

Chapter 2—Navigation

DO:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Keep users oriented as to where they are, where they have been, where they can go next, and the location of the Home Page• Use a Menu for a primary navigation technique.
DON'T:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have confusing or inconsistent links or icons• Link to the current page ON the current page; use a static graphic instead

Useful and clear navigation in a Web site or online help system is an extremely important aspect of usability, and cannot be emphasized enough. Users access any online content to solve their problem—**they need information of some kind**. Clear navigation allows them to find the information they need and increases their satisfaction with the content.

Answer the Primary Navigation Questions

The goal of good site navigation is to avoid the user becoming disoriented or confused about their location in the site. Therefore, all online navigation schemes should answer these **WHERE** questions:

- **WHERE** am I?
- **WHERE** have I been?
- **WHERE** can I go next?
- **WHERE** is the Home Page?

A few well-known navigation schemes and techniques are discussed here; their primary purpose is to answer the above WHERE questions.

Breadcrumbs

Breadcrumbs are a single line of text to show the page's location in the site hierarchy, usually at the top in a prominent place. The name comes from the Hansel and Gretel fairytale. The children in the story dropped breadcrumbs in the forest as they progressed, giving them a trail as a guide to return home.

There are three primary types of breadcrumbs:

- Location
- Path
- Attribute

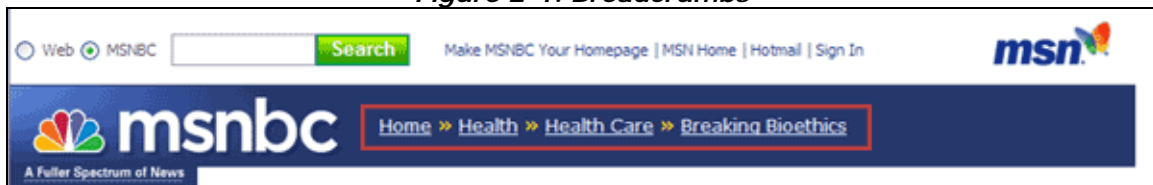
Location Breadcrumbs. Show the present location within the site hierarchy, regardless of the user's path to the page. (*Users could have landed on the page from an outside link, or an alternate path.*)

Path Breadcrumbs. Show the present location in the site, but following the user's path to the page.

Attribute Breadcrumbs. Used primarily within large database-driven sites, where a variety of attributes are used as search criteria to find a specific page topic or product. Attribute breadcrumbs illustrate how products or topics are organized, no matter what the user did.

Figure 2-1 shows a **Location Breadcrumb** example in a large Web site, MSNBC.com:

Figure 2-1. Breadcrumbs



Breadcrumbs are often a secondary navigation technique, with primary menus being the first, but they are gaining an increasingly important place in most users' psyches.

Breadcrumbs are also useful because:

- They give the user one-click access to higher site levels.
- They are easily understood and easy to use.
- They occupy very little space on the page.

Menus

The Menu for any online content is similar to a Table of Contents in printed material. A menu needs to reflect these concepts:

- Descriptive and accurate links
- Good information architecture (IA) or site organization

In **Figure 2-2**, the menu on the MSNBC.com site has been outlined in red. Each subsection of the “Health” section of the site is listed and accurately labeled, as well as right arrows (easily understood by most users) to show sub-menus. Users can see, by using the menu and the breadcrumbs at page top (discussed in previous heading) where they are, where they’ve been, where they can go next, and how to get to the Home Page; in other words, the **Primary Navigation Questions**.

Figure 2-2. Primary Menu



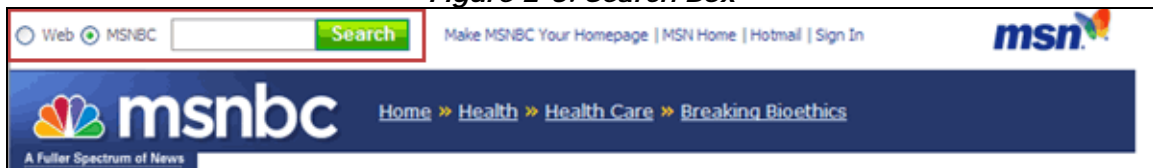
Search Boxes

When users cannot easily find the information that they want through the primary menu, a search box is an appreciated feature. Search boxes should be a **secondary** or **tertiary** navigational method, however, not primary.

The necessary tasks of indexing the site and programming the search engine can also be technically challenging. If the site is accessible to the World Wide Web, the search engine and indexing can be “outsourced” for a nominal monthly fee to specialized services, such as **FreeFind.com**.

