Layers, groups and frames

Layers

Figma documents can become overly complex because they typically contain a dense combination of images, objects, and text. Designers are sometimes tempted to leave their layers panel looking like organized chaos, making it difficult to find things.

Layer naming approaches

When who, and to what extent we name our layers depends on the maturity of our design and the stage of the design process we're in (ideation, collaboration, ready for handoff).

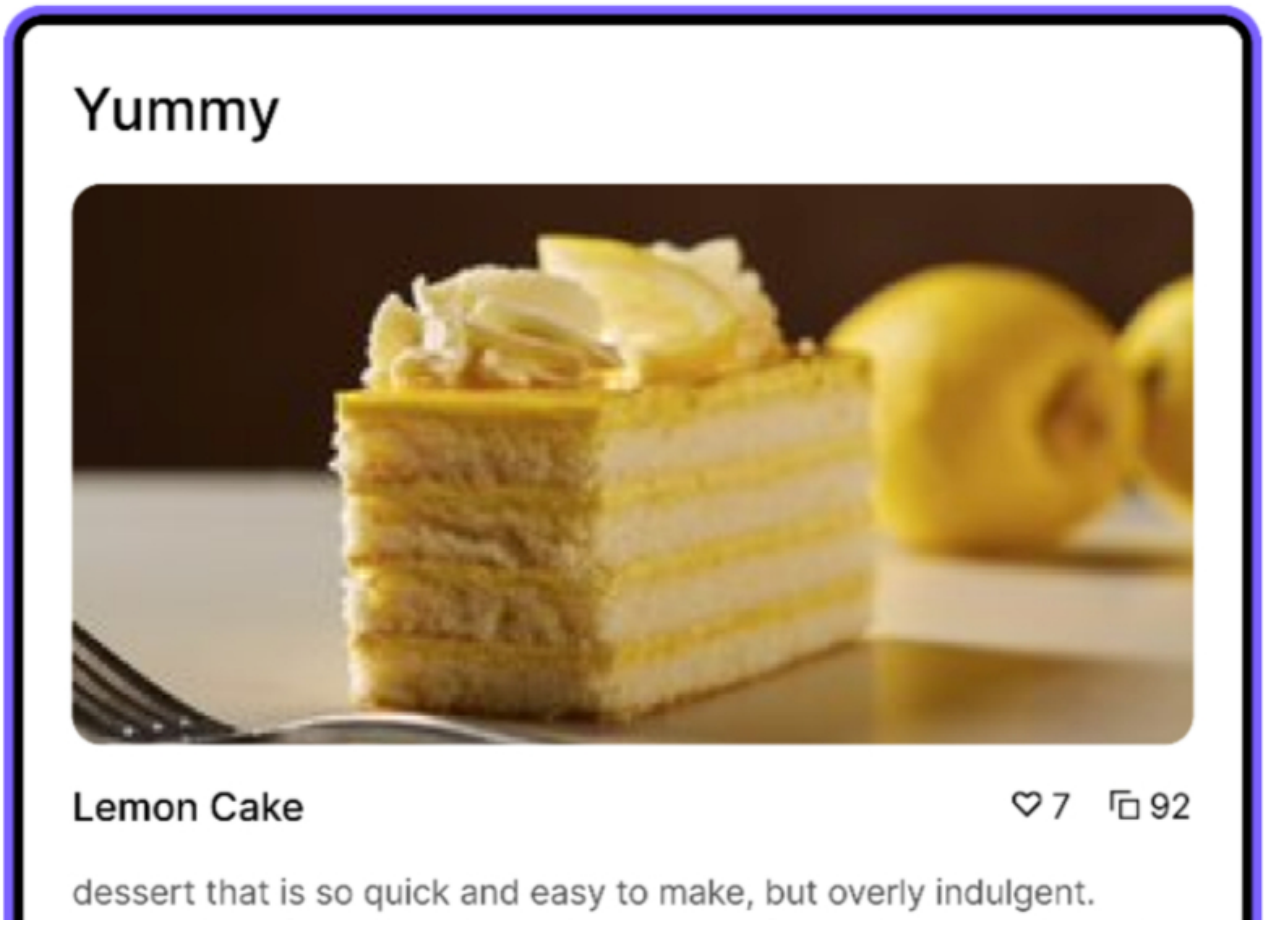
Conventions

Because every team is unique, the advice in this reading is just that - advice. Based on readability or how the developer team prefers to structure their components, you may develop your own methods of working. The person who names layers is also determined by the stage of your design process, the size of your team, and the level of involvement of your developers in the design process. To get you started, here are some methods:

The Task

Let's take the component below, for example:

⌘ Card component



Made with a few simple ingredients, and a fantastic lemon kick, this cake is perfect for every occasion.

