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#### **WIREFRAMING**

# A Beginner's Guide to Wireframing

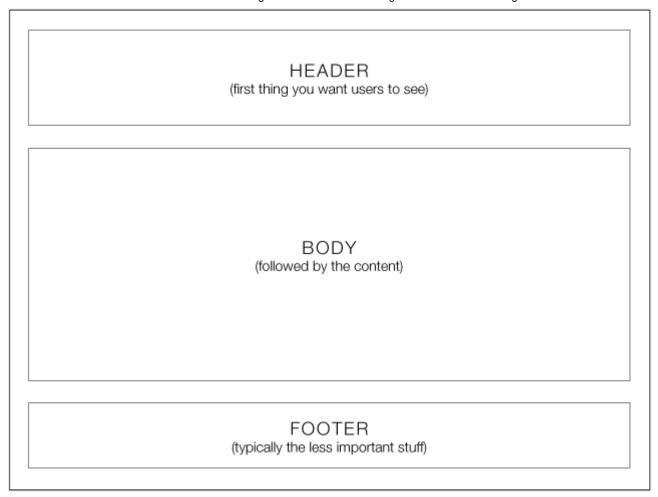


This post is part of a series called UX Foundations.

- ← First Steps in Your User Experience Workflow: Nascent UX
- ▶ A Beginner's Guide to Wireframing in Omnigraffle

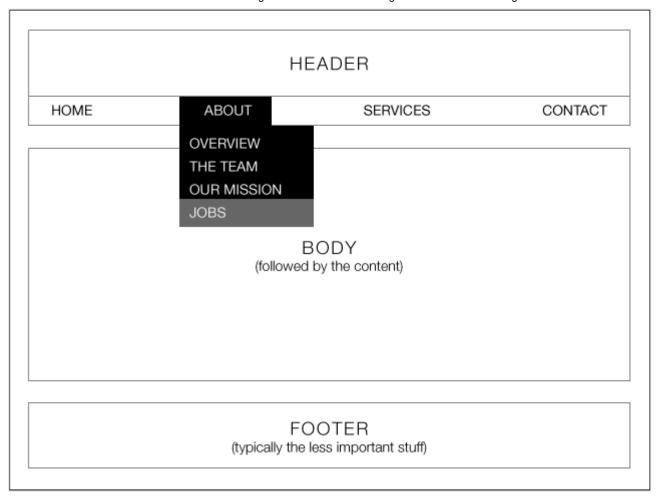
Wireframing is an important step in any screen design process. It primarily allows you to define the information hierarchy of your design, making it easier for you to plan the layout according to how you want your user to process the information. If you've yet to use wireframing, it's time to get your feet wet.

Before we get started though, a quick question: are you needing a pro website solution? If so, we have a number of HTML Templates and PSD Templates that may fit your needs. Otherwise, let's get into this tutorial!



It's like an architectural blueprint; you need to see it in two-dimensional black and white diagrams before you understand how to build the actual house. Similarly for a screen design, you can't start building pixel layers in photoshop, or writing blocks of code, without knowing where the information is going to go.

At a deeper level, a wireframe is also very useful in determining how the user interacts with the interface. For example, wireframes can contain various states of button or menu behaviors.

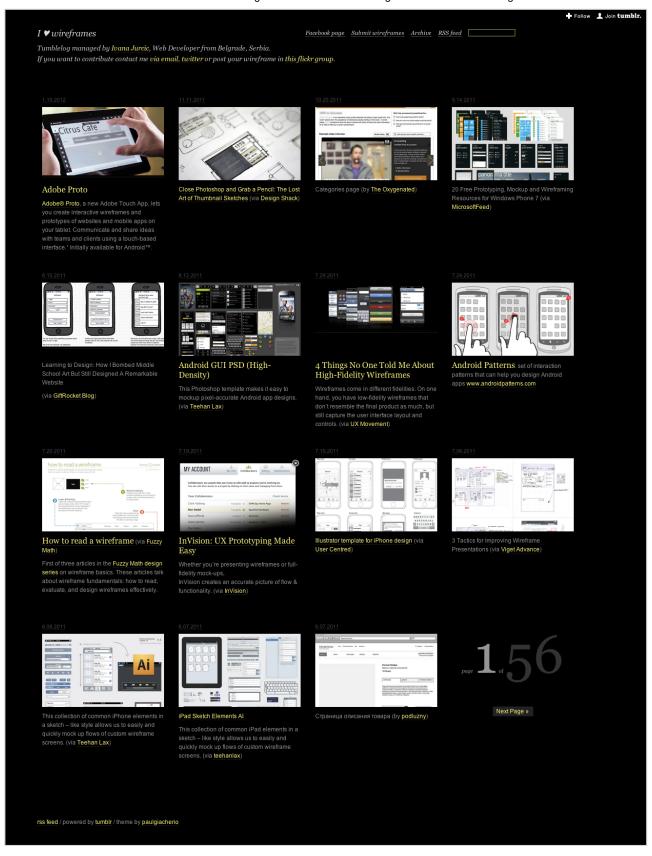


Wireframing is important because it allows the designer to plan the layout and interaction of an interface without being distracted by colors, typeface choices or even copy. I like to explain to my clients that if a user cannot figure out where to go on a black and white wireframe, it doesn't matter what colors you eventually use. A button has to be obvious even if it's not shiny or brightly colored.

