

URL Policy – the www.ucl.ac.uk namespace

DOCUMENT INFORMATION

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1 Overview

The UCL URL policy is in place to help:

- our website users
 - intuitively **understand** the organisation of www.ucl.ac.uk,
 - **trust** and remember our URLs
 - **easily navigate** our large complex site
 - see appropriate **quality results** in search engines – Google, UCL’s search
- our site owners
 - have sites and pages that **perform well** in search engines
 - to have **trusted links** that users are confident to click
 - manage their site content with **clear information architecture**
 - **share web links effectively** in social and print media.

2 Scope

This policy covers the www.ucl.ac.uk domain and its top level folders i.e. www.ucl.ac.uk/top-level namespace.

3 UCL URL use

Guidance on when the UCL name space www.ucl.ac.uk is to be used.

- 1) The top level folders space (www.ucl.ac.uk/top-level-folder) is only to be used for official entities of UCL.

This includes:

- Organisational units: - faculties, departments, schools, institutes, research centres, professional services and facilities and officially named labs.
- Organisational policies and strategies (e.g. 2034).
- Organisational research themes / challenges (e.g. grand-challenges).
- External hosted UCL events.
- UCL-wide initiatives e.g. DARO fundraising campaign.
- Top level ‘sections’ like About UCL, London, maps, Research.

This does not include:

- Personal research projects – these should feature on the research pages of the appropriate organisational unit website.
 - Degrees and programmes – these should feature on the programme pages of the appropriate organisational unit website.
 - Non official organisational entities – these should feature on the appropriate organisational unit website.
- 2) The UCL namespace (www.ucl.ac.uk) is only to be pointed at websites/applications that are hosted on UCL hosted/managed systems.
Note: this includes sub-domains used by exception see point 6.

- 3) The UCL namespace (www.ucl.ac.uk) is only to be pointed at websites/applications that are UCL branded.

Note: this includes sub-domains used by exception see point 6.

3.1 Why

- 1) A controlled use of the top level URL space is to help www.ucl.ac.uk have a robust and intuitive information architecture which is easy to understand and predict for our users so that it is effective as possible.
- 2) If important for the UCL brand that websites applications are hosted on robust and well managed systems that deliver the expected performance, security and availability.
- 3) As an organisation we want to present a strong consistent brand across our www.ucl.ac.uk namespace so unbranded sites should have an external URL.

4 UCL URL style

To ensure good search engine optimisation (SEO) and usability it is important our web addresses are **readable, unambiguous, non-generic** and **memorable**.

To ensure this URLs:

- must use real words split by hyphens.
- must only use recognised acronyms (e.g. IoE).
- must be descriptive and brief.
- must be matched to page titles which are user focussed and work out of context.
- must be based on user need rather than internal naming schemes.
- should avoid keyword stuffing (figure 1) and replication.
- should not use articles (a, an, the) and other superfluous words (e.g. of, UCL, page, this).
- should be lowercase unless there is strong evidence to the contrary.



Figure 1 Keyword stuffing

4.1 Why

Clear understandable URLs allow users to get the content they expect when following a link and ensure good usability and building of trust.

Search engine performance - keeping URLs relevant, compelling and accurate is the key to ranking well in search results. [2]

Expected and understandable URLs are more trusted by our users (see figure 2).

Mixed case URLs are harder to remember and our web servers are case sensitive.

CAPS are difficult to read for dyslexic users (British Dyslexia Association).

Good examples	Bad example
www.ucl.ac.uk/mathematical-physical-sciences www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe www.ucl.ac.uk/news/nobel-prize-winner	www.ucl.ac.uk/part1 www.ucl.ac.uk/french/french.htm www.ucl.ac.uk/news/230516.htm

Figure 2 Understandable URLs

5 Aliases / short URLs

As the UCL website is a large complex domain we have to be sensible when adding aliases or short links to our central host file as, if the file has too many rules in it (1 per alias is needed), it will slow down every user's request.

To that end it is important that the number of short links requested per site is kept to a minimum.

This can be achieved by following the best practice strategy of having permanent URLs that have content that point to deeper links as required rather than creating short links to deeper content.