A simple card component, containing:

- Section title
- Image
- Card title
- Card stats
  - Likes
  - Duplicates
- Description

Design stage ideating

In this paradigm, there is no need to name layers because you are still in free-flow mode, generating ideas and focusing on solving the problem first.

We're just having fun at this point, so we don't need to worry about layer naming or structure. The file creator does the naming for you. Because this is still very scrappy, don't worry about naming or even using specific elements (perhaps a rectangle will suffice for a button!).

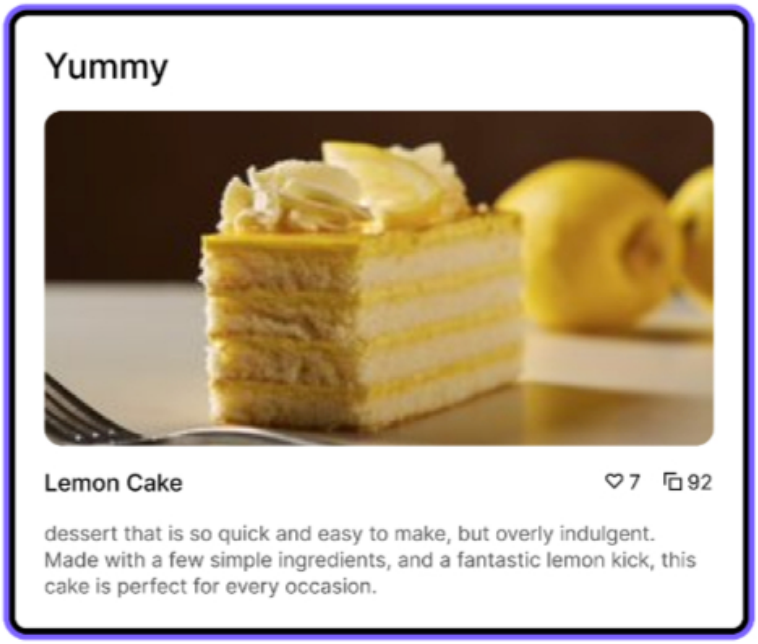
Refinement

When you and your team are getting ready for approval from your key stakeholders, this is when you want to think about how easy it is for someone to digest your ideas and iterate on them, clear layer-naming greatly helps in this.

