Argus Center for Information Architecture

THE INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE GLOSSARY

BY KAT HAGEDORN, ARGUS ASSOCIATES

MARCH 2000

I NTRODUCTION

This glossary is intended to foster development of a shared vocabulary within the new and rapidly evolving field of information architecture. It should serve as a valuable reference for anyone involved with or interested in the design of information architectures for web sites, intranets and other information systems.

We want to make it clear that the terms in this glossary are defined in relation to the field of information architecture. We have attempted to be faithful to the ordinary usage of terms to the degree possible. However, as with any specialty, some common words are used in somewhat uncommon ways within this field, and it is those meanings we have tried to capture.

Defining information architecture is an important and controversial challenge. We encourage readers to contact us with any suggestions regarding the terms and definitions in this glossary. Please direct your comments and suggestions to Kat Hagedorn (kat@argus-inc.com).

INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE GLOSSARY

Attributes. *See also:* **building blocks**. Aspects of information about a content object. Attributes may be fields, tags and meta-tags. <u>Example</u>: a document can have a "language" attribute and a "date" attribute.

Attribute values. *See also:* **building blocks**, **controlled vocabulary**, **labeling**. Descriptive data about the content object. Attribute values can be controlled (conforming to a vocabulary) or uncontrolled. Attribute values may be meta-information. <u>Example</u>: an appropriate attribute value for the attribute "language" might be "French."

Automatic indexing. *See also:* **indexing**. The process of using software to assign attribute values to content objects. There are three methods of automatic indexing: concept extraction, rule-governed attribute value extraction and direct extraction of intrinsic attribute values.

Bottom-up information architecture. *See also:* **building blocks**. The process of developing an information architecture based on an understanding of the content and the tools used to leverage that content (e.g., search, indexes). This involves the creation of building blocks, the databases to contain them and the procedures for their maintenance.

Browsing. *See also:* **contextual browsing**, **hierarchical browsing**, **navigating**, **searching**, **supplemental browsing**. The process of users following paths through a site that results in the retrieval of specific content objects. The three main types of browsing are hierarchical (accessing the primary path through the site), supplemental (accessing adjunct views of the site) and contextual (access to related content objects in the site). Users who browse may have less definite ideas of their information needs than those who search.

Bucket. *See:* **content area**.

Building blocks. *See also:* **attributes**, **attribute values**, **content objects**. The components of a bottom-up information architecture, namely the attribute and attribute values for content objects.

Cataloging. *See:* **indexing**.

Classif|ication, **classif|ying**. *See:* **hierarchical browsing**, **indexing**.

Content. *See also*: **content object**, **granularity**. Information that has a tangible aspect because it has been collected and contained in a content object. Content can be unstructured (usually text) or structured (in a database). Content can be collected at differing levels of granularity. (*See Figure A*.)

Content area. *See also*: **content object**, **grouping method**, **site**. A collection of content objects that share a common grouping method. A content area is one part of a site. Content areas may be buckets, silos and sub-sites. Example: the "Human Resources" area of a site or the search tool for a site, but not an audio clip or a document. (*See Figure A*.)

Content management. The rules (e.g., policies, procedures, standards), roles (people who perform the management) and resources (e.g., time, money, software) used to author, evaluate, organize, publish, maintain and store content objects for a site.

Content object. *See also*: **building blocks**, **granularity**. A discrete, manageable and usable piece of content. Content objects can have coarser or finer levels of granularity and are components of a bottom-up information architecture. (*See Figure A*.)

Contextual browsing. *See also*: **browsing**, **grouping**, **navigating**. The process of users accessing other relevant content objects and tasks that are related to the content object being viewed. These other relevant content objects have not necessarily been grouped with the viewed content object. Contextual browsing is also known as see-also navigation or prospective navigation. Example: a user can contextually browse Amazon.com's site by choosing one of the "Quick Picks" from the main page.

Controlled vocabulary. *See also*: **attribute values**, **indexing**, **labeling**, **preferred term**, **thesaurus**. A collection of preferred terms that are used to assist in more precise retrieval of content. Controlled vocabulary terms can be used for populating attribute values during indexing, building labeling systems, and creating style guides and database schema. One type of a controlled vocabulary is a thesaurus.

