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’ll 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.

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 (see Stage Three of the Design Thinking 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.

With this in mind, let’s take a closer look at problem statements and how you can go about defining them