Figure 2-3 illustrates the Search Box on MSNBC.com:

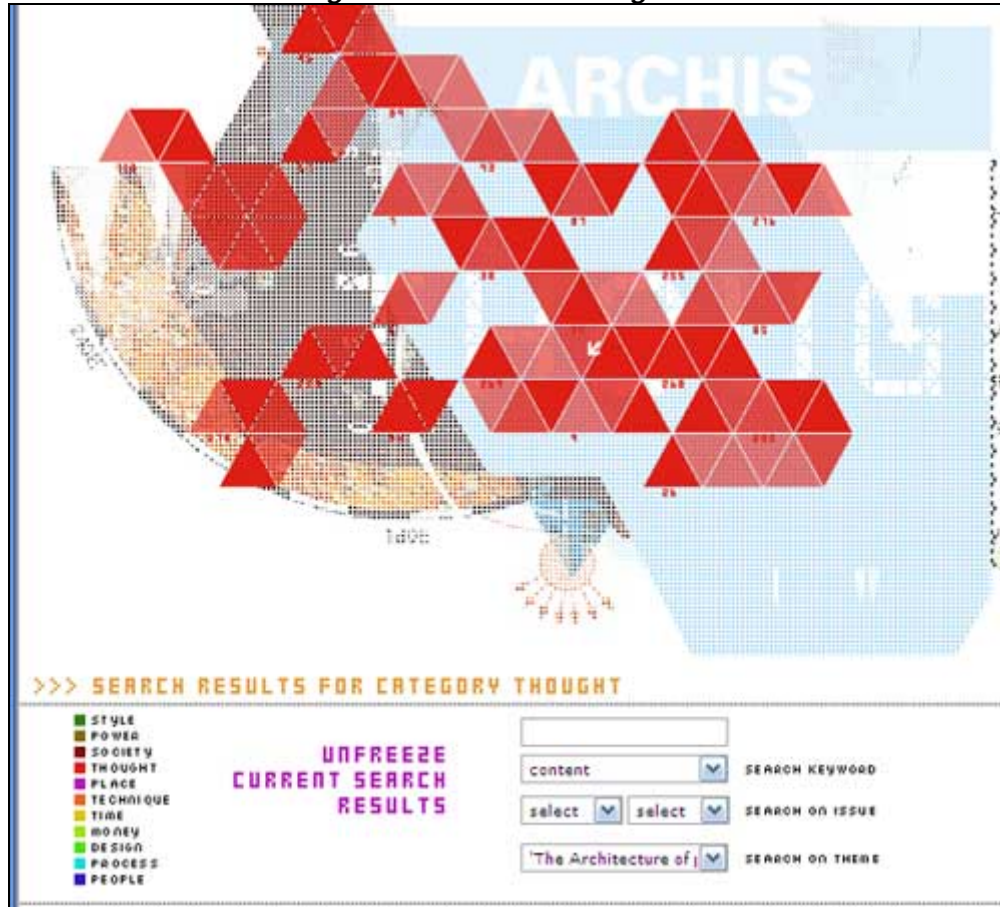
Figure 2-3. Search Box



Navigation IIIs

Some Web sites, in the interests of “artistic” design, do not present clear navigation. This architectural site, pictured in **Figure 2-4**, breaks the rules right away (and not in a good way!) on its Home Page:

Figure 2-4. Unclear Navigation



It is not clear how to get **into** the site; you are forced to mouse over various areas of the Home Page in hopes of finding navigational clues. Icons or navigational objects are not clearly marked or identified. Presumably the primary menu is at bottom left, but this is not obvious. The site fortunately **does** offer a search feature; but as noted above, this should not be a **primary** navigation tool.

The prospective client may be impressed with the artistic abilities of this architectural firm, but may not be sure if they can find their way through the front door.

Primary Navigation Rules

- Be consistent in the use of navigation types; don't use different styles or icons for the same thing.
- When the user is on a page, the link for that page should be disabled or a static graphic. Don't link to the current page **on** the current page.
- Always have a link back to the Home Page.
- Always give the user a way to get to any other part of the site from wherever they are.
- Label icons clearly if they are not immediately recognizable. Don't use esoteric icons with only mouseovers (*alt text*) to identify them.

Navigation and Content Organization are closely related in defining the usability of a site; please see **Chapter 3—Content Organization**, for additional related information.

Chapter 3—Content Organization

DO:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Optimize your content for user scanning by employing headings, sub-headings, and bolded keywords• Use metatags and accurate titles to help users find the content and determine whether it is relevant
DON'T:	Fail to prioritize your information

Content Organization is encompassed by the term **Information Architecture**. Information Architecture, or *IA*, is a specialized study in itself. In the following section, a few general rules are presented to introduce the topic.

The principles of content organization and IA for the Web have evolved from research findings, primarily into how users access information on the Web, as opposed to print media.

