Five Hat Racks

There are five ways to organize information: category, time, location, alphabet, and continuum.[1]

The organization of information is one of the most powerful factors influencing the way people think about and interact with a design. The five hat racks principle asserts that there are a limited number of organizational strategies, regardless of the specific application: category, time, location, alphabet, and continuum.[2]

Category refers to organization by similarity or relatedness. Examples include areas of study in a college catalog, and types of retail merchandise on a Web site. Organize information by category when clusters of similarity exist within the information, or when people will naturally seek out information by category (e.g., a person desiring to purchase a stereo may seek a category for electronic appliances).

Time refers to organization by chronological sequence. Examples include historical timelines and *TV Guide* schedules. Organize information by time when presenting and comparing events over fixed durations, or when a time-based sequence is involved (e.g., a step-by-step procedure).

Location refers to organization by geographical or spatial reference. Examples include emergency exit maps and travel guides. Organize information by location when orientation and wayfinding are important or when information is meaningfully related to the geography of a place (e.g., an historic site).

Alphabet refers to organization by alphabetical sequence. Examples include dictionaries and encyclopedias. Organize information alphabetically, when information is referential, when efficient nonlinear access to specific items is required, or when no other organizing strategy is appropriate.

Continuum refers to organization by magnitude (e.g., highest to lowest, best to worst). Examples include baseball batting averages and Internet search engine results. Organize information by continuum when comparing things across a common measure.
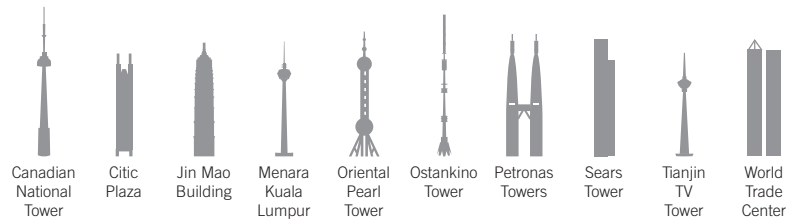
See also Advance Organizer, Consistency, and Framing.

[1] The term *hat racks* is built on an analogy— *hats* as information and *racks* as the ways to organize information. Also known as *five ways of organizing information*.
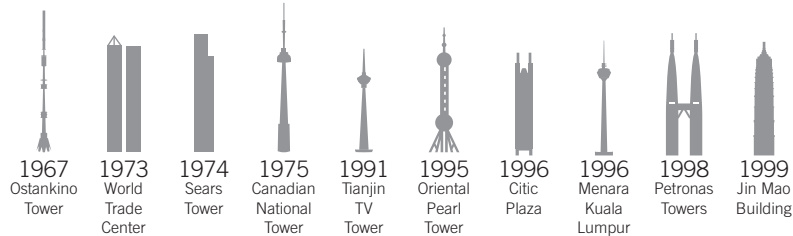
[2] The seminal work on the five hat racks is *Information Anxiety* by Richard Saul Wurman, Bantam Books, 1990. Note that Wurman changed the hat rack title of *continuum* to *hierarchy* in a later edition of the book, which permits the acronym LATCH. The original title *continuum* is presented here, as the authors believe it to be a more accurate description of the category.

The five hat racks are applied here to the tallest structures in the world. Although the same information is presented in each case, the different organizations dramatically influence which aspects of the information are emphasized.
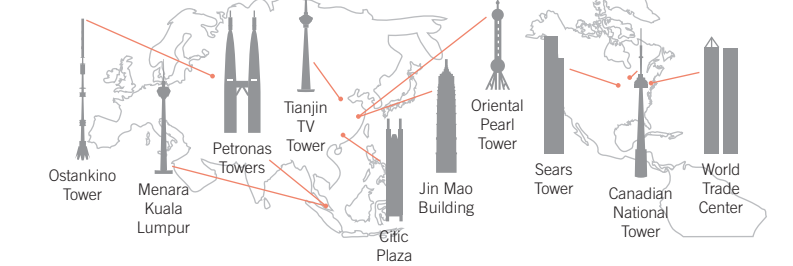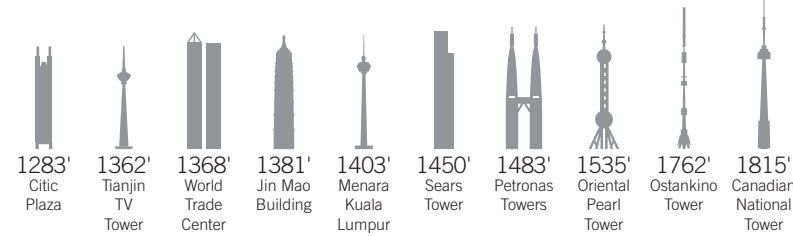
Alphabetical

Canadian National Tower | Citic Plaza | Jin Mao Building | Menara Kuala Lumpur | Oriental Pearl Tower | Ostankino Tower | Petronas Towers | Sears Tower | Tianjin TV Tower | World Trade Center

Time

1967 Ostankino Tower | 1973 World Trade Center | 1974 Sears Tower | 1975 Canadian National Tower | 1991 Tianjin TV Tower | 1995 Oriental Pearl Tower | 1996 Citic Plaza | 1996 Menara Kuala Lumpur | 1998 Petronas Towers | 1999 Jin Mao Building

Location

Ostankino Tower | Menara Kuala Lumpur | Petronas Towers | Tianjin TV Tower | Citic Plaza | Jin Mao Building | Oriental Pearl Tower | Sears Tower | Canadian National Tower | World Trade Center

Continuum

1283' Citic Plaza | 1362' Tianjin TV Tower | 1368' World Trade Center | 1381' Jin Mao Building | 1403' Menara Kuala Lumpur | 1450' Sears Tower | 1483' Petronas Towers | 1535' Oriental Pearl Tower | 1762' Ostankino Tower | 1815' Canadian National Tower

Category

Towers

Canadian National Tower | Menara Kuala Lumpur | Oriental Pearl Tower | Ostankino Tower | Tianjin TV Tower

Buildings

Citic Plaza | Jin Mao Building | Petronas Towers | Sears Tower | World Trade Center