

## Navigation Stress Test

by [Keit Instone](#)

The idea behind my navigation stress test is to ask some really hard questions about your web site navigation to see if it can "pass". It is called a "stress test" because most pages will not pass. The failures may be serious, or they may not matter at all, but at least by performing the test you will have discussed the navigation issues and made conscious design decisions.

The questions are detailed ways to ask about 3 basic concerns users often have upon arriving at a page:

- Where am I?
- What's here?
- Where can I go?

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### Process

- "Randomly" pick a **low-level** page, not a home page, from your site
- Print the page out in **black and white**, without the URL listed in the header/footer
- Pretend that you are **entering this site for the first time at this page** and try to answer to questions below
- **Mark-up** the piece of paper with what you think the answers are

Have other members of your team, and people who know nothing about your site, do the stress test too. Then compare notes. Where did you agree? Where did no one agree?

For the "problem" areas, you can several choices for action to take. You may want to re-design some elements of your navigation based on what you discover with the stress test. Or, you may use it to help focus a round of usability testing (to see if it actually matters for your users). Or, you may very well know what you are doing and say "interesting to know about them, but they do not apply in our context".

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### Stress Test Questions

Navigation Question	Mark Up on the Paper
What is this page about?	Draw a rectangle around the title of the page or write it on the paper yourself
What site is this?	Circle the site name, or write it on the paper yourself
What are the major sections of this site?	Label with X

What major section is this page in?	Draw a triangle around the X
What is "up" 1 level from here?	Label with U
How do I get to the home page of this site?	Label with H
How do I get to the top of this section of the site?	Label with T
What does each group of links represent?	<p>Circle the major groups of links and label.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• D: More details, sub-pages of this one</li> <li>• N: Nearby pages, within same section as this page</li> <li>• S: Pages on same site, but not as near</li> <li>• O: Off-site pages</li> </ul>
How might you get to this page from the site home page?	Write the set of selections as: Choice 1 > Choice 2 > .... Connect the visual elements on the page that tell you this.

Print the [worksheet](#) and make photocopies to stress test the navigation for your own sites.

## Examples

I have used **The Hockey Example** to introduce the Navigation Stress Test for the past few years because the design makes it hard to answer many of the questions.

- [Gif of The Hockey Example](#) (69K)
- [Gif \(static\)](#) version of one possible mark-up (93K)
- [PowerPoint \(animated\)](#) version of a mark-up (118K)
- This particular page is no longer online, but you can explore a [similar page](#) to find the "correct answers". (But the correct answers are not really important, because the goal is often to make the navigation so obvious that you do not need the live version to "grade" it.)

Common discussion questions for this example:

- Is this the BGSU, BGSU Athletics or BGSU hockey site? One way to get at this is to ask what people expect to get if they click on the "Tickets" button on the left. If you think this is the BGSU hockey site, then you would expect BGSU hockey tickets, right?
- How is this site organized - what are the major sections? (In this case, the main organization scheme is by sport - so you are in the hockey section.)

- What is the difference between the "Schedules" link at the top (if you can spot it) and the "Schedules" button on the left? (The one at the top is "hockey schedules" while the one on the left is "BGSU Athletics schedules".)
- Should the large Falcon head in the upper left be clickable? If so, where should it lead to? (Most people say "Yes, site home page".)

I will put more examples up here and there.

## History

- The idea of a navigation stress test was introduced in my 1997 Web Review article that evaluated Adobe.com.
- First public presentation was at the "User-Centered Design" panel at Seybold Seminars, New York, 1998. Jeffrey Veen described that panel as [common sense](#).
- The test was incorporated into various Argus Associates reports and presentations from 1999-2001.
- [The Art & Science of Web Design](#) uses the stress test 3 basic questions to describe "The Three-Panel Layout" (starting on page 47).
- I further refined the test for various "Web Navigation Discussion" presentations in the spring/summer of 2001.
- Mentioned in Chapter 7/Navigation, pages 111-112, of the [2nd edition of Information Architecture for the World Wide Web](#).
- [Worksheet translated into Spanish](#) (PDF) by Christian F. Leal Reyes, December 2004.

## Similar Work

These are similar navigation reviews that were developed separately (as far as I can tell).

- [Don't Make Me Think](#) includes a "trunk test" (starting on page 87).
- James Lewin's [Rapid Web Development](#) in IBM developerWorks, September, 2001, has a section on printing out pages and reviewing them for common interface problems.

## Related Research

Michael L. Bernard, [Software Usability Research Laboratory](#), Wichita State University, has done research on where users expect to see certain elements of the page (like home, internal and external links).

- [Examining User Expectations of the Location of Web Objects](#), internetworking, December, 2000.
- [Developing Schemas for the Location of Common Web Objects](#), Usability News, Winter/2001.

## References

- [Cognitive Walkthrough for the Web](#) mentions the navigation stress test as a possible addition to the CWW algorithm.

*fonte:* [user-experience.org](http://user-experience.org) - December 30, 2004