So for example:

- You have a big event to promote – ensure it is the main focus on your department homepage and promote the link to the top of your website.
- You have a degree you'd like to promote – if there is no room on your homepage, ensure it is the main focus of your 'Study' page and post the normal link (www.ucl.ac.uk/site/study) of that page as a short link.

The benefit of this strategy is that you are promoting the same links each time to your users so that they can understand where the latest news will be posted in the future. It also helps you avoid creating pages that users struggle to find without a direct short link, and help the search engines understand these are your main pages and will direct users there.

When required, short URLs/aliases for use in printed materials must follow the format below.

Case	Use and example
UCL wide links	www.ucl.ac.uk/ucl2034
Organisational unit link	www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe-open-day www.ucl.ac.uk/earth-sciences-open-day

So to clarify this strategy, for events like an open day rather than have a short URL as above which needs to have the department as well as the phrase 'open-day' – it would be better to publicise the link to the homepage and then have a call to action on the homepage that links to the open day information – this has the additional benefit that users who come to your homepage without seeing the open day promotion will also see the call to action.

6 Sub-domains

To optimise search engine optimisation and user trust all URL web address (apart from the technical exceptions below) should use folders rather than sub-domains.

For example www.ucl.ac.uk/site-name not www.site-name.ucl.ac.uk or site-name.ucl.ac.uk.

6.1 Why

- A sub-domain does not benefit from www.ucl.ac.uk SEO power/goodwill.
- www.ucl.ac.uk misses out on sub-domain's SEO power/goodwill.
- Sub-domains generally necessitate unreadable and possibly end user untrusted URLs e.g. www.es.ucl.ac.uk.
- Strange looking URLs dilute users trust in using that link.
- Users use domain bias in search results choice so unusual looking URLs affect SEO [1].
- Increases technical/maintenance/performance debt which includes redirects, rewrites and Cross Origin Resource Sharing permissions, SSL certificates.

