. Your style of writing should convey that.

   Though there must be a general consistency of style across the externally-focused top-level pages of the site—and that voice must be consistent with your character as an institution—the tone of each page can and should vary slightly depending on the section's targeted audience and their needs. For instance, student life-type pages may have a more playful tone than Academics; Giving may strive to foster school pride more than Information Technology.

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

3. **Integrate key messages**
   Through the news stories, themes, selection of examples, and general choice of words—especially for news headlines and event titles/teasers—readers should come away associating Washington College (or your particular department or office) with some of its key values and characteristics. We believe that visitors to the WC site will form associations based on ALL the content they read on the site. So to the extent possible, each part should reflect the qualities of the whole.

4. **Incorporate first-person narratives**
   In general, we recommend using first-person narratives as much as possible. Prospective students want to get an accurate sense of the true nature of the Washington College experience, and direct exposure to your community is the best way to achieve that goal. Blogs, student/faculty-generated content, good photography with descriptive captions, and video are all good ways to communicate this.

5. **Guide your visitors**
   Every bit of text on each page should have the goal of presenting information and guiding your reader to the next step. Use links in the text, headers, featured links, event titles, and so on to present information that moves site visitors through your content.

Your top-level pages should work together to tell one story. Websites often grow in fits and starts 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 to tell one cohesive story. With few exceptions, the content of a page should be unique, adding the next bit of information to the greater story. This is especially critical for primary institutional pages.

Nearly all pages should include 1-2 short opening paragraphs of text that introduce the content and link to key pages within the section. (Some of these links may be redundant with the section's top-level IA, but will give it more context and make information more accessible.) Keep these short so they can be read quickly and easily.

6. **Mix up your approach**
   Do not try to cram every bit of information into the main body (static) text of a page, especially for homepages and others at the top level. You have many other means of communicating your message: news story headlines, announcements, event titles, photos (and their captions), video, and other dynamic content feeds—blog headers, Twitter and Facebook posts, etc. Along with your static text, these offer your audience different ways to absorb your messages and help to form a richer, more realistic picture of your efforts.

7. **Make sure you know what a page is.**
   This might seem like a silly point, but often websites become unruly behemoths when pages are created, then lost and forgotten. We know that there will always be a little messiness around the edges but with a redesign we have the opportunity to review and streamline as much as possible.

   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.)
   - **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 information? 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.

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. It is not uncommon for us to find web content that has been cut and pasted from print publications—often past its expiration date by 6 months (or 6 years).

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 for the new site, here are eight things to keep in mind:

1. **Be concise.**
   Keep word counts low, especially on top-level pages that should be telling the story 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 between 100-300 words. This word count includes both static and dynamic (news and event) content.

   Heavy blocks of text are not easy 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.

   On primary public-facing pages (that is, all pages one click away from the homepage), the text should be written specifically with a first-time visitor in mind. This is because inside page landings are common with search engines (e.g. the result of a Google search). Every page should be treated as a first entry point to a website.

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 you/your and the active voice. Use useful 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 your message. There is less chance that your content will be misunderstood, so you spend less time explaining it. If your document gives instructions, your readers are more likely to understand them and follow them correctly.

4. **Be conversational, but not clever.**
   The use of contractions (it's, we're, you'll, etc.) is encouraged. Some of the rules that are applied 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.

   Washington College is staffed by an extremely knowledgeable and thoughtful group, and using words like "our" and "we" can help convey that online. *Again, one of the best ways to check the style of web writing is to read it to yourself out loud.*

5. **Make use of meaningful subheadings to guide a reader through the page content.**
   Along with short paragraphs, breaking up a page with subheadings allows a web reader to quickly determine what information is most important for her needs. This is a good general principle for all content pages of a site; for long, policies-and-procedures-type pages, it's absolutely essential.

   As a general rule, there ought to be a subheading for every 125 or so words of web content. And top-level pages often benefit from a much more widespread use of headings and subheadings. Many good top-level pages pair small subheadings with short paragraphs to give a visitor a very clear idea of what's to be found throughout that section of the site. Organize your text so that the hierarchy is no deeper than three levels. Lower-level headings are hard to distinguish and disorienting to online readers.

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

6. **Use text formatting, like bulleted lists, pull quotes, and paragraph breaks, to quickly convey information.**
   On most basic content pages there shouldn't be 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. **The text should guide readers around the site.**
   Links within the text are 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 ok, 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 in the institutional site (without introducing the terms first)**.
   Your primary audience for the institutional site is external (even some of your students may not be familiar with a shortened office name or activity nickname). You should not expect they are familiar with language you use internally. 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 in ways that do not leave them guessing.

Additional Resources

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