

FAQs are often a tempting way to present information, because writing questions and answers is quicker and easier than thinking through good information architecture (IA). But making the effort to logically structure and design your website will help your audience to find information and achieve the aims of your site.

FAQs – frequently asked questions – are a common feature of many websites.

FAQs started life in Usenet newsgroups. The first FAQ was written by Mark Horton with answers to 18 questions commonly encountered in the newsgroups, such as ‘What does “foobar” mean?’, and ‘What does “unix” stand for?’.

FAQs caught on as a convenient way to answer basic questions asked by new users in a group or mailing list. FAQs stopped these questions clogging up the rest of the discussion.

## Why not FAQ?

At their best, FAQs do just what they say they do: present the answers to frequently asked questions in one convenient place, making it easier for audiences to find the information they need.

But at their worst, FAQs become a grab-bag – or indeed a dumping ground – of all sorts of bits of information. They can become a long list of questions and answers, often in no particular order. This makes it harder for audiences to find what they need.

## Try IA, not FAQ

Websites are about information and communication. The key aim of any website should be to reach your target audience with the information they are looking for.

In a well-designed website with good IA, information is presented under logical headings and pathways, rather than buried in a FAQ.

## What is IA?

IA is about how information is organised. It includes how the information is:

- **grouped** – is the grouping logical and balanced, does everything in a category belong there, do the categories make sense for the topic?
- **prioritised** – can users find key information easily, are the most important messages clear, is the flow of information and headings logical?
- **labelled** – are the headings clear and understandable, are they descriptive enough, do they accurately reflect what is in that category?
- **linked** – what is a logical path for users, what links will help them to find additional information, what will lead them to a dead end?

## What is good IA?

Good IA connects people with the content they are looking for. To achieve this, the IA must organise and label information in a way that makes sense to the audience.

## Our 3 main steps in developing IA are:

- **research** – we look at the content to see what types of information are being presented; we also talk to the client and potential audiences to see what they want from the site
- **trying** – we play with the structure and grouping of information to try to come up with a logical hierarchy and labelling
- **testing** – we try out the planned IA on colleagues, the client, family, friends and passers-by to see whether it is working and whether they can find what they need. (Testing might also be done by a separate user testing company.)

Trying and testing is an iterative process that continues till we have good IA.

