Imagine you're in the kitchen getting ready to prepare dinner. You open the fridge and find you don't have quite everything you need to make a full meal because you didn't take the time to check and prepare the right ingredients. Making dinner just became much more of a chore than originally anticipated.

This is the same concept behind Agile backlog refinement. If you don't take the time to organize your product backlog, your upcoming sprint won't be set up for success.

What is backlog refinement?

Backlog refinement, also known as backlog management or backlog grooming, is the period of time where product owners, managers, and team members review and prioritize product backlog items. This project management process is commonly used in development teams who use the [Agile methodologies](#). By taking the time to identify which tasks are high priority for the next sprint, your team can begin the current sprint planning process with clarity and hit the ground running when the sprint starts.

In addition to providing clarity, backlog refinement helps prevent tickets from piling up in your product backlog. That's why you should schedule backlog refinement as an ongoing process. Aim to refine your backlog once every sprint, during your sprint review and before your sprint planning meeting.

Typically, the [product manager](#) is responsible for refining the product backlog as an ongoing activity. During the refinement process, they will act as a facilitator to organize product backlog items (PBIs) and:

- Prioritize tickets for the next sprint based on current sprint goals.

- Clarify vague tickets with detailed user stories.

- Merge duplicative tickets.

- Meet with stakeholders to get more information on a ticket.

- Group similar or relevant tickets into one task.

- Divide tickets with a large amount of work into smaller tasks.

- Determine the "definition of ready" (i.e. whether or not the task can be worked on and completed in an upcoming sprint) and acceptance criteria for each task.

- Use [story points](#) to estimate the scope of work for each task.

Why maintaining a backlog is important

Much like taking your car in for regular check-ups, it's important to regularly refine your product backlog. Originally known as "backlog grooming," the term came from the idea of grooming a plant. You're trimming off the excess branches so that it looks nice and well-maintained.

When it comes to your backlog, this means looking at all of the tickets in the backlog and identifying which tickets add the most business value and which are superfluous. Regularly maintaining backlog tickets means that, once those tickets are added to a sprint, your team members can begin work with all of the context they need to get the job done correctly.

Backlog refinement makes sprint planning easier. For example, imagine you're working in a restaurant. There are prep chefs that prepare the ingredients for the meal, and the chefs cook the meal. Backlog refinement is similar to chopping the vegetables before the dinner rush—in this case, the sprint. It helps get everything into place so that when the sprint begins, everyone has all of the information they need at hand and no time is wasted trying to find the right ingredients.

Where possible, try to involve your teammates in backlog maintenance so they can develop a shared understanding of how it works. This helps you align expectations around what's coming next and gives team members time to think about how they're going to tackle each problem in the backlog before working on it. Plus, during the sprint planning phase, team members will already be familiar with all of the available tickets.

Backlog refinement vs. backlog grooming

While the language is different, backlog refinement and backlog grooming mean the same thing. The language recently shifted away from the term "grooming" to avoid the negative connotation. However, backlog refinement and backlog grooming are often used interchangeably.

Who is in charge of backlog refinement?

Traditionally, Agile project management includes a product leader or owner who organizes the product backlog. In some forms of Agile like Scrum, the Scrum master is the one responsible for refining the backlog.

Work with your team to find the best process for your situation. In some cases, you may delegate backlog refinement responsibilities to team members who are focused on a specific part of the sprint.

3 tips to keep your backlog organized

Backlog organization doesn't have to be complicated. Here are a few tips for keeping your backlog maintained:

1. Create a DEEP product backlog

Product management expert Roman Pichler recommends that you make your product backlog DEEP.

A DEEP product backlog means that it is:

- Detailed appropriately: Every item in the product backlog should have enough contextual information to create a solid user story. A developer should be able to look at a task or a ticket and have all of the context they need to complete the ticket.

- Emergent: A good product backlog should constantly evolve. Anybody should be able to add new tickets or tasks, add more information to tasks, or delete tasks as needs change. Nothing in the product backlog should be permanent.

- Estimated: All tickets should include an estimation of how much time or effort the task will require. Most Agile teams use a standard form of measurement in this section, the most common one being the amount of time a task will take.

- Prioritized: Tasks should be organized by order of importance. Those that relate most to the goal of the sprint get prioritized first and everything else comes after.

2. Keep task dependencies in mind

When you're prioritizing tasks, double to check to make sure that certain tickets aren't [dependent on others](#). A dependency is a task that relies on the completion of a different task. If there is a task that is dependent on another, make sure to prioritize correctly.

To do this, clearly label your dependencies. That way, your team won't accidentally start a dependent task. Labeling your dependencies also allows your team to prioritize efficiently so that work flows smoothly, and you don't have to worry about blockers getting in your way.

3. Streamline meetings

The only people in a backlog refinement meeting should be the stakeholders involved in the upcoming sprint, like a project manager and team members who will actually work on each ticket. A product manager should only spend time connecting with cross-functional stakeholders if they need clarifying information for a specific task. This should be done separate from a full backlog refinement session. That way, you can avoid any unnecessary conversation during your backlog refinement session and focus conversation on the sprint at hand.