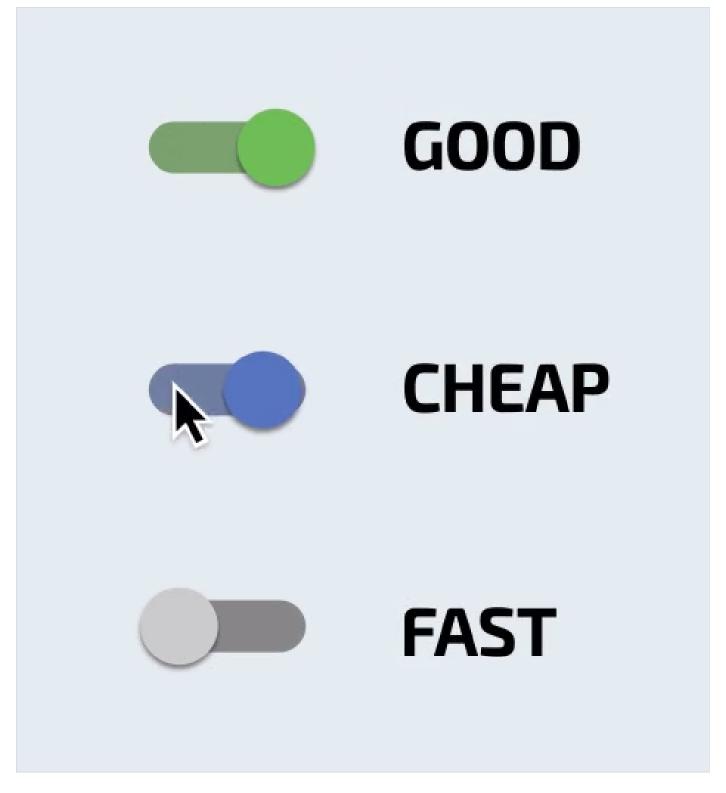# Constraints

Constraints are limitations on the designs and products you create or the processes you use while making them. They can significantly help you develop ideas — and they come from customers, stakeholders, or are even self-imposed. Within these limitations, it's possible to be inspired to find great ideas or solutions; to narrow the possibilities for entry points into the design process while allowing for the quicker production of work with fewer options.

These creativity guardrails can help focus the design work and process. With no limits, there is are unlimited possibilities, similar to the effect a blank canvas can have. Consider the intimidating, infinite canvas of a blank sheet of paper or an empty frame in a new design file. When there are no boundaries, sometimes it becomes a boundary itself. Constraints can be a significant forcing function to remove these creative limits.

Arguably the most common constraints that designers face are the problem sets you're trying to solve for specific customers, timeline or deadlines, and budget or financial resources.

GIF by MissingCloud

Another common constraint is the size of an intended device you are designing for. If you know you are creating an app screen for a phone, then you've got a starting place. And with that you know you are constrained to using bigger text with shorter line lengths. But other constraints come with designing for a mobile screen, such as the file size of images, videos, or the application itself. Your customers may be on

a network connection that is slow and expensive, with bandwidth limitations and data caps.

There are always limitations based on the materials that you are designing for. Print materials may constrain you to use a particular color spectrum, or have requirements relating to the margin and bleed of the physical paper. If you're working in the print industry, there are likely file format requirements for your deliverables and software that you may have to use that are specific to printers and their color profiles.

If your intended audiences are kids, non-technical individuals, highly-technical individuals, people who speak or read in multiple languages, etc., you may need to adjust your designs accordingly. You'll need to limit your text line length and color contrast as you consider accessibility (which you must always), as you know individuals with dyslexia or color vision deficiencies are your customers.

You may be constrained with colors outside of accessibility considerations through set corporate styles or brand guidelines. Those corporate guides may also come with business requirements such as retention metrics and growth goals. You may deal with internal politics, your reach of authority, and access to resources inside an organization as well. Your own or your team's research skills could be a limiting factor in serving and advocating for your customers too.

Your customer-base will have different levels of literacy and various native languages. Some languages are written and read from right to left so your product will need to be designed that way as well.

Of course, the development of what you design is a constraint. That's why there is an ever-controversial discussion in the design community of designers learning to code. If you understand even some fundamentals about how your designs are built and become products, you may start designing your layouts and interactions differently with those limitations in mind. It's just like how you begin to understand the design language of a mobile platform, like Apple's Human Interface Guidelines. You get familiar with it, and design within its constraints to increase the usability of your app, making it easier to learn for your customers because they already know how an app on iOS should work.

Often there are constraints that you choose on your own, like signing up for a 100-day design program, constraining yourself by time, assignments, and perhaps some accountability within an online community. The brief or scope of work is in itself a constraint. It may state that the solution to your customers' problems may need to have specific capabilities or features.

Whatever a constraint is, view them as a positive and constructive framework for designing, as they help you find solutions faster and better, that meet the needs of your customers.

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