

# Hierarchy of Needs

In order for a design to be successful, it must meet people's basic needs before it can attempt to satisfy higher-level needs.<sup>1</sup>

The hierarchy of needs principle specifies that a design must serve the low-level needs (e.g., it must function), before the higher-level needs, such as creativity, can begin to be addressed. Good designs follow the hierarchy of needs principle, whereas poor designs may attempt to meet needs from the various levels without building on the lower levels of the hierarchy first. The five key levels of needs in the hierarchy are described below.<sup>2</sup>

*Functionality needs* have to do with meeting the most basic design requirements. For example, a video recorder must, at minimum, provide the capability to record, play, and rewind recorded programs. Designs at this level are perceived to be of little or no value.

*Reliability needs* have to do with establishing stable and consistent performance. For example, a video recorder should perform consistently and play back recorded programs at an acceptable level of quality. If the design performs erratically, or is subject to frequent failure, reliability needs are not satisfied. Designs at this level are perceived to be of low value.

*Usability needs* have to do with how easy and forgiving a design is to use. For example, configuring a video recorder to record programs at a later time should be easily accomplished, and the recorder should be tolerant of mistakes. If the difficulty of use is too great, or the consequences of simple errors too severe, usability needs are not satisfied. Designs at this level are perceived to be of moderate value.

*Proficiency needs* have to do with empowering people to do things better than they could previously. For example, a video recorder that can seek out and record programs based on keywords is a significant advance in recording capability, enabling people to do things not previously possible. Designs at this level are perceived to be of high value.

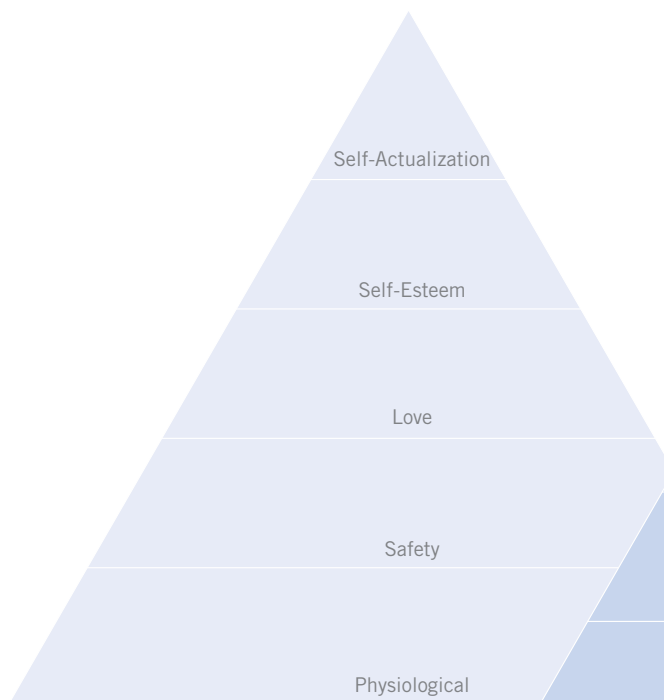
*Creativity* is the level in the hierarchy where all needs have been satisfied, and people begin interacting with the design in innovative ways. The design, having satisfied all other needs, is now used to create and explore areas that extend both the design and the person using the design. Designs at this level are perceived to be of the highest value, and often achieve cult-like loyalty among users.

Consider the hierarchy of needs in design, and ensure that lower-level needs are satisfied before resources are devoted to serving higher-level needs. Evaluate existing designs with respect to the hierarchy to determine where modifications should be made.

See also 80/20 Rule, Aesthetic-Usability Effect, and Form Follows Function.

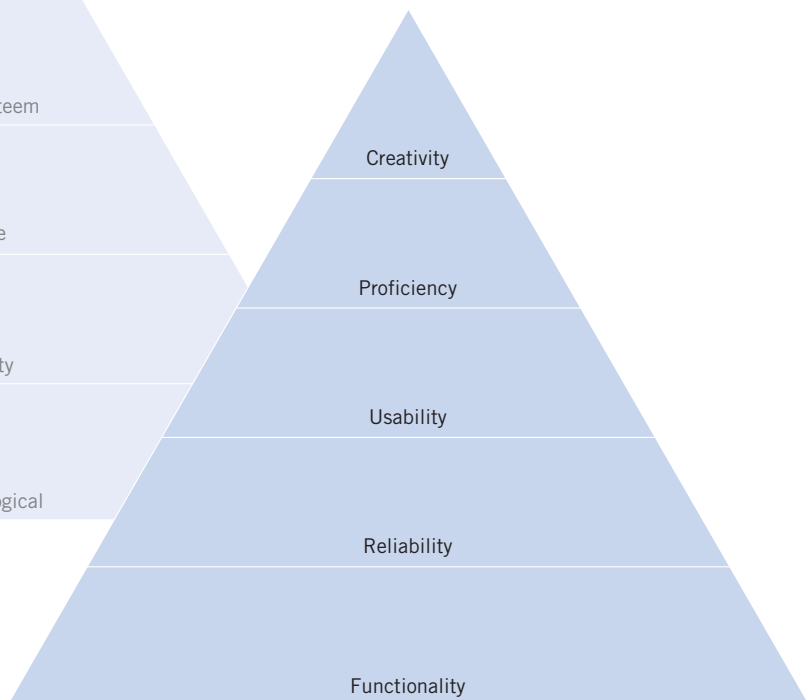
<sup>1</sup> The *hierarchy of needs* is based on Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*.

<sup>2</sup> The seminal work on the concept of a hierarchy of needs is *Motivation and Personality* by Abraham Maslow, Addison-Wesley, 1987 [1954].



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

The hierarchy of needs specifies that a design must address lower-level needs before higher-level needs can be addressed. The perceived value of a design corresponds to its place in the hierarchy—i.e., higher levels in the hierarchy correspond to higher levels of perceived value. The levels of hierarchy are adapted from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.



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