

# Tree testing

A test in which people get search tasks and go through a site's structure as text only, level by level, to choose where they expect to find each thing.

In Spanish

*Prueba de árbol*

Origin

Spencer (2003); named by O'Brien (2009)

Output

Where people look for each thing and which sections or names confuse them



## What it's for

Helps you know whether the organization and section names work before designing the screens, without the visual look getting in the way.

## Key elements

### Only the tree

It tests the hierarchy of sections and their names, without search, cross-links or visual design.

### Find-it tasks

Each task asks people to locate something specific, as someone would for real.

### Success, speed and a direct path

What matters is whether they reach the right place, how much they hesitate, and whether they go straight there or wander.

## How it's done

1



**Write the tree** of sections and the search tasks.

2



**People go down level by level** and choose where they would look for each thing.

3



**Look at the paths** that fail and change the names or the order.

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## Applications in design

### ✓ When to use it

After a card sort, or before redesigning a site's menu, to check whether its structure makes sense.

### ✗ Avoid

Writing tasks with the same words as the menu; people would just look for the match.

### 👁 Don't fall for it

A structure that works as text isn't guaranteed to work on screen: test it later with the design.

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## Connections

Related to

■ Information architecture

■ Card sorting

■ Usability testing

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## Authors and works

|      |                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|------|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2003 | <b>Donna Spencer</b> | In the professional magazine Boxes and Arrows she described a paper version, with cards for each menu level, to test a classification apart from the interface.                                         |
| 2009 | <b>Dave O'Brien</b>  | In the same magazine he named it "tree testing" and proposed measuring success, speed and whether people get there without detours. These are sources from professional practice, not academic studies. |

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## Sources

### Original sources

- Spencer, D. (2003). Card-based classification evaluation. Boxes and Arrows. [View source \(https://boxesandarrows.com/card-based-classification-evaluation/\)](https://boxesandarrows.com/card-based-classification-evaluation/)
- O'Brien, D. (2009). Tree testing. Boxes and Arrows. [View source \(https://boxesandarrows.com/tree-testing/\)](https://boxesandarrows.com/tree-testing/)

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