**Colorado College**
Website redesign

**Best Practices Guide:**

# Reviewing and Revising Site Information Architecture and Content

The Web is a crucial communications tool. Prospective students (and their parents), 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 and university websites are always the product of a decentralized and diverse community of authors and editors. Pages have been created, changed, and/or maintained by different people at different intervals over many years. The current CC site is, as expected, a bit tangled, with outdated information and writing that was not originally intended for the Web.

A redesign is the perfect time for everyone across campus 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, department, and even institution.

In addition to spending time on refining content and navigation 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 how to evaluate and update content and IA. We'll start with a section on audience, then move into navigation, and finally, content. We include tactics for reviewing and revising current information and offer suggestions on how to write for the Web.

## Understanding your audience

In many ways, 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.

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 it's a teenage prospect, a CC staff member, or a retired alumna.

Because "internal" and "external" audiences share many of the same needs, we sometimes prefer to talk about the audience orientation of Web content in terms of the intended purpose of the content. 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; 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 Colorado 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 College 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, 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 the institutional pages of the CC site is external—prospective students and their 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 institutional site will be where they go to learn more about the College and access the information they need to apply, donate, reconnect, 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 CC.

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 health services, public safety, and the registrar, are visited by prospective students curious about the services and offerings of the College 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.

## 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 (staff lists, directions) 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 <u>no more than 8-10</u>. Long lists of links are difficult to read. 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, the navigation should link to internal pages only. Links that are part of the primary navigation 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: It's fine to deliberately cross-list pages in two places in the navigation when it intuitively makes sense.

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

## Content Strategies

**The words on a Web page are just as important as the look and feel of the page, if not more important.** We offer these content strategies as a framework to use when creating or editing any content on the CC site.

1. **Make sure your top-level pages 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 institutional pages.

2. **Keep style and tone relatively consistent.**
   There must be a general consistency of style and tone across all of the externally focused top-level messaging of the site. Overall, the tone 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 likely to be good.*

   A little variation in writing style and tone is ok, however, when developing content for areas of the site with different audiences. For instance, Student Activities may have a more playful tone than Giving to CC.

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 Colorado College (or your particular Department or

Office) with some of its key values and characteristics. We believe that visitors to the CC 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 as accurate a sense as possible of the true nature of the CC community, and direct exposure to that community is the best way to achieve that goal. Blogs, student/faculty-generated content, good photography with descriptive captions, and video can help to give this impression.

5. **Use opening paragraphs on section/department/office homepages**.
   Each section/department/office homepage should include one to two short opening paragraphs of text that introduce the content area and link to key pages within the section. (Many of these links will be redundant to the section's navigation, but will give it more context and make information more accessible.) It will be important to keep these short, so they can be read quickly and easily. These intro pages should be around 200-300 words in length.

6. **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.

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 some information that needs to be "put on the website," it's easy to simply create a new page. But a few questions ought to be asked before a new page is created:

   - **Is this an event or news?** If, yes, it should <u>not</u> be a page, it should be entered into the CMS 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 there someone else on campus more directly in charge of this information that I should be coordinating with? If the answer is yes, then briefly mention the information and link to the existing page. This extra step helps cut down on redundant and out-of-date information throughout the site. And in the end it's less work for everyone.

  If this question is being considered during a content review process, consolidate redundant pages (or simply eliminate some) and find the most logical place in the architecture for the one page. The "owner" of this page should be the one who has access to the most up-to-date information for it.

**General inside page main content area**
In reviewing content on any interior page, often the biggest problem is heavy blocks of text that are not easy to read (often the result of transferring information from print to the Web). This is where Web writing style guidelines are most critical.

The more prominent a page is, the more carefully we need to consider quick readability, style, and message. Most pages should not exceed 500 words.

Pages deep in the site with very technical information can be longer, 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.

**Sidebar content**
Page sidebars (and other ancillary content blocks) should be reserved for content that *supplements* the main area of the page. At the very least, this might include related links or available document downloads – and at best, can include rotating stories, quotes, testimonials, or images that help to explain and bring life to the main content area.

On pages where the sidebar is used for sub-page navigation, only very pertinent information (such as contact info or deadlines) should be added. This additional information should always be placed *below* any navigational elements.

## Writing for the Web: General Principles

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 writing for print. In writing, re-writing or editing for the new site, here are seven 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 150-300 words. This word count includes both static and dynamic (news and event) content.

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 home page), 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. landing inside a website from 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.

CC 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 four 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.

## Additional Resources

*Scrolling Toward Enrollment Web Site Content and the E-Expectations of College-Bound Seniors*. Noel Levitz, Inc, 2009
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