Directory. *See*: **hierarchical browsing**.

Fields. *See*: **attributes**.

Granularity. *See also*: **content**, **content object**. The level of complexity of a content object. There are coarsely grained content objects (e.g., sites, databases, applications, collections) and finely grained content objects (e.g., documents, audio clips, drawings). More coarsely grained content objects

contain more different types of content objects. Examples: (towards finer granularity) book – chapter – page – paragraph – sentence – word – letter *or* video – story – event – shot – frame. (*See Figure A.*)

Grouping. *See also:* **labeling**, **organizing**. The process of placing like content objects together so users can access them effectively, thereby defining content areas. Grouping is performed in conjunction with labeling and is part of the process of organizing.

Grouping method. *See also:* **grouping**, **organizing**. The process of collecting content objects according to a rule of organization. Appropriate grouping methods allow for more effective access for users. A grouping method is also known as an organization scheme. Examples: alphabetical, chronological, geographical, topical, task-oriented, audience-oriented.

Guide. *See also:* **supplemental browsing**. A content object that repackages disparate content objects for a specific purpose. Examples: a "new user" guide to a site or a tour of the site.

Hierarchical browsing. *See also:* **browsing**, **grouping method**, **information ecology**, **navigating**. The process of users following the primary path through a site to access content objects. The primary path is generally called the site hierarchy, but can also be known as a classification, a directory, an ontology or a taxonomy. The site hierarchy reflects the site's information ecology and an appropriate grouping method. Example: a user can hierarchically browse Amazon.com's site by moving from the main page to the "Books" main content area.

Index. *See also:* **attribute**, **grouping method**, **indexing**, **supplemental browsing**. A non-hierarchically organized content object that reflects an appropriate grouping method and that directs users to content objects that share a particular attribute. An index is created by the process of indexing. Example: an alphabetical (grouping method) index of products (shared attribute).

Indexing. *See also:* **attribute values**, **automatic indexing**, **controlled vocabulary**, **manual indexing**. The process of assigning attribute values to content objects. Indexing can be performed manually or automatically, or by using a combination of the two approaches, and can involve a controlled vocabulary. The process of indexing is also known as cataloging, classifying and tagging.

Information. Anything that can be stored or retrieved.

Information architecture. *See also*: **bottom-up information architecture**, **top-down information architecture**, **user investigation**. The art and science of organizing information to help people effectively fulfill their information needs. Information architecture involves investigation, analysis, design and implementation. Top-down and bottom-up are the two main approaches to developing information architectures; these approaches inform each other and are often developed simultaneously.

Information ecology. *See also*: **information space**. The network of relationships that makes up an information space. The pieces of an information ecology are the content, the tools created to leverage the content, the context of the content and the users who access the content.

Information retrieval. The study of systems for indexing, finding and recalling content.

Information space. The sum of information on an area of interest. Information spaces may be as large as the entire Internet or as small as an individual computer's hard drive.

Knowledge. Information that is analyzed by the user and leads the user to action.

Labeling. *See also*: **controlled vocabulary**, **grouping**, **organizing**. The systematic application of terms used to describe content objects. A controlled vocabulary can be used to develop appropriate labels. Labeling is performed in conjunction with grouping and is part of the process of organizing.

Main menu. *See*: **table of contents**.

Manual indexing. *See also*: **indexing**. The process of humans assigning attribute values to content objects. Manual indexing is based on human evaluation of content objects and perception of appropriate attribute values.

Meta-information. *See*: **attribute values**.

Meta-tags. *See*: **attributes**.

Navigating. *See also*: **browsing**, **searching**. The process of users interacting with a site to effectively fulfill their information needs. Users navigate sites by searching and browsing for content objects.

Navigational elements. *See also*: **contextual browsing**, **hierarchical browsing**, **searching**, **supplemental browsing.** The page-level pieces of a site interface. The global navigational element is consistent across a site; it allows users to browse hierarchically among content areas, and access search

and supplemental browsing tools. Local navigational elements change between content areas; they allow users to browse hierarchically within a content area. Contextual navigational elements allow users to browse contextually. (*See Figure B.*)

Ontology. *See:* **hierarchical browsing**.

Organization scheme. *See:* **grouping method**.