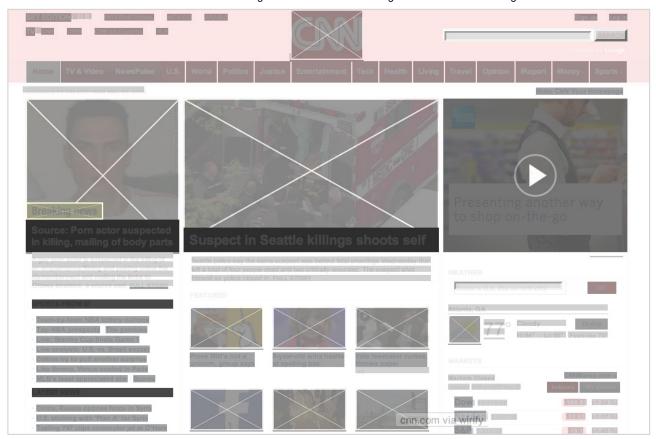
Like the foundation of a building, it has to be fundamentally strong before you decide whether to give it an expensive coat of paint.

# **Step 1: Getting Inspiration**

Before getting into further details, since a picture can paint thousand words, take a look at I • wirefames. You'll be able to get a quick overview and visual understanding of how other designers are handling their wireframing process.



Perhaps also grab this nifty browser bookmarklet, Wirify which enables you to see a "wireframe-d" version of any live site.



If you continually observe what other designers or sites are doing for their wireframes, you will slowly get a picture in your mind of how a wireframe helps to organize information for the screen.

## **Step 2: Designing Your Process**

Design is an organic process and thus different designers approach wireframing and its translation to visuals or code in different ways. You have to find the process that brings out your own strengths and you are most comfortable with. Below is a diagram showing several typical processes:

SKETCH > WIREFRAME > VISUAL > CODE

SKETCH > WIREFRAME > HI-DEF WIREFRAME > VISUAL > CODE

WIFEFRAME > HI-DEF WIREFRAME > VISUAL > CODE

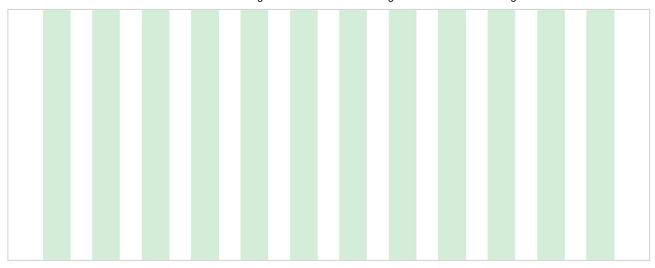
SKETCH > CODE

WIFEFRAME > INTERACTIVE PROTOTYPE > VISUAL > CODE

37signals is well known for advocating the use of sketches and going straight to code, though it seems some of their designers do involve visual mockups in their process too.

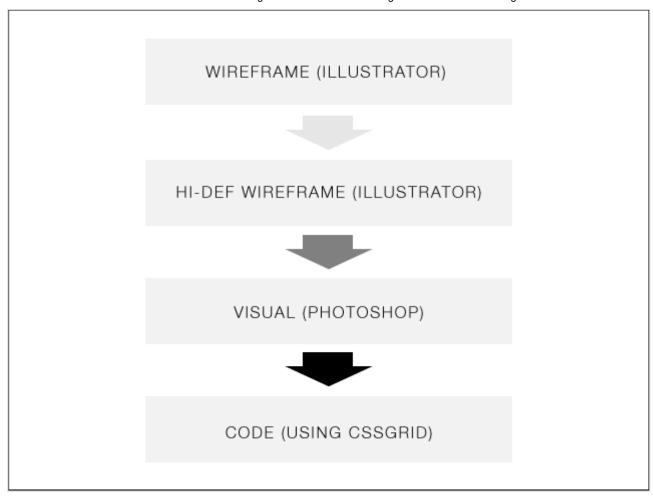
For me, I have gone through enough design-to-code cycles to have a somewhat streamlined process. This is a step some people may not think about, but I also consider any html/css framework that I would use in the project.

For example, I used to build a ton of sites in Blueprint, thus I would set both my wireframes and Blueprint to the same 12-column grid. This speeds up prototyping and development time considerably, as instead of having to write every element's width into my css stylesheet, they are now pre-defined from one to twelve columns wide. I now use cssgrid instead for its responsive design support, but it is still set to a 12-column grid which you can download as a photoshop template.



As I've said, it's up to you to decide which process you are comfortable with, sometimes you may have try it out several times before realizing which is the most effective process. Some people may be really good at sketching and they may prefer not to use a wireframing tool at all. Other designers may want to have as many steps as possible to minimize deviations or allow them to think through every single iteration as the design starts to take form and shape.

You'll eventually develop your own preferred process but for the tutorial's sake I'll use my typical process as an example:



The reason why I use usually Illustrator as my wireframing tool is mainly for three reasons:

- Styles you can save type and object styles and re-use them throughout, just like CSS.
- 2. It's easy to modify, move or scale multiple objects.
- 3. It affords easy transition to Photoshop later.