FIGMA LAYER STRUCTURE

COMPONENT

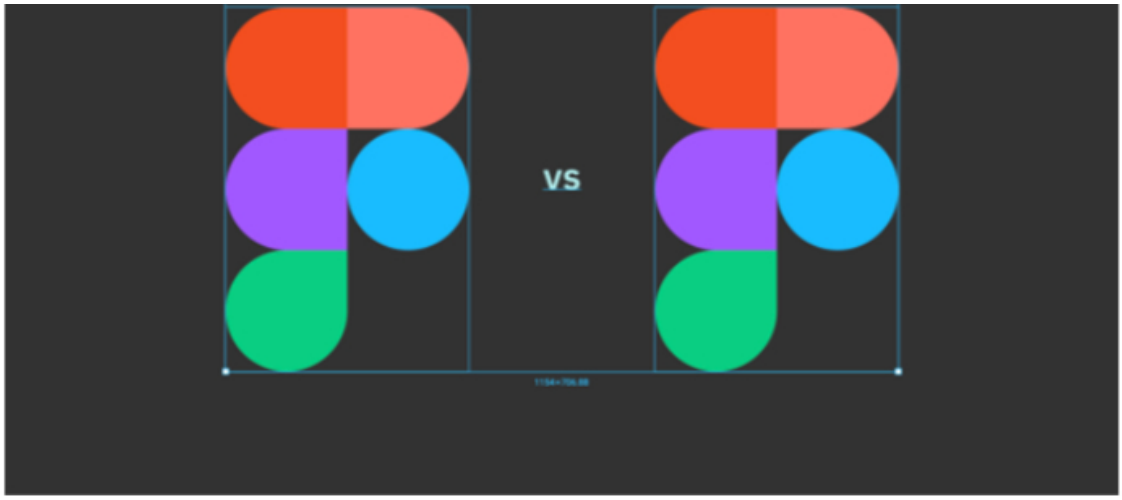
⌘ Card component



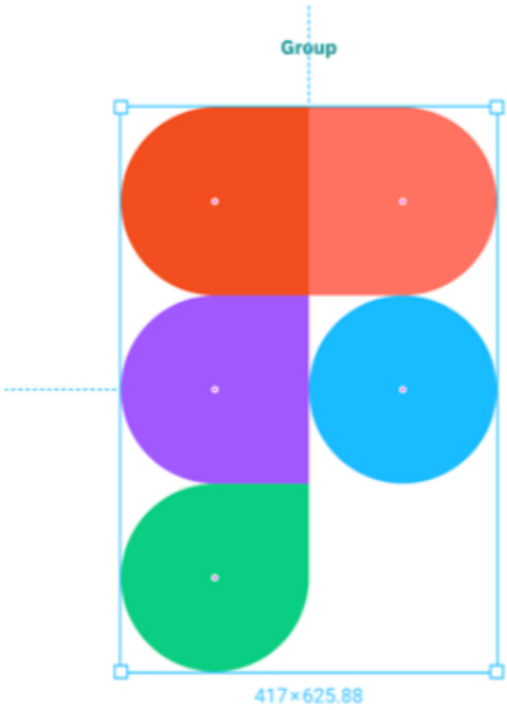
Use descriptive layer names here. A card should be called a card, a number should be called a number, and a description should be called a description. At this point, you still own your designs but are brainstorming ideas with colleagues. This is an excellent time to name layers so that they make sense as a group. The simplest way to accomplish this is to be as descriptive as possible.

Groups and frames

When working with a large number of layers, you require a more formal method of bundling these. In other design software, you'd use a group for this, but Figma offers another option: frames. Frames appear to be very similar to Groups at first glance, so let's take a closer look and discover their unique characteristics.



Let's begin with the fundamentals. Every graphics app now has grouping functionality: select some objects, press Command G on a Mac or Ctrl G on Windows, and your layer list will now look cleaner with a collapsible group. Groups are defined by their contents. Your group's boundaries are the outer edges of whatever is inside it. As a result, whenever you change the position or dimensions of an object, the bounds of the group will change accordingly. The parent element in your document is related to the group object. The group's constraints are set to "left" and "Top" by default, as shown by the dashed lines here:



If the constraints are set to scale, your group will scale with its parent element. When you resize a group, the contents are always resized as well. You can keep the same aspect ratio by holding Shift while resizing.

Frames

At first glance, there does not appear to be much distinction between groups and frames. You select your objects and press Command G on a Mac or Ctrl-Alt-G on Windows to convert them into a frame. They will collapse similarly in the layer list. When you create a frame, the initial dimensions are determined by its contents. The boundaries of your frame, on the other hand, are independent of what's inside.

Your frame is similar to a window or, if you prefer, an artboard through which you can see the objects behind it. When you resize your frame, you are only resizing the window through which you are looking. Designing with frames is the key to unlocking Figma's most powerful features. You'll be able to create designs that are well-organized, beautifully styled, simple to use, scrollable and resizable.

Individual sizing

A frame's size is independent of its children, the nested layers. The size of the parent frame will not change if the children are moved or resized. This means that the parent frame can be the same size as or larger than its children. Allowing you to do things like internal add padding, create a "mask" effect, and enable scroll interaction in a prototype (examples of these below). In contrast to Groups, where the group must be the same size as its children.

Use styles

Frames, like rectangles, are objects that can be styled. They can be decorated with a fill, stroke, or shadow. They can also have rounded corners. With this level of adaptability, frames can be used to design almost anything. A button, for example, can be created using only a styled frame (blue with rounded corners) and a single text layer, unlike groups, where a second layer is required for the background (making auto layout impossible).

Overflow content

A frame's children (nested layers) can "overflow" past its bounds. With the help of "Clip Contents," those out-of-bounds children can be kept visible or hidden.

Resizing with constraints

Children of a frame can be applied to resizing constraints (nested layers). They are used to "constrict" or "pin" the children to the top, bottom, center, left or right of the frame or to scale as the size changes.

Auto-layout resizing

Auto-layout can be applied to frames to create a variety of (automatic) resizing behaviors. The direction a frame will grow, the spacing between children (nested layers), internal padding, and how each individual child will respond to changes are all determined by auto-layout. This is a very powerful feature that can be used in a variety of ways.

Layouts and grids

Grids and layouts can be applied to any frame, from a large device "artboard" to a UI region or a small component. These various frames can even be nested inside of another parent frame. When used with constraints, this is useful for maintaining consistent spacing across different container sizes and configuring resizing behavior. A desktop frame, for example, can have one layout for its nested page frame and another for its nested side navigation frame. Each has its resizing behavior.

Make components

To create a component, all component layers must be housed in a single frame. However, if these elements are housed in a group, Figma will automatically convert the group into a frame when you click "create component."

Final thoughts

Reading about all of the features available with frames is useful, but hands-on learning is even better!