Organizing. *See also:* **grouping**, **labeling**. The process of grouping and labeling content.

Portal. A site for a particular audience, providing a path to all-encompassing content and services through one access point. A portal can be a vortal (vertical portal; narrow area of interest) or a hortal (horizontal portal; broad area of interest).

Preferred term. *See also:* **controlled vocabulary**. A keyword or keyword phrase that is chosen as the most relevant term for describing an aspect of a content object. The choice of term depends on context and audience. Example: a page about the evolution of the horse might be labeled with the preferred term "equine" if the audience is expert, or "horse" if the audience is novice.

Prospective navigation. *See:* **contextual browsing**.

Remote navigation. *See:* **supplemental browsing**.

Searching. *See also:* **attributes**, **browsing**, **navigating**. The process of users entering terms into a system that results in a selection of content objects. The system can search the full text of content objects or attributes of those content objects. Search can be limited to one part of a site. Users who search may have more definite ideas of their information needs than those who browse. Example: a user can search Amazon.com's site by entering "information architecture" in the search box.

See-also navigation. *See:* **contextual browsing**.

Silo. *See:* **content area**.

Site. A container for content objects that users navigate by searching and browsing. An intranet is a type of site; it is limited to a secure information space.

Site hierarchy. *See:* **hierarchical browsing**.

Site map. *See also*: **supplemental browsing**, **table of contents**. A content object that graphically represents the levels of the site hierarchy.

Sub-site. *See*: **content area**.

Supplemental browsing. *See also*: **browsing**, **guide**, **index**, **navigating**, **site map**, **table of contents**. The process of users accessing content objects that offer adjunct views of the site hierarchy. Guides, indexes, site maps and tables of contents are all supplemental browsing tools. Supplemental browsing is also known as remote navigation and supplementary navigation. Example: a user supplementally browses Amazon.com's site by choosing the "Site Guide."

Supplementary navigation. *See*: **supplemental browsing**.

Table of contents. *See also*: **site map**, **supplemental browsing**. A content object that textually represents the levels of the site hierarchy. A table of contents is also known as a main menu for the site.

Tagging. *See*: **indexing**.

Tags. *See*: **attributes**.

Taxonomy. *See*: **hierarchical browsing**.

Thesaurus. *See also*: **controlled vocabulary**. A type of controlled vocabulary that shows the hierarchical (e.g., parent-child), associative (e.g., related) and equivalent (e.g., synonymous) relationships among terms.

Top-down information architecture. The process of developing an information architecture based on an understanding of the context of the content and the user needs. This involves determining the scope of the site and the creation of blueprints and mockups detailing the grouping and labeling of content areas.

User investigation. The process of discovering user information needs. This includes direct interviews and observations of individuals, group surveys and the study of artifacts of use (such as search logs). User investigation is a critical component of information architecture because it ensures that user needs are reflected in the design.

