Remember the comic books that condensed massive literary classics down to a few illustrated pages? The folks that created them got "Moby Dick" down to 12 pages; they produced a version of "Great Expectations" that could be read in 15 minutes. I’ve tried to do the same trick for some of the tools we use for information architecture.

It’s important to note that the overviews I’ve created don’t replace the fine work found in the documents I’ve used as my sources. But it’s my hope that the overviews serve as entertaining reminders of the development options we have at our disposal.

These pages can also serve as tools in themselves, helping explain to the people we work with what we’re doing and why. This may be helpful for people working as outside consultants, but it’s absolutely essential for those doing IA work from within organizations.
Sitepath Diagramming

Purpose
Helps visualize what sorts of activities a product's users will try to accomplish and how those different activities are related to one another.

1. Represent each type of user for the product.
2. Draw a user's entrance, their events within the system, and their exit.
3. Repeat for each user type.

Topic Mapping

Purpose
A brainstorming tool used to generate a structure for a product's information.

1. Write the product's key topic.
2. Generate items associated with the key topic.
3. Generate items associated with the items you just added. Repeat until all items are exhausted.

SOURCE: "Information Architecture: Blueprints for the Web" by Christina Wodtke.
Free Listing

**Purpose**
To understand the scope and contents of a domain.

**Collecting**
In this example, 20 people are asked to name kinds of videos. (The more agreement within a particular domain, the fewer respondents are needed.)

**Crunching**
Charting the average number of times each item was listed by the respondents helps understand the core, middle, and peripheral items within the domain.

**Comparing**
A co-occurrence matrix charts how many times pairs of items both appeared on respondents lists. This data can be used for multidimensional scaling.

Hmm, the data says there's something about comedy that is more like drama than sports ...

**Co-occurrence matrix**

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<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Multidimensional scaling**

**OBJECTIVE data**
The distances between items are derived from the co-occurrence matrix data.

**SUBJECTIVE analysis**
Axes location and labels are used to try to explain the distances between items.

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Card Sorting

**Purpose**
To understand how users group information within a particular domain. This can help create or revise a product’s hierarchical organization.

**Method**
Test participants organize cards representing specific types of information.

**Open sort**
When launching a new product or if a complete reorganization of an existing product is possible, test participants can label their own categories for the sorted information.

**To avoid test participants giving a new category for every item***:
Suggest a range for the final number of categories (four to eight, for example).

**OR**
Allow successive card sorts where test participants can collapse categories into progressively more encompassing categories.

*From Rashmi Sinha’s presentation at the AIfIA Leadership Seminar, March 21, 2003.

**Closed sort**
When reorganizing or making improvements to an existing information architecture, test participants are asked to organize cards under existing categories.

**Variations***:
1. You should consider NOT allowing a miscellaneous category.
2. You should consider allowing participants to put the same item under more than one category.

**Resolving the results**
From "Information Architecture: Blueprints for the Web" by Christina Wodtke:
1. **Look for the dominant organization scheme among all results.** Typically, one will emerge.
2. **Adjust scheme to make kinds of categories consistent.** For example, Breakfast - Appetizers - Italian - Main Course - Side Dishes - Tofu - Drinks - Dessert can be condensed into Appetizer - Main Course - Dessert ... without losing the spirit of the test results.
3. **Set aside the odd categories that don’t match.** Look for odd categories created by more than one person. Sometimes they suggest criteria for how people are looking for information and can be addressed with solutions outside of the overall organizing scheme.
Personas

Purpose
By creating archetypes that represent the users of a product, products can be more user-centric.

Using personas
Personas have value in every phase of product development:

1. Defining the problem
   Personas focus on specific user characteristics, this creates a hierarchy, and hierarchy forces tough (but essential) decisions.

2. Developing the solution
   Solution can be tested against personas.

3. Building the solution and
4. Launching the product
   Personas maintain cross-departmental cohesion.

Developing personas

According to Cooper
The folks at consulting firm Cooper develop personas by interviewing the current users and/or potential users of the product. They then distill characteristics learned in the interviews to represent distinct sets of user behavior patterns and goals.

According to Razorfish
Much to the chagrin of Alan Cooper, some folks want to use a more quantitative approach to developing personas. (Cooper argues that demographics shed light on the sales process, not the development process.) In the redesign of the Ford Motor Co. website, consulting firm Razorfish used statistical data about Ford customers to guide who they would interview and how the distilled characteristics would be organized.

Failing either of those approaches, Plan C
When I led a development of personas as Director of Site Development at washingtonpost.com, I didn't have the buy-in I needed in order to talk to our users. The use of personas and IA tools in general were treated like voodoo by some key mid- and senior-level managers. To stay under the corporate radar, I used an alternative approach to developing personas for a project to overhaul our Customer Care services.

If the Web is about a single user and the information they choose to experience, then the user goal is the Web's dominant, core component. So we used user goals to create our personas:

Step 1: Brainstorming user goals
Picture an upside-down triangle (basically, an arrow pointing down). User goals that are too broad occur at the widest area of the triangle and are difficult to address in any real way with product development. I led a brainstorm by a cross-departmental team to generate user goals that could be satisfied by ideal washingtonpost.com Customer Care services.

1 "The Inmates are Running the Asylum" by Alan Cooper, chapters 9 and 10.
Goals that were too broad were distilled to be as specific as possible:

- "I want to be informed."
  - ... became "I want to know how to place an ad."
  - ... which we realized really meant "I want to place an ad."
  - ... which was really a task to satisfy the true user goal: "I want to sell my car."

Step 2: Cluster user goals
We played around with different combinations of user goals until archetypes emerged:

- "I want to sell my car."
  - "I want to know how to watch the video about Nagasaki."
  - "I want to submit a movie review and I don't understand your instructions."
  - People who want to learn or need to learn in order to get what they want.

- "I want to know that the correction I sent in was received."
  - "I got a 'We are unable to locate the page you requested' message and now I want to know what to do."
  - People who want the thing they're talking about right away and they can't do it themselves.

- "I want to give Michael Wilbon a story idea."
  - "I want a job at washingtonpost.com."
  - "I want to tell someone at wp.com that I like potato salad."
  - People who want more than an answer or piece of content, they want something deeper.

Step 3: Create personas

- **A** Chester Gunn
  - 19 yr. old college student. Smart, but lazy. He only puts effort into things that interest him.

- **B** David Palmiotti
  - 43 yr. old father of one. Remarried. Impatient and used to being taken care of.

- **C** Taiye Uwawah
  - 57 yr. old widow and retired librarian.

Primary personas
There still seems to be some variation in the definition of the primary persona:

**Alan Cooper:** "To be primary, a persona is someone who must be satisfied, but who cannot be satisfied with an interface designed for any other persona." Cooper used a primary persona in his book that represented a tiny percentage of his client's business, but who was the perfect key to his client's product puzzle.

**Christina Wodtke:** "Your primary persona needs to be a common user type who is both important to the business success of the product and needy from a design point of view — in other words, a beginner user or a technologically challenged one."

**My experience:** The idea of a single primary persona completely freaked out some of the washingtonpost.com managers I dealt with. "But we want to be great for aaaaaaaaall of our users!!!" they objected. I was never able to get them to support personas, or put resources toward the satisfaction of specific user types if it was at the expense of others. As a result, all of our users ended up less satisfied.

1 "The Inmates are Running the Asylum" by Alan Cooper, pg. 137.