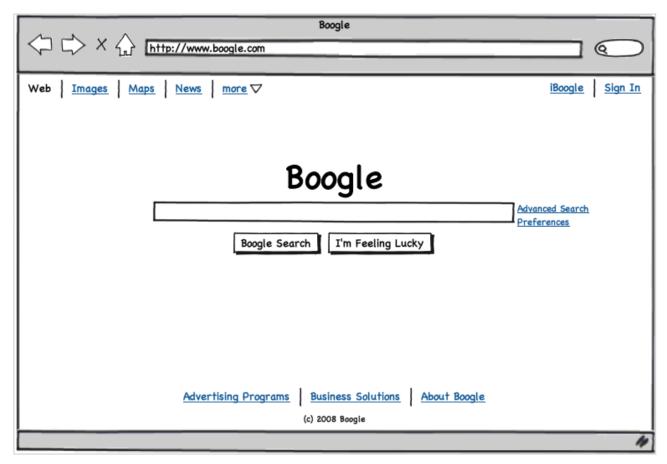
However, I do use other tools and it depends on the project scenario. I will briefly outline some popular tools, their strengths and their weaknesses in the next section.

## **Step 3: Pick Your Tools**

Here are some popular tools in no particular order:

## **Balsamiq**

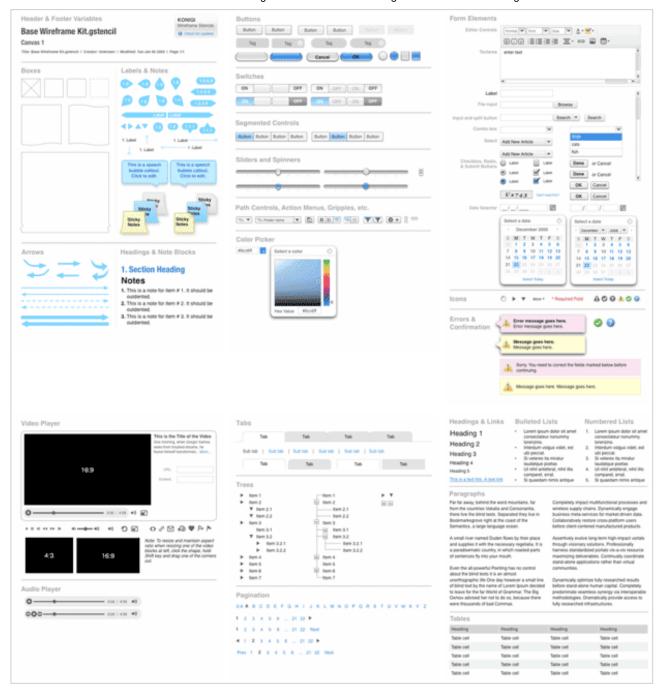
Balsamiq became popular as wireframes produced with Balsamiq resemble sketches, making it immediately obvious that the wireframe is not a finished product but a work in progress. Balsamiq also has a huge library of reusable components which you can drag and drop very easily to design your wireframes.



You can also use it on almost any platform, with desktop versions available for Mac, Windows and Linux, plus there is a web version if you prefer to work in the cloud. Third party apps like iMockups for the iOS also support Balsamiq export formats.

## **Omnigraffle**

An old Mac favorite, Omnigraffle also has a widely supported user-contributed library of reusable components; Graffletopia.



Since it was developed specifically as a diagramming application, Omnigraffle also has complex features like automatic layout, custom object styles support, smart guides and graph tools. Some of these features are also available in the Adobe CS suite, but if you do not have the CS suite, Omnigraffle is good value (~\$100) for producing detailed wireframes.

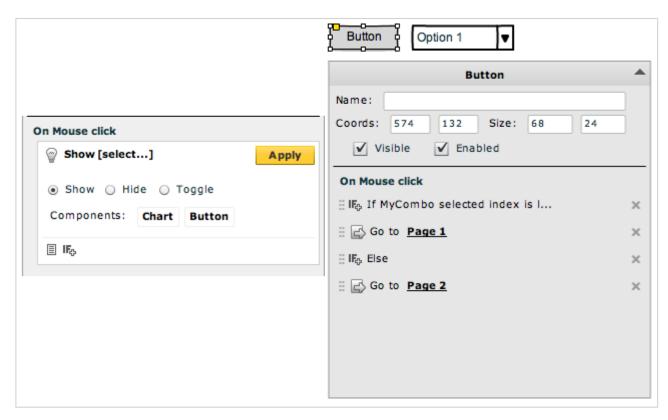
### **Axure**

Almost like the grandfather of wireframing tools, Axure was one of the first professional-class wireframing/prototyping tools. Until recently, it was only available on Windows. I personally don't have much experience with it, but it's known to be a

widely-used tool among industry professionals.

### Flairbuilder

A new kid on the block, Flairbuilder has very strong support for interactions.



It also has a huge component library, supports master pages and you can export the prototype to be viewed online.

## Online applications

If desktop software is not your cup of tea, there are tools like mockflow, hotgloo and mockingbird.

## **Keynote/Powerpoint**

Keynotopia "transforms your favorite presentation application into the best rapid prototyping tool for creating mobile, web and desktop app mockups". For non-mac users, do not fret, Keynotopia also offers powerpoint templates.

I personally highly recommend it if you need to wireframe or protoype mobile applications quickly. Another good alternative is Keynote Kungfu.

## **Adobe CS**

For those already familiar with the Adobe suite, Fireworks, Illustrator and Indesign are very capable wireframing tools with their own individual strengths and weaknesses.

## **Fireworks**

You can work on the entire design process in Fireworks, from basic wireframes to the full visual. Fireworks support master pages (think of them as reusable templates where every edit on the master template can be applied throughout your childpages), element libraries and you can make interactive prototypes with Fireworks relatively quickly.