How Users Read Web Pages

According to *Dr. Jakob Nielsen's*¹ studies regarding how users read Web pages, people rarely read them word by word; instead, they scan the page, picking out individual words and sentences. Therefore, content organization needs to employ a few techniques to facilitate this user scanning.

The following techniques are helpful to users and explained further below:

- A summary or conclusion
- Clear and concise headings
- One idea per paragraph
- Meaningful sub-headings
- Bulleted and numbered lists
- Keywords
- Link to supporting information
- Consistent link styles
- Label or describe links

A Summary. A summary of the relevant and main points of the page at the top is appreciated by users, and allows them to quickly see if the page has the content they are looking for.

Clear and Concise Headings. Headings should clearly indicate the content of the sections.

¹ "How Users Read on the Web," by Dr. Jakob Nielsen, Principal, Nielsen Norman Group, <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/97110a.html>

One Idea Per Paragraph. Each paragraph should contain one main idea. This is, of course, the definition of a paragraph; however, it bears repeating for Web content in particular.

Meaningful Sub-Headings. Sub-Headings allow the user to quickly scan the text to find what they are looking for.

Bulleted and Numbered Lists. Lists are employed more often in Web content as an efficient and structured way of presenting information.

Keywords. Keywords catch the eye. Bolding, as well as text variations in font or color, will help bring important words or concepts to the user's attention. Don't highlight entire sentences or long phrases since a scanning eye can only pick up two or three words at a time.

Link to Supporting Information. Link to secondary pages if the information is secondary or very detailed and/or not directly relevant to the main topic. Only the **most relevant links** should be part of the text, otherwise they can be distracting. It is preferable to move less relevant but meaningful links outside the main body, such as a "*See Also*" section at the bottom. And if the information can be presented concisely in the body of the document, there is no need to hyperlink at all.

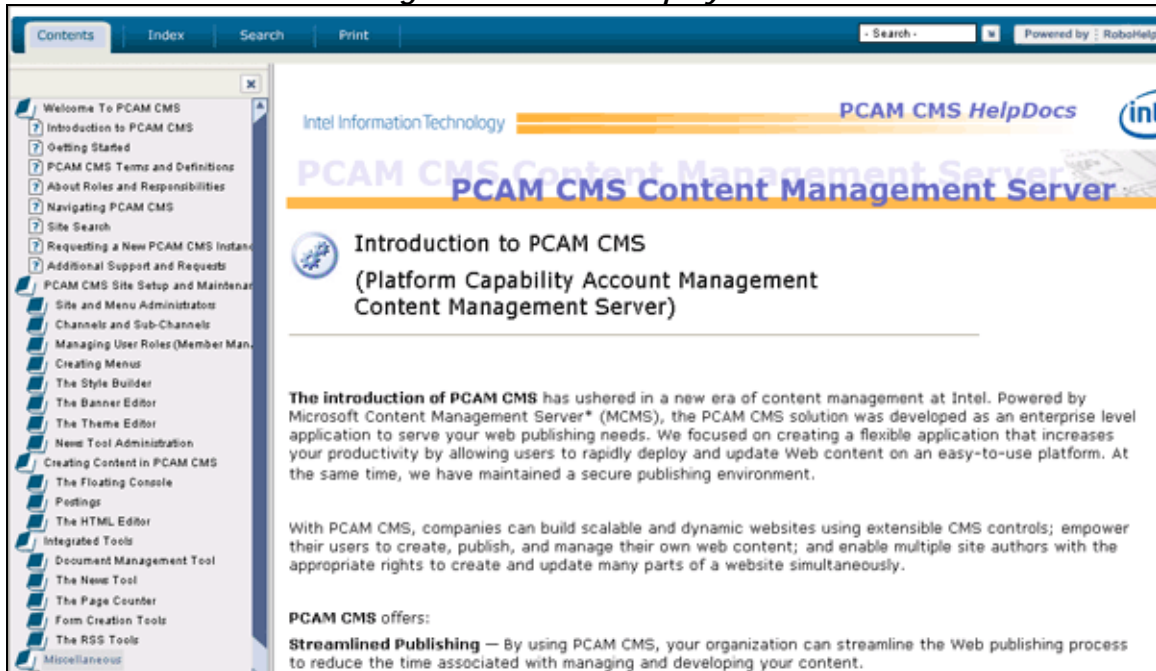
Consistent Link Styles. All links should have a consistent style to set them apart from regular text.

Label or Describe Links. Describe the link information that a link will contain, so the user knows whether they should follow it or not.

Online Help documents are especially important to organize accurately and efficiently, because users are there specifically to answer a question about a specific software function or use, and want to be able to find it quickly.

Figure 3-1 is an example of a well-organized online help system. The navigation menu on the left highlights the topics and links to the appropriate page. It utilizes headings, sub-headings, and bulleted and numbered lists.