Validation. *See also*: **indexing**. Quality control for the indexing process. This includes checking for empty attribute values and looking at each attribute value for accuracy and consistency.
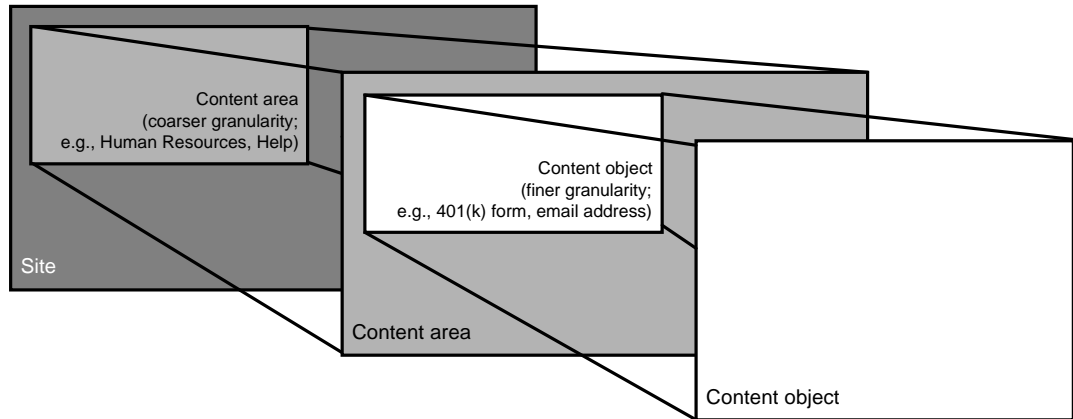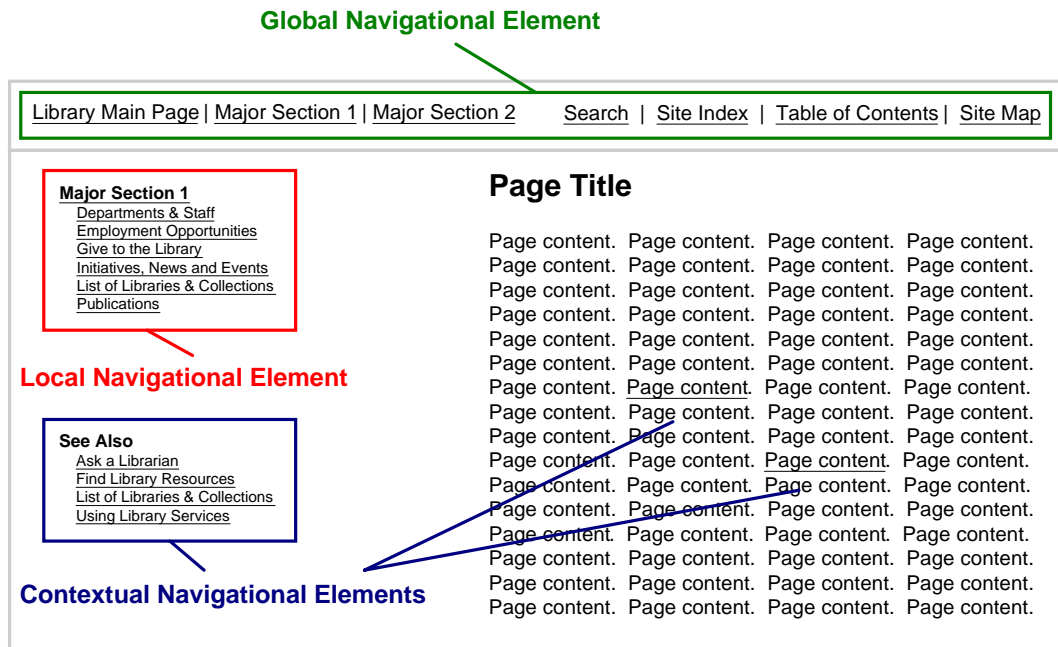
Figure A. Granularity of Content

Figure B. Navigational Elements

THE AUTHOR

Kat Hagedorn (kat@argus-inc.com) joined Argus Associates as an Information Architect in 1998. Her background in biological sciences brings an added dimension to her expertise in designing classification schemes. She earned a B.S. from Cornell University and an M.S. from the University of Michigan School of Information.

Before joining Argus, Kat was a technical librarian for Michigan manufacturer Kelsey-Hayes. She also served in various capacities for the University of Michigan Media Union Library and as a cataloger for the Albert R. Mann Library at Cornell University.

At Argus, her projects have included classification scheme analysis and design for Procter & Gamble and Corning, Inc. and information architecture design for Weather.com and AT&T.

ABOUT THE ARGUS CENTER FOR INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE

Mission

The Argus Center for Information Architecture provides leadership in defining and advancing the evolving discipline of information architecture.

What We Do

The Argus Center serves as a focal point for learning about the theory and practice of information architecture. Towards this goal, we:

- Manage a selective collection of links to the most remarkable content, events, and people in our field.
- Produce original articles, white papers, conferences, and seminars that draw from the experience and expertise of the Argus team.
- Conduct research, independently and through partnerships, focused on improving our collective understanding of information architecture.

Who We Are

The Argus Center for Information Architecture was created by information architects for information architects.

It is sponsored by Argus Associates, a consulting firm that specializes in information architecture design. The entire Argus team contributes to its development.

The Argus Center also draws from the broader community of information architects, through partnerships with individuals, corporations, and universities.

Learn More

To learn more about the publications and events of the Argus Center, please visit our web site at: http://argus-acia.com/