### Illustrator

This is one of my favorite tools to use because I am already very familiar with Illustrator and I am sure many designers here would be familiar with it too. I use Illustrator when I am trying to do quick, but complex wireframes, with no need for interactivity.

What makes it a winner? The ability to export as a PSD with editable layers, strong copy and paste support to Photoshop, and strong typography controls with type styles you can save, edit and reuse, almost like CSS.

## Indesign

Similar strengths to Illustrator with even stronger typographic styles controls, strong master pages support and the recent ability to make interactive prototypes.



I pick Indesign when I have to make interactive high fidelity multi-page prototypes. The only caveat for me is the weak export support to Photoshop for designing visuals.

## **ProtoShare**

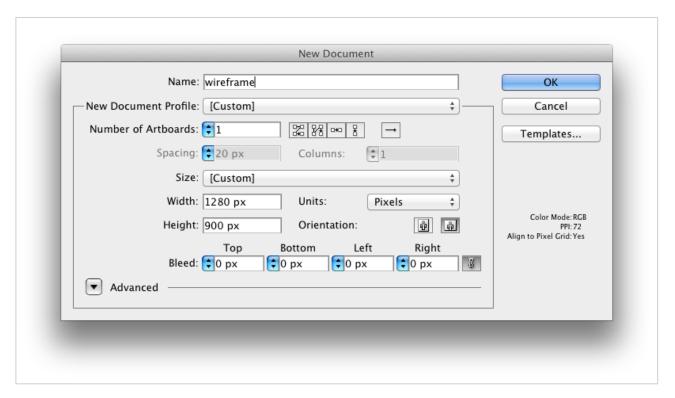
"Powerful Prototyping Made Easy." Recently released version 9 with a new wysiwyg palette. Worth checking out.

# Step 4: Setting a Grid

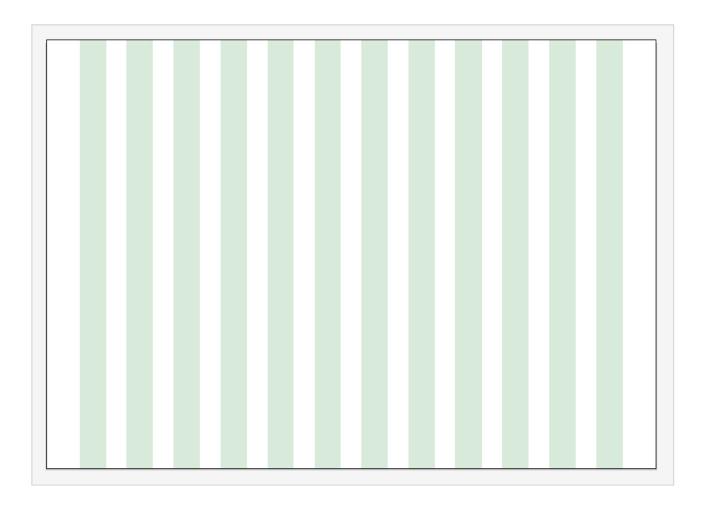
There's a lot of theory with regards to grid systems, but without going too much into it, I shall explain it as "a structured and simple way to layout elements".

I'm using Illustrator for this tutorial but the steps can be applied to any of your tools.

Firstly, set a document size. I used 1280 x 900 because I will be using cssgrid which will allow my website to scale between mobile resolutions to a maximum of 1140 pixels easily.



Place the downloaded template from cssgrid into your document.

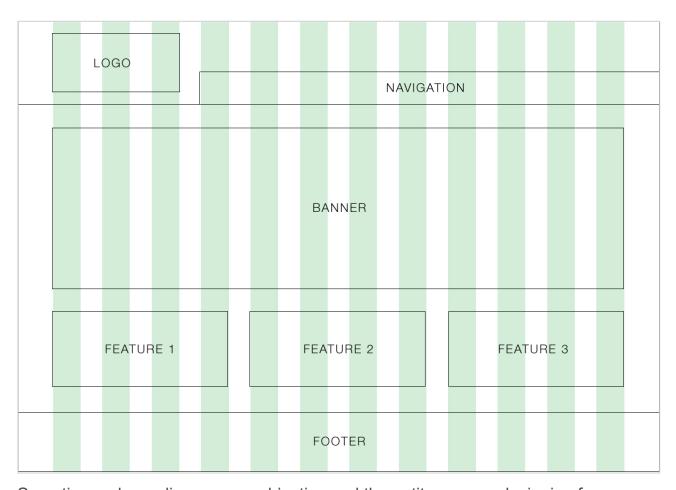


## Tip:

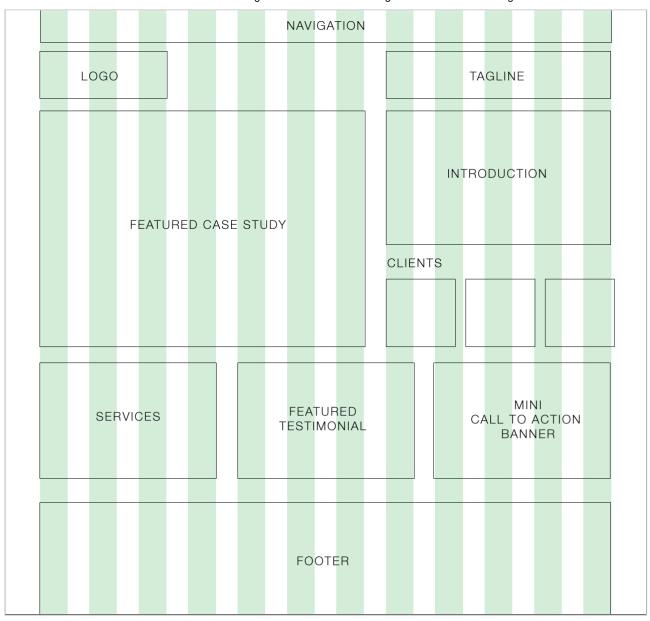
There are plenty of grid templates available for download, but if you're interested in customizing your own take a look at responsify.it.

