



**Athabasca  
University**

**User Experience & Social Media  
Guiding Principles**

Draft 4, March 14, 2019



## Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this document is to define the principles which guide the design, development, and maintenance of Athabasca University's (AU) user experience (UX) including social media interactions.

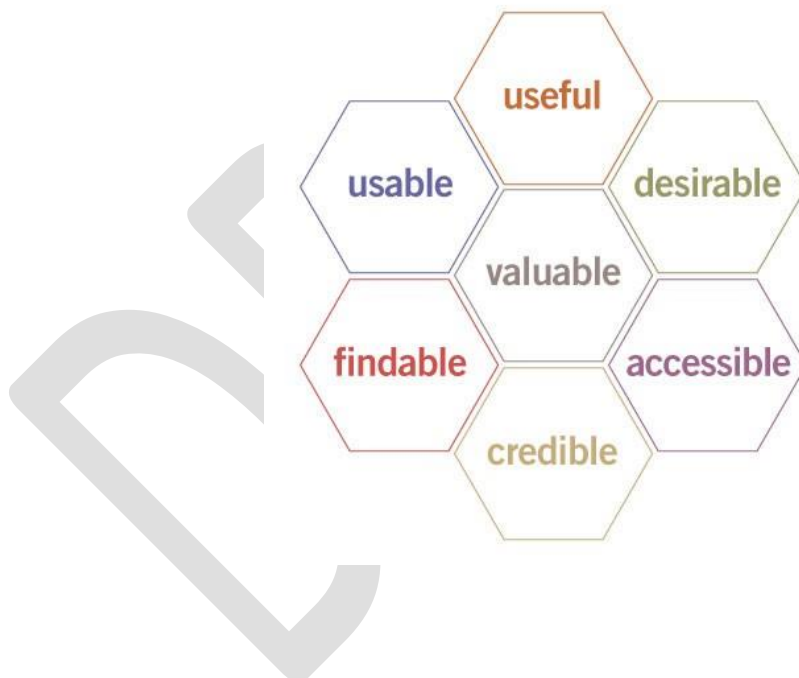
The Nielsen Norman Group summarizes user experience as follows:

*"User experience" encompasses all aspects of the end user's interaction with the company, its services, and products<sup>1</sup>.*

As the summary above implies, User Experience is more than usability, which is a quality measure of a user interface (UI). UX includes a person's, perceptions, emotional and physical response, and behaviour which occur during and after an interaction with AU.

## General Principles

On his website, Semantic Studios Peter Morville explains how the broadening of his interests from information architecture and findability to user experience motivated him to develop the diagram below to explain the qualities of user experience<sup>2</sup>.



---

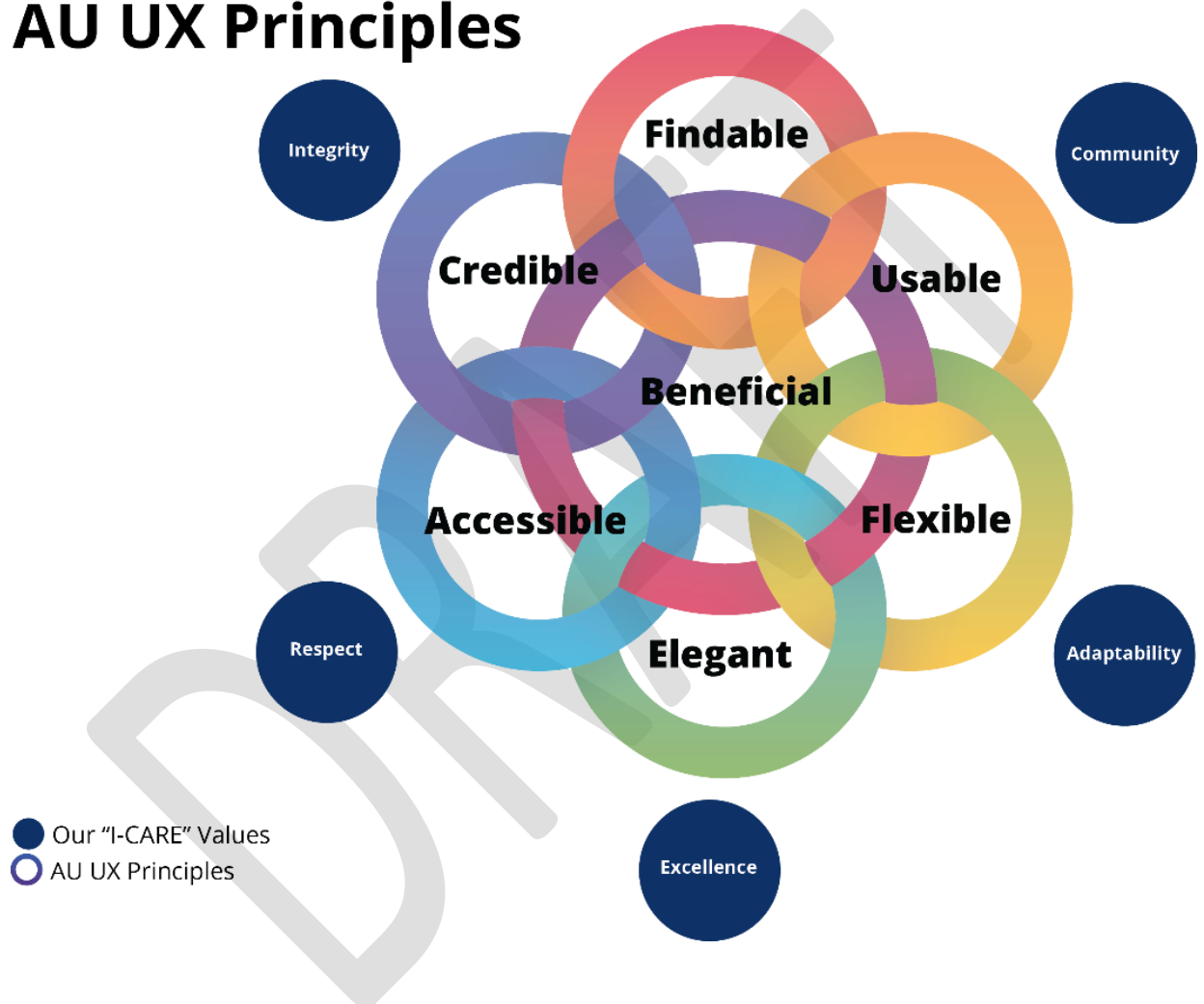
<sup>1</sup> The Definition of User Experience (UX). (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/definition-user-experience/>

