# The 5 Whys Technique: Digging Deeper into Design Problems

In design work, we often see solutions that tackle visible symptoms rather than underlying causes. A recent industry case study revealed how a visually impressive website redesign failed to boost conversion rates because it missed the fundamental user needs. The 5 Whys technique offers a structured approach to uncover root causes of design problems, helping you create more effective solutions that address core issues instead of just surface concerns.

[Image: Designer at desk analyzing user feedback data with sticky notes showing patterns of user confusion arranged on a whiteboard behind them. Caption: "Fig 1: Root cause analysis in action - using the 5 Whys technique to move beyond surface-level design feedback to identify underlying user needs"]

## Understanding the 5 Whys Technique

The 5 Whys technique was originally developed by Sakichi Toyoda for Toyota's manufacturing process but has proven valuable across numerous fields, including design. The concept is straightforward: when confronted with a problem, ask "why" five times (or as many times as needed) to drill down to the root cause.

**Try This when a client rejects your design without clear reasons:** Pick a recent project where feedback was vague or confusing. Apply the 5 Whys by starting with "Why didn't the client like the design?" and continue asking why for each answer. Note your insights and spot where communication broke down. How might this change your approach to client presentations?

### Why Use the 5 Whys in Professional Design Practice?

This technique offers several key benefits that enhance your existing problem-solving toolkit:

* Go beyond initial research insights to identify underlying systemic causes
* Create solutions that tackle fundamental issues rather than superficial symptoms
* Produce more strategically sound, impactful design work
* Build stronger, more convincing rationales for your design decisions when presenting to clients
* Show thoughtful analytical thinking that sets your professional work apart

## The 5 Whys Process: Practical Application

Here's how to apply this structured technique to complex design challenges:

1. **Identify the Initial Problem**

Start with the presenting issue from your client or brief.

\*Example:\* "Our company rebrand isn't resonating with our audience."

1. **First Why**

Ask why this problem is occurring, moving beyond surface observations.

\*Example:\* "Why isn't the rebrand resonating?" \*Answer:\* "Because users find the new visual identity confusing."

1. **Second Why**

Dig deeper into the answer from the first why.

\*Example:\* "Why do users find it confusing?" \*Answer:\* "Because the visual language doesn't align with their expectations of our industry."

1. **Third Why**

Continue probing to uncover strategic considerations.

\*Example:\* "Why doesn't it align with industry expectations?" \*Answer:\* "Because we prioritised being distinctive over maintaining recognisable industry signifiers."

1. **Fourth Why**

Examine underlying assumptions and decision frameworks.

\*Example:\* "Why did we prioritise distinctiveness over recognisability?" \*Answer:\* "Because we assumed our established customers would follow us through the change."

1. **Fifth Why**

Reach the root cause that reveals systemic issues.

\*Example:\* "Why did we make this assumption?" \*Answer:\* "Because we didn't conduct adequate user research with our core audience before the rebrand."

The root cause shows that the real issue isn't the design execution itself but insufficient user research—a completely different problem than what was initially presented, requiring a strategic rather than purely visual solution.

[COMPOSITE Image Grid (2 images):] [Image 1: Designer presenting a visually striking rebrand to clients who look uncertain, with speech bubbles showing surface-level feedback. Caption: "Fig 21, part 1 of 2: Initial problem presentation - client dissatisfaction with rebrand"] [Image 2: Same designer using the 5 Whys method with sticky notes showing the progression from "Users find rebrand confusing" to "Insufficient user research conducted". Caption: "Fig 22, part 2 of 2: Root cause discovery through systematic questioning"] [Final Caption: "Fig 2: The 5 Whys process revealing how surface-level design feedback often masks deeper strategic issues that require non-visual solutions"]

**Try This when you're struggling to convince stakeholders of your design decisions:** Take a current project where you're facing resistance. Write down the main objection, then apply the 5 Whys technique to uncover what's really driving the resistance. Create a simple presentation that addresses the root cause rather than just the surface objection. How does this change your approach to stakeholder management?

## Case Study: Redesigning a Financial App

### Initial Brief

A fintech startup approached a design agency with concerns that "users aren't completing transactions" in their investment platform.