## **Step 5: Determine Layout With Boxes**

Start by drawing boxes on the grid. Think about the order of information you would like to present to your visitors, top to bottom is the easiest, followed by left to right. Below is an example of a wireframe which has a layout commonly used by software companies these days:



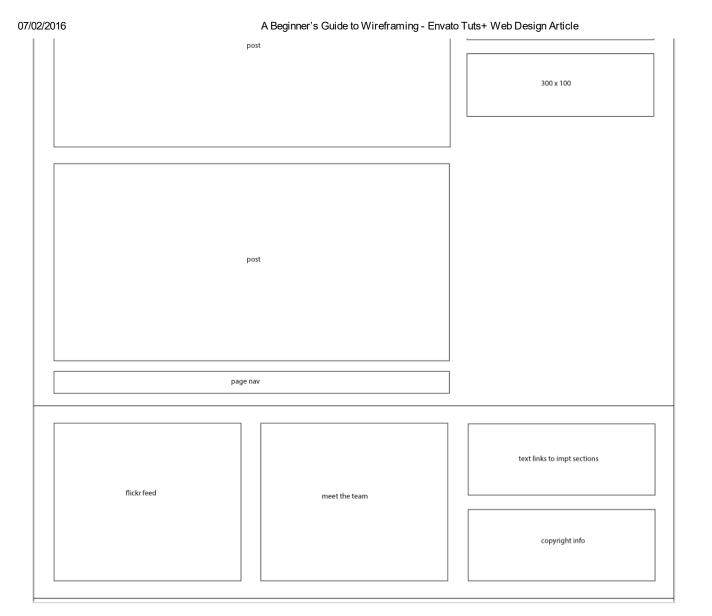
Sometimes, depending on your objective and the entity you are designing for, you can be creative with the layout, though still keeping the hierarchy of the information in mind. This is a real-world example of one of my clients where I was breaking out from conventional technology company website layouts:



Here's a layout for a blog, with carefully positioned advertising containers and specific instructions for the client:



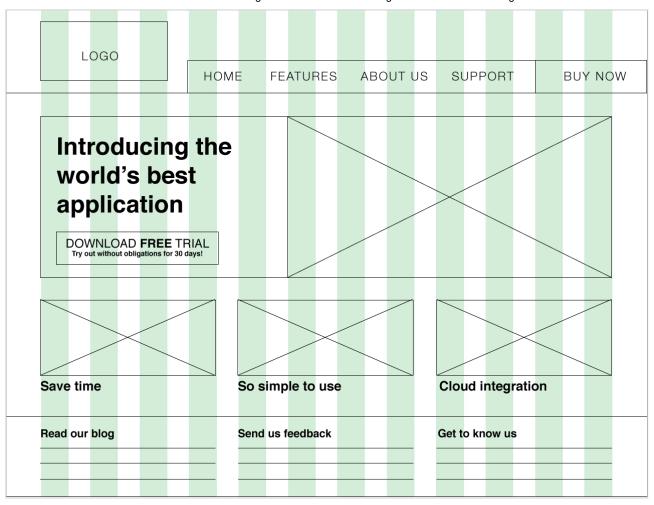
featured posts (jquery slide panel)		
reactive posts () quely since parter)	popular   latest   comments   tags	
slide panel navigation	tabbed panel	
	subscribe to newsletter	
post	social media buttons (facebook/twitter/blah)	
post	320 x 250	
	twitter feed	
post	(WILE) IEEU	
	125 x 125 125 x 125	
	125 x 125	



# Step 6: Define Information Hierarchy With Typography

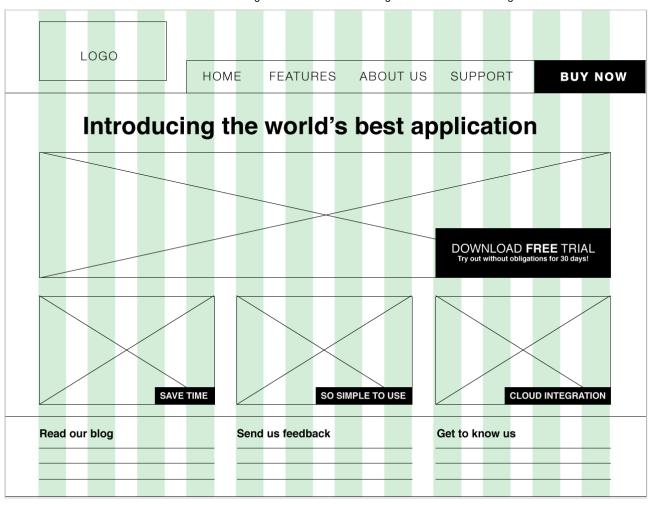
After you are satisfied with how the boxes are laid out, start dropping in bits and pieces of your content to get a feel of whether the information is being well-structured. The rule of thumb is the same: the information you want to deliver to your audience has to be clear, even in a black and white wireframe.

