NYS DIGITAL INNOVATION LAB

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Albany & NYC

NEW YORK STATE | Digital Service

Executive Chamber

Improving Access Through Better Information Architecture

Using card sorting to design clearer pathways to state services

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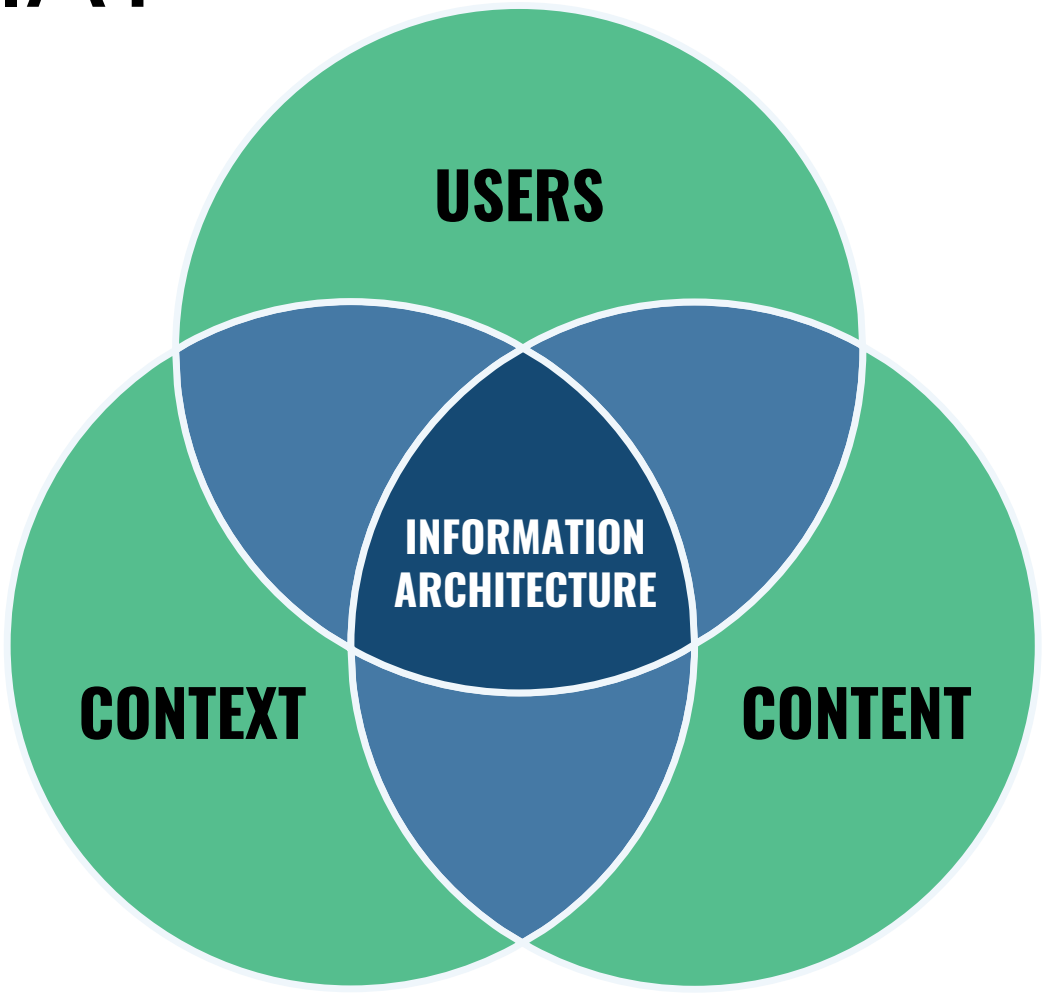
What Is Information Architecture?

- **Information architecture (IA)** is how information and services are structured, labeled and organized
- Acts as the blueprint of a website
  - Guides users on navigating and moving through content
- The Goal: help users find what they need quickly and intuitively without having to stop and think about where to go next

What Shapes Effective IA?

