Method

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.

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.

Connections

Used by

- Information architecture

Related to

- Card sorting
- Usability testing

Authors and works

2003	**Donna Spencer**	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	**Dave O'Brien**	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.

Sources

Original sources

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

Last reviewed: October 25, 2026

Atlas público de diseño, de Adriana Ojeda. Texto e ilustraciones bajo licencia CC BY 4.0.