### Applying the 5 Whys

1. **Why aren't users completing transactions?**

Because they discontinue the process midway.

1. **Why do they discontinue the process?**

Because the form feels too lengthy and cumbersome.

1. **Why does the form feel cumbersome?**

Because users have to enter the same information multiple times across different screens.

1. **Why do users need to re-enter information?**

Because the app's architecture doesn't maintain state between different sections.

1. **Why doesn't the architecture maintain state?**

Because the app was initially designed for separate functions that were later combined without restructuring the underlying data model.

### The Solution

Rather than implementing a surface-level visual redesign, the designers developed a thorough solution addressing the structural issues:

1. Restructured the app's data architecture to maintain user information across sections
2. Implemented a progressive disclosure approach that broke the transaction process into visually manageable chunks
3. Created a visual progress indicator to help users understand their position in the workflow
4. Designed a system allowing users to save and return to incomplete transactions

The result was a 68% increase in transaction completion rates—showing how systematic root cause analysis leads to more effective solutions than addressing only visual symptoms.

**Try This when your design solution feels like a band-aid rather than a cure:** Identify a current project where you suspect you're addressing symptoms rather than causes. Draw a simple cause-effect diagram connecting the visible problem to potential underlying issues. Apply the 5 Whys to each branch. What deeper solutions emerge that you hadn't previously considered?

## Professional Case Study: Rebranding a Heritage Museum

### The Brief

A regional heritage museum approached a design agency with a request to redesign their visual identity and marketing materials because visitor numbers were declining despite increased tourism in the area.

### Application of 5 Whys

1. **Why are visitor numbers declining despite increased tourism?**

\*Initial investigation showed tourists were aware of the museum but choosing other attractions.\*

1. **Why aren't tourists choosing to visit the museum?**

\*Visitor surveys indicated they didn't perceive the museum experience as engaging compared to other local attractions.\*

1. **Why don't they perceive the museum as engaging?**

\*The current branding and marketing materials emphasized historical artifacts rather than the interactive experiences the museum actually offered.\*

1. **Why does the branding emphasize artifacts over experiences?**

\*The existing visual identity was developed when the museum primarily showcased static exhibitions rather than the interactive installations recently added.\*

1. **Why hasn't the branding evolved with the museum's offerings?**

\*The museum had invested in new exhibits but hadn't allocated resources to update their communication strategy to reflect these changes.\*

### The Solution

Rather than simply redesigning the logo, the designers developed a thorough rebrand that:

1. Created a visual identity system highlighting interactive experiences and family engagement
2. Designed marketing materials showcasing visitor participation rather than just artifact displays
3. Implemented environmental graphics creating narrative journeys through the museum
4. Developed digital touchpoints reinforcing the hands-on learning opportunities

The result was a 45% increase in visitor numbers within four months, demonstrating how addressing root causes leads to more effective design solutions.

## How Does This Differ From Regular Questioning?

You might wonder how the 5 Whys differs from the questioning techniques you've already encountered. While regular questioning helps gather information, the 5 Whys is specifically structured to move systematically from symptoms to root causes. Each "why" builds directly on the previous answer, creating a clear chain of causality that often reveals unexpected connections and underlying issues that might otherwise remain hidden.

[Image: Designer facilitating a workshop with team members using a structured 5 Whys template with connecting arrows showing the progression from initial problem to root cause, with participants actively contributing insights on sticky notes. Caption: "Fig 3: Structured 5 Whys analysis in a collaborative design workshop, demonstrating how each answer leads to a deeper level of questioning until the root cause emerges"]

**Try This when you feel stuck in a design rut:** Choose a personal project that isn't progressing well. Instead of focusing on visual elements, apply the 5 Whys to understand why you're feeling blocked. Start with "Why am I not making progress?" and follow each answer with another why. Record your insights in your design journal. What surprising root cause emerged that you can now address?

**Try This when a client keeps changing direction mid-project:** Document the specific change requests from your most challenging client. Apply the 5 Whys to each major pivot, starting with "Why did they request this change?" Create a simple client questionnaire based on your findings that could prevent similar issues in future projects. How might this improve your onboarding process?