Themes, Epics, Stories, and Tasks in Agile

Agile Guide

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Themes, Epics, Stories, and Tasks

Think of a typical story. It has a fixed beginning, middle, and end — right? This linear path is similar to traditional project management methodologies such as Waterfall. The sections must occur in that order for everything to make sense.

Agile project management is a little different. Though it follows a set of principles and requires a stable team structure, there is far more flexibility. An Agile project is more like a "choose your own adventure" book, where self-managing teams are given the base requirements and must figure out their own journey to the end deliverable.

So, how do Agile teams tackle these projects? They break their workload down into themes, epics, stories, and tasks. These words might conjure up images of childhood fairytales, and, in a way, storytelling does play a key role in Agile. It helps teams to understand what is required and provides the creative framework they need to get there. The Agile Alliance notes that Agile coaches must "influence teams to look at the world through a new lens, and storytelling is one of the most powerful tools we have available to help us to do this."

We will now take a closer look at these tools.

The Agile work structure

As mentioned, there are four primary sections in Agile project management: themes, epics, stories, and tasks.

Themes

A theme is a wide area of focus that helps an Agile team to keep track of their organizational goals — think of it as a label that can be used to group similar activities. A theme helps to define the common characteristics between different areas and unite them under one heading.

Epics

An epic is a substantial collection of smaller stories that combine to make one large story. An epic cannot be completed in a single Agile iteration (or sprint). The key element to an epic is that it takes a lot of time. For more information on Agile epics, check out our detailed guide.

Stories

A story, also referred to as a user story, is a short-form request that can be delivered in one sprint. It is written in simple language from the perspective of the user. Story points are used to measure the complexity of a story. The overall goal of a story is to provide value to its user within a set timeframe. Learn how to create a user story here.

Tasks

A task is a subsection of a story. It helps to break the story down and outline how it will be completed. Tasks tend to be more technical as they are used by members of the development team (e.g., a quality assurance tester) rather than a front-end user.

There are other grouping terms that crop up when working within an Agile structure. These terms include initiatives and features. Let's look at them in more detail.

Initiatives

An initiative is a group of epics. It can incorporate epics from lots of different teams, but they will all have a common objective. An initiative will naturally take more time than an epic.

Features

A feature refers to a certain functionality or service that satisfies a stakeholder's need. Each feature must outline the criteria involved and offer a specific business value.

Still wondering how these terms relate to each other? We will now explore how some of these various sections compare.

Epic vs story

A story is a single requirement, while an epic is a group of multiple stories. Picture a project with a lot of folders. The folders are the individual stories that are related in some way. They all combine to form one large project, which is the epic.

Another key difference between an epic and a story is the length of time each one takes. A story takes place within a sprint, which is usually about one or two weeks long. On the other hand, an epic will likely take between one and three months to complete.

Theme vs task

Themes and tasks are similar in that they both help with categorization, adding a sense of order to the work management process. However, themes bring a group of epics or initiatives together under one related banner. Tasks break a story down, creating sub-divisions within an existing section.

Themes are also broader and can spread across the entire company, relating to various epics, stories, and initiatives. Tasks, meanwhile, have a far more specific purpose. They are only used within the context of a single story and are not designed to be shared outside it.

Initiative vs feature

Initiatives and features can both draw from multiple areas to create compilations. An initiative can include epics from different teams, and a feature can involve several different stories.

The key differentiator between the two is the amount of time required. Initiatives involve long-term planning and can take up to a year to complete. Features, however, will typically take place within a single quarter.

Top tips for your Agile structure

Now you know how themes, epics, features, stories, initiatives, and tasks work in Agile project management. But how can you make this structure work in your organization?

One key thing to remember is the essence of Agile itself: adaptability. Make the structure work for your organization. If something isn't working, react quickly and make changes.

Secondly, spend some time training your staff on this particular Agile work structure. It will only be effective if your teams understand the various segments and how to work within them.

Another helpful tip is to invest in the best tools and technology to ease your teams into this framework. Find a software solution that will help you set up your Agile work structure and manage projects throughout the development life cycle. Why not try Wrike's all-in-one task management platform?

Manage your Agile workload with Wrike

With Wrike's versatile software, you can manage your Agile workflow in a few easy steps:

- Get started with an Agile teamwork template

- Use projects and folders to organize your work

- Build custom request forms to auto-assign tasks

- Create a Scrum dashboard to boost project visibility

- Monitor progress with an interactive Gantt chart

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