<sup>2</sup> Morville, P. (2016, October 11). User Experience Design. Retrieved February 5, 2019, from [https://semanticstudios.com/user\\_experience\\_design/](https://semanticstudios.com/user_experience_design/)



Morville’s user experience honeycomb aligns with the approach taken by University Relations to UX and forms the basis for AU’s UX principles shown in the diagram below. AU’s UX Principles align with and support our “I-CARE” values.

## AU UX Principles



### Beneficial

The experience we create must benefit AU and the end user. The AU UX must reduce barriers to information and services, encourage engagement, support success and increase satisfaction with AU interactions. The AU UX must provide value.

### Findable

The user must be able to navigate our online systems easily to find what they need. Our content must also be discoverable through external and internal search engines.



### Useable

The AU UX must be intuitive, simple, easy to use and fast, but must also move beyond functionality to support the emotional needs of users.

### Flexible

The AU UX must meet the changing needs of our community and reflect its cultural diversity. Staff involved in UX design and development must understand their user's needs, motivators, and behaviours as they utilize our systems and services. This understanding helps inform the creation and deployment of empathetic, innovative, and flexible solutions.

### Elegant

AU UX solutions are simple, practical, and aesthetically pleasing. We know in the first few seconds of a user's interaction with our systems and services they are forming perceptions about AU, therefore, we need to make a positive impression. AU UX appreciates and utilizes the power of images, graphics, typography and other elements of visual design to build emotional connections with our users.

### Accessible

We do not design for ourselves or a segment of our users. We believe all users should be able to access and successfully use the AU UX. With 12% of our undergraduate student body having some form of disability this not only ethical but essential.

### Creditable

The UA UX builds trust in the AU brand through quality. Quality in the design itself and in the accuracy, currency, validity, and searchability of its content.



## Tactics

Below are some of the tactics used in the design and development of AU's user experience. The list is not exhaustive, nor is it fixed. The tactics used to develop the AU UX are intended to evolve as technologies, users, and best practices change.

### Beneficial

#### **Understand Underlying Goals**

Before starting to design a UX understand what the goal is for the user and AU.

#### **Make Sure the User is Successful**

Guide the user when needed but get out of their way by removing distractions so they can complete their task efficiently.

#### **Empathy**

Understand a user's point of view and identify and relate with their needs. Provide value to users by making their experience fulfilling and productive.

### Findable

#### **Discoverability**

Start of the design and development process by considering how a user will find the user interface and/or the content they require build that into your plans.

#### **Information Scent Trails**

Users are on a mission to find something or complete a task. They hunt down content and determine the next step by looking for cues. Set the correct expectations at each stage by using clear, understandable and relevant language.

### Useable

#### **Obvious and Self-evident**

A person's failure to understand how to interact with a user interface is not their problem; it is a failure of the design, it is our failure. Functionality should be apparent, simple, and based on metaphors familiar to the end user.