Simply using different font sizes as a start is a great way to differentiate between the different levels of information.



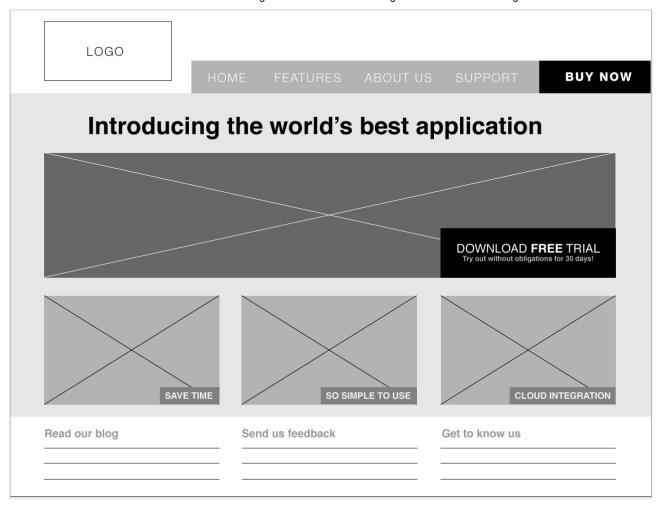
Don't be afraid to experiment at this stage. Sometimes, as you fill in more detail, you may realize the original layout is not working well. That's the whole point of the wireframing process; to make as many iterations as possible in order to narrow down the best way of representing the information you are trying to communicate.

In the example below, I have decided I wanted the screenshots to have more impact and I have also started to use black boxes to define which are the areas that would take visual importance for this website:



# **Step 7: Fine-tuning With Grayscale**

Using the full spectrum of grayscale can help you determine the visual strength of your elements without having to pick a color palette. In fact, it may help you during the visual design process later on.

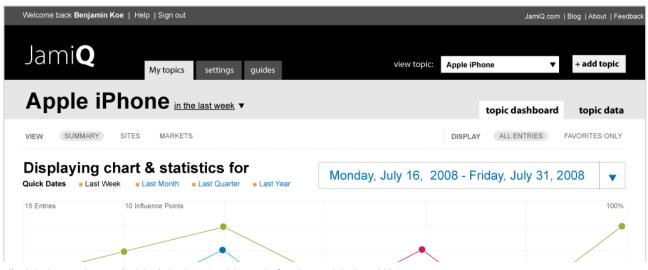


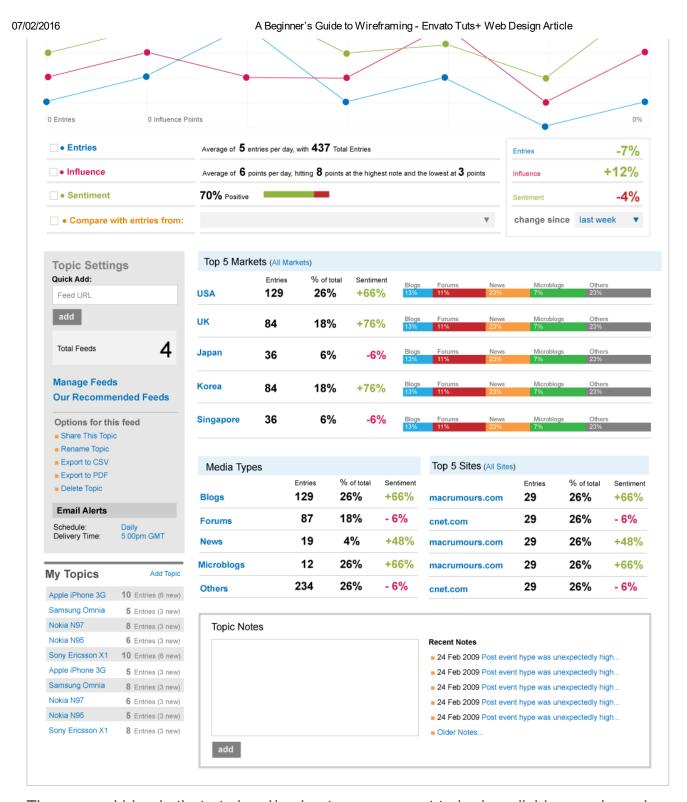
# **Step 8: Hi-definition Wireframe**

This is an optional step, but if you like to take things in increments you may want to try it out. Making a wireframe high definition means simply adding more details, as much as possible, without going too granular into the visual details. It may mean filling in the actual copy into the wireframe and trying to determine the ideal font-sizes:



### It could also involve colors:





The general idea is that at visual/code stage you want to be in polishing mode and no longer in drafting or experimenting mode. Perform the iteration cycles (feedback <-> wireframing) as quickly as possible in a wireframing application you are comfortable using, rather than moving layers and pixels in photoshop.