- **Users:** Determine how information should be organized and labeled (goals, mental models, behaviors)
- **Context:** How and when users interact with information (device, environment, journey stage)
- **Content:** Defines what needs to be structured (volume and complexity, hierarchy, relevance)

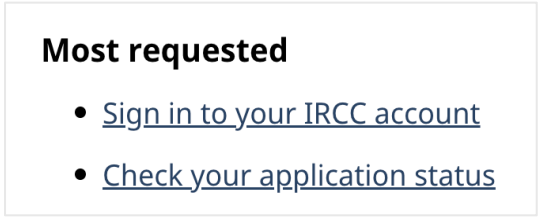
Ignoring any of these increases friction and makes information harder to find



Common Ways To Structure Information

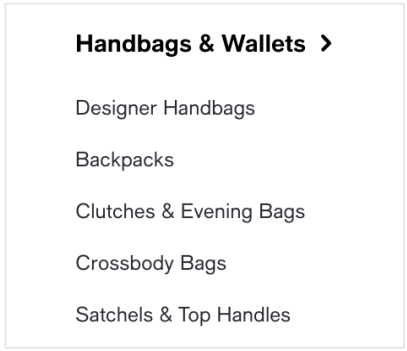
- **Object-based:** Organized by topic
- **Action-based:** Organized by tasks (Apply, Register, Pay)
- **Audience-based:** Organized by user groups (Students, Patients)

Most systems combine these approaches to best meet user needs.



Action-based

Audience-based



Object-based

Why It Matters

When the information architecture is done right, the impact is immediate:

Easier navigation → Users find information faster

Improved usability → Less confusion and friction

Increased efficiency → Fewer clicks, less backtracking

Builds trust → Experiences feel intuitive and reliable

IA Should Be Evidence-based

Effective information architecture should not be built on assumptions or internal perspectives.

Instead, it should be:

- Grounded in real user behavior
- Aligned with users' mental models
- Continously tested and refined

How do we understand how users think about organizing information?

Using Card Sorting

Card sorting is a method for understanding how users naturally organize and group information.

It helps teams:

- Design or validate navigation structures
- Improve labeling and content organization
- Understand how user expect information to be grouped

What Do Participants Do?

In a card sort, users typically:

- Group related items together
- Create or assign categories
- Adjust or refine groupings
- Explain their thinking and highlight confusion

This reveals how users naturally structure information

How To Run A Card Sort

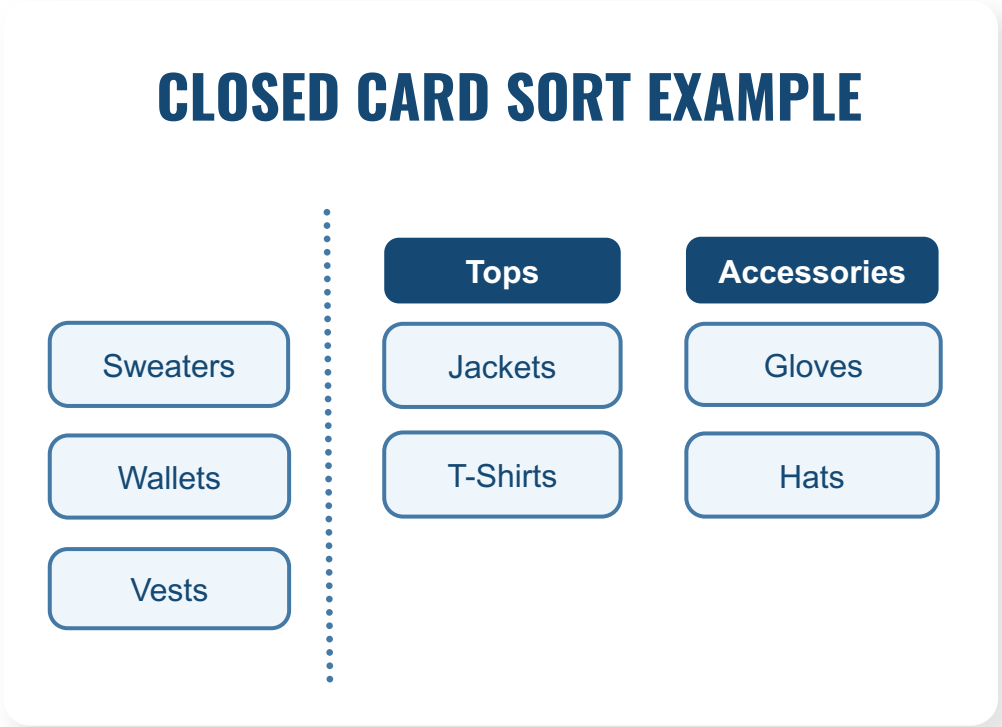
Start by selecting the right method based on your goal:

- Open, Closed or Hybrid Sort

Then, prepare your study:

- Define the scope (full site or specific section)
- Create 30-60 clear, concise cards
- Run a pilot to refine labels and instructions
- Recruit 15-20 participants

Types Of Card Sorting



Open Sort

- Participants create their own categories
- Best for: discovering how users naturally think

Closed Sort

- Participants sort into predefined categories
- Best for: testing/validating a current structure

Hybrid Sort

- Combination of both. Participants can add categories if needed.

