

Define



As the second step in the Design Thinking process, the define stage is dedicated to defining the problem: what user problem will you be trying to solve? In other words, what is your design challenge?

- The define stage is preceded by the empathize phase, where you have learned as much about your users as possible, conducting interviews and using a variety of immersion and observation techniques.
- Once you have a good idea of who your users are and, most importantly, their wants, needs, and pain-points, you're ready to turn this empathy into an actionable problem statement.

- Define stage help the designers gather great ideas to establish features, functions, and any other elements that will allow them to solve the problems or, at the very least, allow users to resolve issues themselves with the minimum difficulty.
- In the Define stage you will start to progress to the third stage, Ideate, by asking questions which can help you look for ideas for solutions by asking: “How might we... perform an action that benefits company’s product or service?”

- The main concern in the “define” stage of Design Thinking is around clearly articulating the problem you are trying to solve. Without clearly defining the problem, you will stumble in the dark and come up with solutions that don’t work.
- Our goal should be to frame the problem correctly. By doing so, we generate a variety of questions, which in turn give us different options and ways of thinking about the problem. As a result, more solutions will open up.

Define Phase

- Put together the information created and gathered during the Empathise stage.
- Analyse your observations and synthesis them in order to define the core problems identified up to this point.
- You should seek to define the problem as a problem statement in a human-centred manner.

- The relationship between the empathize and define stages can best be described in terms of analysis and synthesis.
- In the empathize phase, we use analysis to break down everything we observe and discover about our users into smaller, more manageable components—dividing their actions and behaviour into “what”, “why” and “how” categories, for example.
- In the define stage, we piece these components back together, synthesising our findings to create a detailed overall picture.

Why is the define stage so important?

- The define stage ensures you fully understand the goal of your design project. It helps you to articulate your design problem, and provides a clear-cut objective to work towards. A meaningful, actionable problem statement will steer you in the right direction, helping you to kick-start the ideation process and work your way towards a solution.
- Without a well-defined problem statement, it's hard to know what you're aiming for. Your work will lack focus, and the final design will suffer. Not only that: in the absence of a clear problem statement, it's extremely difficult to explain to stakeholders and team members exactly what you are trying to achieve.

What is a problem statement?

- A problem statement identifies the gap between the current state (i.e. the problem) and the desired state (i.e. the goal) of a process or product.
- Within the design context, you can think of the user problem as an unmet need. By designing a solution that meets this need, you can satisfy the user and ensure a pleasant user experience.

- A problem statement, or point of view (POV) statement, frames this problem (or need) in a way that is actionable for designers.
- It provides a clear description of the issue that the designer seeks to address, keeping the focus on the user at all times.
- Problem or POV statements can take various formats, but the end goal is always the same: to guide the design team towards a feasible solution.

Various ways to frame design problem:

- From the user's perspective
- From a user research perspective
- Based on the four Ws—who, what, where, and why

From the user's perspective:

“I am a young working professional trying to eat healthily, but I’m struggling because I work long hours and don’t always have time to go grocery shopping and prepare my meals. This makes me feel frustrated and bad about myself.”

From a user research perspective:

“Busy working professionals need an easy, time-efficient way to eat healthily because they often work long hours and don’t have time to shop and meal prep.”

Based on the four Ws—who, what, where, and why:

“Our young working professional struggles to eat healthily during the week because she is working long hours. Our solution should deliver a quick and easy way for her to procure ingredients and prepare healthy meals that she can take to work.”

- As you can see, each of these statements addresses the same issue—just in a slightly different way.
- As long as you focus on the user, what they need and why, it's up to you how you choose to present and frame your design problem.

What makes a good problem statement?

- A good problem statement is human-centered and user-focused.
- Based on the insights you gathered in the empathize phase, it focuses on the users and their needs—not on product specifications or business outcomes.

Create a meaningful problem statement

- Focus on the user
- Keep it broad
- Make it manageable

Focus on the user

- The user and their needs should be front and center of your problem statement.
- Avoid statements that start with “we need to...” or “the product should”, instead concentrating on the user’s perspective: “Young working professionals need...”.

Keep it broad

- A good problem statement leaves room for innovation and creative freedom.
- It's important to keep it broad enough to invite a range of different ideas; avoid any references to specific solutions or technical requirements, for example.

Make it manageable

- Problem statement should guide you and provide direction.
- If it's too broad in terms of the user's needs and goals, you'll struggle to hone in on a suitable solution. So, don't try to address too many user needs in one problem statement.
- Prioritize and frame your problem accordingly.

The four Ws

Asking the right questions will help you put your finger on the right problem statement. With all your findings from the empathize phase in one place, ask yourself the four Ws: Who, what, where, and why?

- Who is experiencing the problem? In other words, who is your target user; who will be the focus of your problem statement?
- What is the problem? Based on the observations you made during the empathize phase, what are the problems and pain-points that frequently came up? What task is the user trying to accomplish, and what's standing in their way?
- Where does the problem present itself? In what space, situation or context is the user when they face this problem? Are there any other people involved?
- Why does it matter? Why is it important that this problem be solved? What value would a solution bring to the user, and to the business?

The five whys

Another question-based strategy, the five whys technique can help you delve deeper into the problem and drill down to the root cause. Once you've identified the root cause, you have something that you can act upon; somewhere specific to focus your problem-solving efforts.

Let's take our previous example of the young working professional who wants to eat healthily, but finds it difficult to do so. Here's how you might use the five whys to break the problem down and get to the root cause:

- Why is she not eating healthily? → She orders takeaway everyday.
- Why does she order takeaway everyday? → Her fridge and cupboards are empty.
- Why are the fridge and cupboards empty? → She hasn't been grocery shopping in over a week.
- Why hasn't she been grocery shopping? → She doesn't have time to go to the supermarket.
- Why doesn't she have time? → She works long hours and is exhausted.

Problem statement

The root cause here is a lack of time, so your solution might focus on efficiency and convenience.

Your final problem statement might look something like this:

“Young working professionals need a quick, convenient solution to eating healthily.”

Conclusion

- By the end of the define phase, you'll have turned your findings from the empathize stage into a meaningful, actionable problem statement. With your problem statement to hand, you'll be ready to move on to the ideation phase, where you'll turn your problem statement into "how might we" questions and generate as many potential solutions as possible.