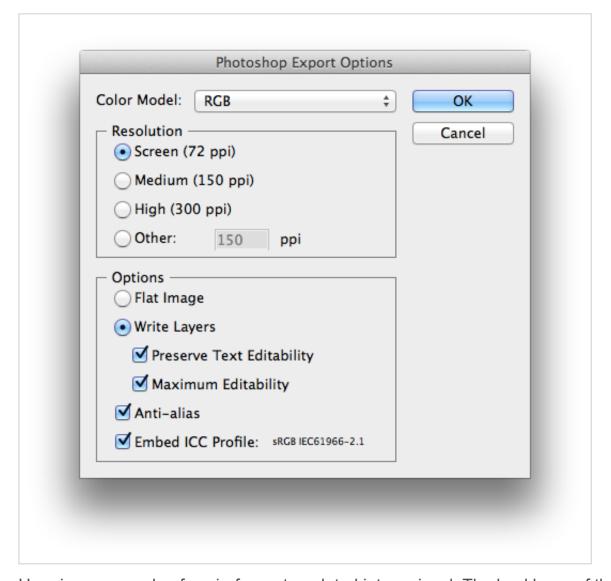
That being said, in certain scenarios it may be more ideal to skip defining the details too much and go straight into an interactive prototyping stage (ala 37signals). The argument for this is that certain interaction details cannot be communicated fully on

a flat image.

If you work with a team of developers, you may want to hand off the approved wireframes to the developers for coding the basic framework while you work on the visual.

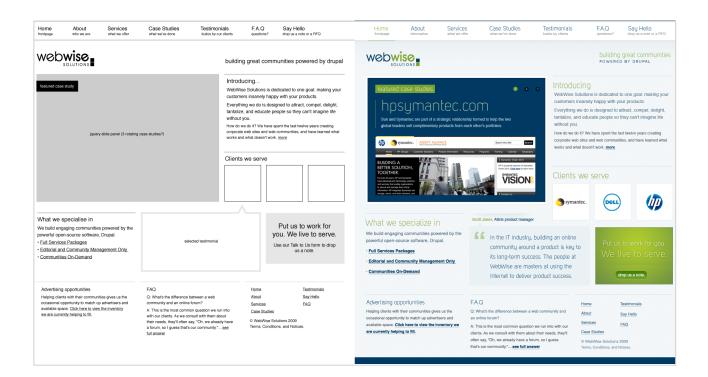
# Step 9: Translating a Wireframe into a Visual

Mentioned earlier, the reason why I tend to prefer using Illustrator for wireframing is because I can export it into a .psd with most of the type layers editable. By the time I am in Photoshop I won't need to edit the type that much (Photoshop has inferior type control tools, though much improved in CS6):



Here is an example of a wireframe translated into a visual. The backbone of the

wireframe is pretty much intact, though there are tweaks made visually. You can also view this website live:



# Free Wireframe Tool

Create interactive wireframes and collaborate in real time w/ others!



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## Conclusion

So here we end this tutorial. I hope it's inspired you to start experimenting! As with any design process, do not be afraid to iterate, iterate and iterate.

Also, do spend some time experimenting with different tools and processes. You'll find the time investment worth it once you find an application that feels intuitive to you.

Please feel free to ask any questions in the comments, thanks for reading!

Also, if you're needing ready-made website components, we have a ton of HTML Templates and PSD Templates for sale. Browse through our galleries on ThemeForest if you have an urgent project to get to work on.

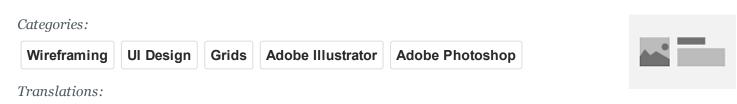
## **Additional Resources**

If you would like to find out even more about wireframing, you may want to check out these resources.

- 35 Excellent Wireframing Resources
- Wireframing & Prototyping with Adobe Fireworks Resources and Tutorials
- Good design faster (slides on sketching wireframes)
- 50 Free UI and Web Design Wireframing Kits, Resources and Source Files
- Yahoo! Design Stencil Kit
- wireframes.linowski.ca
- Quora: What are the best tools for wireframing?



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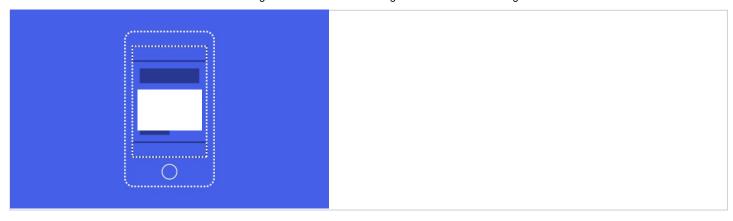


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Petr · 3 years ago

I use Wireframesketcher for sketching. Great app.

http://wireframesketcher.com/

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**123** → Petr · 2 years ago

this is not a free tool \*\*\*

13 ^ • Reply • Share >



McJohn ⋅ 3 years ago



Nice tut, I'm now wondering how build wireframe with parallax and other effects using HTML5. Do you have any advice please?



Dee Sadler → McJohn • 2 years ago

My slides here explain options.

http://www.slideshare.net/dees...



**Ariel Charney** • 3 years ago

For someone new to website design, this is a great, easy guide. THANK YOU!



**Becky** • 2 months ago

Thanks for the great guide. Really useful to new beginner. I found a new prototype/ wireframe tool Mockplus. It is very simple and easy-to-use.



**Jessie** → Becky • 2 months ago

I am totally agree with you. Mockplus is such an easy and simple prototyping tool to use, even no any coding or programming requirement needed. The simple drag-and-drop operation links interactive pages clearly and elegantly.