#### **Familiarity**

A design should not deviate too far from universal modern web design and user experience practices; this ensures the user can draw on their previous experience with common design elements when interacting with an interface – particularly for their first interaction. The use of clear and consistent design elements applied universally facilitates effective user interactions.

#### **Feedback and Responsiveness**

When users interact with a form, search field or other UI element provide prompt feedback to confirm



the user is on the right path and that the system has received their input. Use clear and concise messages to keep the user informed and what the results of that action are.

## Flexible

### **Forgiving**

When a user fails a task for technical reasons or through misinterpretation of the user interface, reduce the negative impact by retaining the data entered up to that point.

### **Make Actions Reversible**

If the user makes a mistake or ends up with an unintended result, give them a way to fix the problem via an Undo or Step Back control.

### **Think from the User's Perspective**

Learn about the user, who they are, why they are here, what experiences they bring and what it would feel like to be them. Empathize with them and know if they are struggling with our systems, it's our failure, not theirs.

## Elegant

### **Graphics and Visuals**

Use icons, videos, and photography, and other design elements to give a sense of elegance and richness while maintaining a clean user interface. These elements should not take away from the end goal of a user attaining the information they need, but instead enhance its communicate value. Consider adding visual cues that can help guide them to the information they are seeking.

### **Animation**

The use of subtle animation brings attention to critical buttons or calls to actions without being a distraction.

### **Less is More**

Everything in a UI should have a functional purpose while being aesthetically pleasing. Minimize elements of the design to what is necessary; this reduces cognitive overload.

### **Keep What Isn't Currently Needed Hidden Until it is Required by using Accordions**

Utilization of UI elements such as accordions allows you to minimize the overall depth and size of menus and at the same time reduce the cognitive overload of content on a screen or page. You need to ensure you have clearly labeled accordion menus as to what content is inside.

### **Metaphors**

Users grasp a function more quickly when it uses metaphors for familiar experiences—real or digital.

## Accessible

### **Think "Accessibility First"**

Structuring of content is key to bringing the web to all users regardless of disabilities.



## **WCAG 2.0 Level AA**

Build on a solid foundation that uses Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) to ensure users can access all content. Everything on AU's website must be usable by keyboard, screen reader, touchscreen and mouse.

### **Clarity**

Ensure all text is legible at every screen size.

### **Consistency**

Implement common standards and paradigms by using standard AU elements, icons, and standard text styles. Incorporate features and behaviors in ways people expect.

### **Creditable**

#### **Make it easy to verify the accuracy of the information on your site<sup>3</sup>**

Provide citations, references, and sources for the information you present.

#### **Avoid errors of all types, no matter how small they seem<sup>3</sup>**

Typographical errors, script errors, broken links, and other errors hurt credibility.

#### **Make it easy to contact AU<sup>3</sup>**

Make your contact information clear and easy to find.

#### **Highlight the expertise in your organization and in the content and services you provide<sup>3</sup>**

Provide contact information and biographies where appropriate.

### **Clarity**

Ensure content is easy to read, jargon is avoided or explained.

---

<sup>3</sup> Stanford Guidelines for Web Credibility. (2002, June). Retrieved February 8, 2019, from <http://credibility.stanford.edu/guidelines/index.html>



## Related Documents and Resources

The following are a collection of resources which we encourage you to consult and become familiar with.

### Imagine: Transforming Lives, Transforming Communities

(<http://imagine.athabascau.ca/>)

It is critical to start with an understanding of Athabasca University's strategic plan and the AU story. The online resource contains the AU story, Our pledge to students, Our "I-CARE" values, Our Commitments, Our Strategic Theme, Our Foundations, Our impact, and Institutional priority outcomes.

### RISE: Athabasca University's Digital Transformation, Our 5 Year IT Strategy

(<https://www.athabascau.ca/vpit-cio/rise.php>)

RISE is one of AU's strategic foundational plans that supports the greater institutional strategy – Imagine. RISE serves as the blueprint for Athabasca University's digital transformation and UX is an integral component of the strategy.

### Brand & Editorial Guidelines

(<http://intra.athabascau.ca/depts/university-relations/documents/guidelines/Brand & Editorial Guidelines.pdf>)

The brand and editorial guidelines contain an overview of the AU brand, vision, mission, position values, and personality. Also included are directions for the use of the logo, typography, colour, and photography. The editorial section also contains guidelines for writing copy including tone and voice, approach and style.

### Digital Properties Standards

(<http://www-yp.athabascau.ca/AU-website-standards/>)

The digital properties standards page is a collection of reusable patterns which define behavior for controls and other UI elements. Components include windows, dialogs, panels, menus, buttons, typography, colours and other items. Digital properties standards is an organic document which we will add to as technology and practices change.