Turning Insights Into Action

Once your sessions are complete:

- Evaluate groupings to spot patterns and inconsistencies
- Identify confusing labels or gaps
- Analyze common themes across participants

Then, translate insights into action:

- Refine structure, navigation and labeling

Card Sorting To Re-imagine NY.Gov

Two-phased approach

1. Open Sort: Participants grouped NY.gov's top services and information in ways that made sense to them
2. Hybrid Sort: Incorporated user-defined categories from phase one and introduced new cards based on top services across New York State agencies to identify category gaps and validate the initial structure

Methodology

- 20 participants per phase, representing a broad range of NYS residents
- Unmoderated study via UserTesting

Key Findings

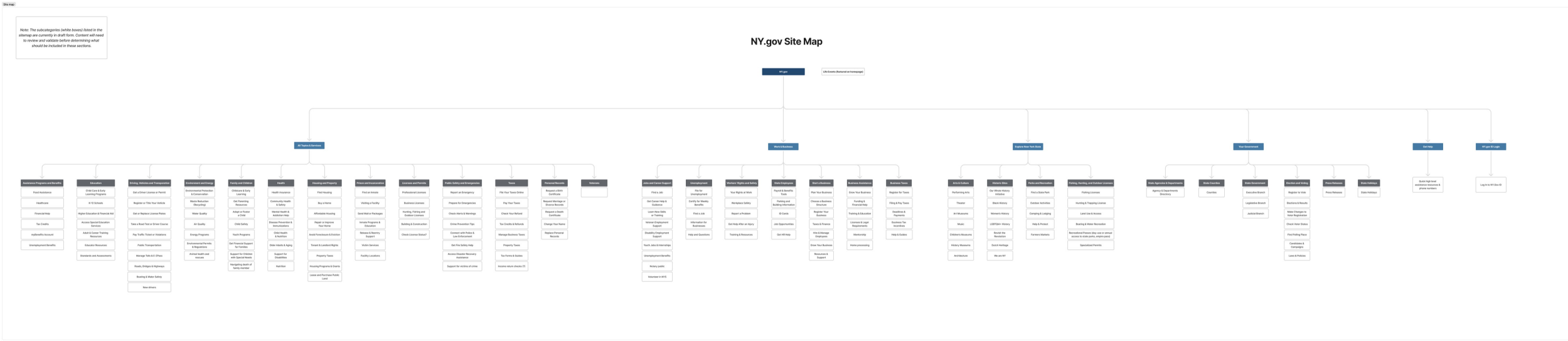
- In hybrid testing, most users preferred to sort cards into existing categories over creating new ones
- Some services were difficult to categorize (specialized agencies)
- Popular services often split across categories (unemployment, WIC were sorted into both family and children and assistance)

Additional Insights

- Identified categories users expected but didn't exist
- Found gaps in current site structure
- Revealed unclear or unintuitive labels
- Direct opportunities for improving navigation

NY.Gov site map

- Used card sorting results to develop a better information architecture
- After card sorting, validated the structure with tree testing
- Refined navigation based on findability insights



Card Sorting Workshop

~ 10 minutes

Activity Instructions

- Review each card on table
- Group cards in a way that make sense to you
- Name each group with a clear, descriptive label
- Discuss and refine as a team
- Note any challenges or unclear items

Goal: learning how card sorting works to apply to your agency's digital experience

Group Share & Reflection

Each group will share:

- How you grouped the cards
- Why you chose those categories
- Difficult or unclear items
- Any disagreements or patterns

Key Takeaways

Good information architecture is:

- User-driven
- Tested, not assumed
- Continuously improved

Better IA = Better Access

- Designing with users leads to clearer pathways and more equitable access to services and programs

Additional Resources

Card Sorting Quick Start Guide (handout from todays workshop)

New York Experience

Nielsen Norman Group

Digital.gov

US Web Design System (USWDS)

Sources

https://www.figma.com/resource-library/what-is-information-architecture/

https://yalesites.yale.edu/explore-resources/basic-principles-of-information-architecture

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