Mockplus → Becky • 2 months ago

Thank you for sharing us. How do you like it, Becky? Any feedback, please feel free to contact us from Facebook/Twitter/VK/LinkedIn. Good luck!



AQ · 3 years ago

Thanks so much for writing this! Very understandable. I will definitely start giving some of these tools a try!



noygbiv ⋅ 3 years ago

What an encouraging guide! Thanks a lot! :)



Vlad Abr • 3 years ago

Great, thank a lot!

07/02/2016



**INIOCKPIUS** • ∠ months ago

If you are looking for a UX prototyping tool, Mockplus is also a good choice for rapid & better prototypes. Check it out: http://goo.gl/CBdiAT

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rey alejandro · 2 years ago

This is the best process for . No complex learning process needed, I try Axure and I think it is better in complex medium to large scale project. I think the style and symbol tools is the best tool for prototyping in illustrator.

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**Sarah Montgomery** • 2 years ago

Great list, thanks for sharing!

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cesare casadonte · 4 years ago

very interesting article for a good web site project regards cesare casadonte



Techeese · 4 years ago

Great tutorial and resources thanks!

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amidude · 4 years ago

Very concise tutorial. Very helpful and very nice. Thank you so much.

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Jerry Bayler • 4 days ago

I'd add iRise to the list. Along with wireframing and prototyping, they've got some cool requirements and collaboration features. Good for teams. Depends on how far you want to take the project. http://www.irise.com/

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John Snow • 2 months ago

cssgrid was removed by its creator. Any other downloadable grids you would recommend? Thanks!

http://andytaylor.me/2013/04/0...



Mir Yu · 4 months ago

It is a very nice article for the beginner wants to create wireframes. Also many tools are useful. THANK YOU!

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lan Yates Mod → Mir Yu · 3 months ago

Glad you enjoyed it **@Mir Yu**—thanks for stopping by!

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Rakesh Patharwat • 4 months ago

i am using photoshop cs3



Lau Gro • 5 months ago

jmng



Surya • 7 months ago

how to design a certain wireframe area, estimating any size or shape or color of logos to fit in?



Eileen Coyle · a year ago

I'd add fluidui.com to the list of interactive design tools for web, mobile or wearables. It has custom libraries for desktop - both high and low fidelity. It's also quick and easy to learn.

Eileen (From fluidui)

Reply • Share >



Shalin Siriwaradhana · a year ago

I use Creately as a wire-framing tool for my mockup needs. Its a good beginners guide thanks

• Reply • Share >



MuninJLM ⋅ a year ago

invisionapp.com would be a great addition to the tool list.

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**Ant99** • a year ago

Very nice tutorial, wireframing is essential to a successful design and an integral part of the design process.

More great info about wireframing here

http://www.digimadmedia.com/bl...

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**Dak Tengur** • 2 years ago

Great tut - concise, useful and a plethora of options to choose from. Thank you!

∧ V • Reply • Share >



Marcy White • 2 years ago

Great article! Very helpful, thanks! You can use Lucidchart's wireframe design tool to begin! https://www.lucidchart.com/pag...



**Andrew Micallef** • 2 years ago

I use SnapUp from QuickFocus, I find it really good with its offline to online process.

```
www.quickfocus.com
```



Ryan Spencer • 2 years ago

I like using vector programs like Illustrator or Inkscape to mock up sites. It is so much easier to resize elements compared to Photoshop. HTML divs take dimensions, colors, gradients, and drop shadows like Illustrator shapes. They even stack the same way.

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∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share >
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gcofres · 2 years ago

Excellent guide, thanks



reSabi • 3 years ago

Thanks for the great guide and inspiration!

It's always helpful to see the designing process of another designer. :)



Riana · 3 years ago

Thanks for the tutorial and awesome references!



Joao · 3 years ago

Amazing tutorial. Thanks.



Chin' ⋅ 3 years ago

Very clear and concise.



Tara • 3 years ago

It's definitely a good idea to start a design by creating a wireframe. I personally get really overwhelmed when creating a design in Photoshop because there are so many things to think about: layout of elements, color, overall design, etc. This method of wireframing is really going to help me! Thanks!

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Dee Sadler → Tara · 2 years ago

PS isn't a good tool for something a vector tool does so well.



**App Mockup Tools** ⋅ 3 years ago

We design iOS GUI Element Kits for prototyping and wireframing iOS apps in Keynote. No coding required, just copy and paste. www.appmockuptools.com

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Yama · 3 years ago

I consider this as a free training, thanks! Great work.



Leila Calderón · 3 years ago

Muchas gracias, excelente tutorial!



mona · 3 years ago

hi

thank you so much for posting UX for beginner , it is helping me lot .

one question I am a programmer but i don't know HTML and CSS , can i make career in UX ????



**Sergey** • 3 years ago

Great article! Thanks from Russia!



Etay Gafni · 3 years ago

http://www.intuito.com lets you take these wireframes (web and mobile apps) and collect actionable feedback from real users. You can run studies, surveys and more all within the context of your designs and app.



**Anon** • 3 years ago

This was my very first attempt at either wireframing or Illustrator. Many thanks for introducing me to both.



wiz@rd · 3 years ago

Thanks for this -- really helpful for a beginner like moi.



Vinish Garg • 3 years ago

Nice post, I loved the step for transition from wireframe to design.

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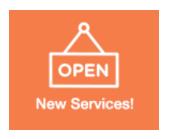
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