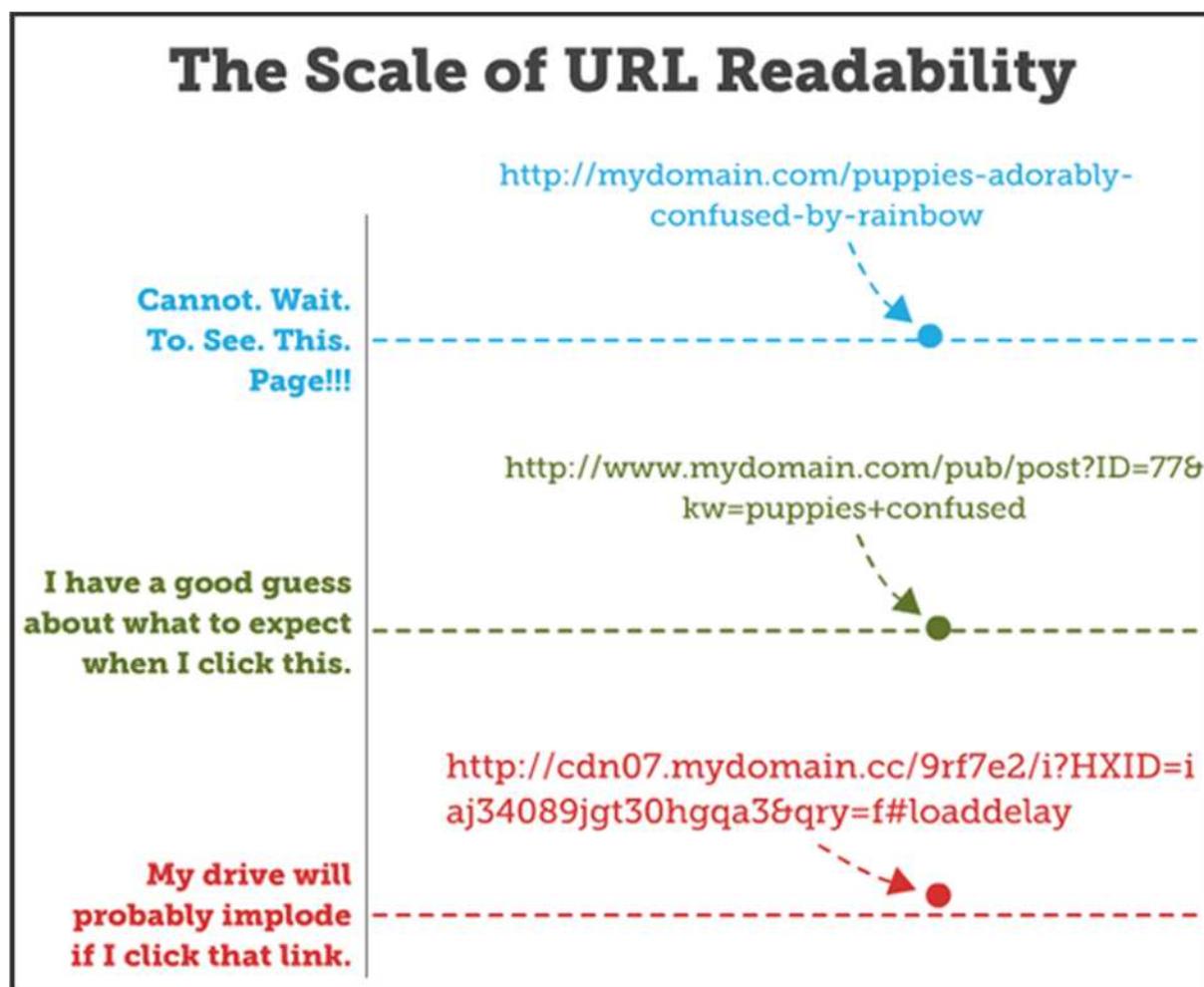


Figure 3 The Scale of URL Readability [2]

6.2 Exceptions

- Sites hosted on non ISD servers – these must stay as sub-domains due to technical considerations of the UCL network infrastructure. This is only due to valid technical restrictions of the website/application – sites that can be hosted internally should be.
- For applications (e.g. moodle and myaccount) it is appropriate for these domains to have their own sub-domain as they are a separate applications.

7 Partnership/third party UCL sites

This policy recognises that it is appropriate for joint funded projects to have a non-UCL URL and also to be styled off-brand. However, the policy does still expect however the rules of this policy to be met where appropriate.

External web domains should be purchased from a recognised Domain Name hosting company with permanent contact details so that there is a contact point for renewals and issues. If appropriate these can be pointed to hosted applications/websites within UCLs infrastructure.

8 Governance

The Eligibility Group will govern this policy and any requests relating to UCL URLs will be referred to them in the first instance. If any issues arise that require clarification or a higher level of decision-making, they will be referred to the Digital Transformation Governance Group.

9 Frequently asked questions

Q) My site has had a URL that doesn't meet the above policy for years how can we change it without causing a problem to our users and search engines?

The Digital Presence team can help you to rename, redirect and re-educate search engines and users so any impact of this change is minimal.

Q) Why do we need to control URLs?

To ensure a consistent approach so that our web users find our websites easy to use but also due to the fact that UCL is such a large organisation where we have over 2000s web sites vying for the same namespace a policy based approach is essential to managing this area.

10 Glossary

SEO – Search engine optimisation – the tips and advice to help your content be found by the your users. [5] Wiki definition : *Search engine optimisation (SEO) is the process of affecting the visibility of a website or a web page in a web search engine's unpaid results.*

11 References

- [1] - Domain Bias in Web Search <http://research.microsoft.com/pubs/155941/domainbias.pdf>
- [2] - 15 SEO Best Practices for Structuring URLs - <https://moz.com/blog/15-seo-best-practices-for-structuring-urls>
- [3] - URL standards for GOV.UK - <https://insidegovuk.blog.gov.uk/url-standards-for-gov-uk/>
- [4] - URLs on the University website – Bath University - <http://www.bath.ac.uk/guides/urls-on-the-university-website/>
- [5] - Search engine optimization - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Search_engine_optimization