Figure 3-1 Online Help System



Optimize Content for Search Engines

- More than half of Web users rely on search engines and search functions to navigate pages.
- Include in each page all possible query terms that can be used to search for the topic of the page.

Metatags

Metatags are special HTML tags, *not visible to the user while on the page*, which are added to the <HEAD> tag section of a Web page. There are a great number of metatags; the most useful for search engine optimization are the **Keyword** and **Description** metatags.

Although these tags are not visible to the user, they will appear in a search engine listing, so the user can decide whether the page is relevant to their needs prior to visiting the page.

Keyword Metatags

List the most important terms in a **Keyword Metatag** together with all common synonyms, even if they don't appear in the body text.

The entire keyword content is surrounded in quotes, and each keyword is separated by commas. The syntax for metatags is illustrated in **Figure 3-2**:

Figure 3-2 Metatag Syntax

```
<HEAD>
<meta NAME="keywords" CONTENT="keyword, keyword" />
<meta NAME="description" CONTENT="description of page goes here" />
</HEAD>
```

Description Metatags

A short description of the page content is usually included in a **Description Metatag**. This summary is shown below the page title by some search engines.

Descriptions should tell users what the page is about and allow them to judge whether it is of relevance to their current problem or need. Descriptions must be 150 characters or less.

Titles

Titles are also technically a metatag, in that they appear in the <HEAD> section of the Web page. However, they ARE visible to the user of the page, because Titles appear in the browser at the top of each page. They are an important guide to the user as to the content of the page.

- Each page should always have a <TITLE> tag.
- Titles should consist of a single line, typically no more than 60 characters. Make sure that the first 40 characters of the title describe the topic of the page.
- Make the first word of the title the most important descriptor of the page; users often scan down long lists of titles to choose pages.
- The title should make sense when viewed completely out of context, as part of a long list of other page titles.
- Pages about the same topic can start their titles with the same words but should end with words that explain the difference between them.

Figure 3-3 illustrates the Title syntax:

Figure 3-3 Title Syntax

```
<HEAD>
<meta NAME="title" CONTENT="Title text here" />
</HEAD>
```

Content Organization IIIs

Some Web sites seem to have made no attempt at prioritizing their content, and so the user doesn't have an indication of which links are the most important, and which is likely to give them the information they want or need.

Figure 3-4 is an example of non-prioritization:

Figure 3-4 No Content Organization Priorities

The screenshot shows the homepage of HRODC Ltd. The page is cluttered with text and links. At the top, there is a navigation bar with language options (English, Spanish, Portuguese, etc.) and a search bar. Below this, the company name 'HRODC Ltd.' is prominently displayed. The main content area is divided into several columns. The left column contains a vertical list of links: Home, Site Search, Training Courses, Course Schedule, Brochure Download, Postgraduate Diploma, HRODC SERVICES, Public Information, BROCHURE REQUEST, CONTACT REQUEST, Popular Seminars, Popular Training Courses, Recruitment Selection, Social Care Consultancy, HR Outsourcing Facilitator, and Terms & Conditions. The middle column contains a large block of text describing the company's services, including 'Human Resource & Organisational Development Consultancy (HRODC) Ltd. - An International Human Resource (HR) Training Provider'. The right column contains a list of seminars and courses, such as 'Antigua, Argentina, Armenia, Aruba, Ascension Island, Australia, Austria, International training seminars or public training courses include Dynamics Of Organisational Change Management Seminar, Personnel and Occupational Testing Seminar or Course, Personnel and Occupational Test Questionnaire Design and Results Analysis Seminar or Course, Client Of Customer Care Seminar, Trainer Training, Training for Trainers Seminar, Motivating Workers, Intrinsic and Extrinsic Rewards Seminar, Employee Resourcing, Recruitment and Selection Seminar, Diversity Management, A Value Added Inclusion Seminar, Research Project Design, Conduct & Report Seminar, Anti-Dumping and Anti-Subsidy Claims, Measures and Stance Seminar, Internal Audit Seminar, Human Resource Management - A Practitioner's Approach Seminar, Financial Risk Management Seminar, Judge Seminar 1: Dealing with economic and financial crimes Seminar, Judge Seminar 2: The UK Legal System - Court Organisation, Management & Sentencing Seminar, Fundamentals of The Automotive Industry Seminar, Advanced Project Management Seminar, Productivity Improvement Seminar, Comprehensive Real Estate Management Seminar, Real Estate Management - An Introduction Seminar, Conveyancing and Property Valuation Training Seminar, Human Resource Management: A Comprehensive View Seminar, Risk & Security Management Training Seminar, Fundamentals of Aviation Cargo Seminar, etc.

Notice in the above example that almost the entire text of the Home Page is composed of links, with no indication of their place in the hierarchy of information.