# Design Thinking - The Five Stages

Design thinking is a way of solving problems that starts with people, not with technology or ready-made answers. Its ideas were spread widely by the design company IDEO and the d.school at Stanford University, both connected with the designer David Kelley. The d.school describes the process in five stages: empathize, define, ideate, prototype and test. The stages are not a strict line; teams often go back to an earlier stage when they learn something new. Design thinking can help with products, services and everyday problems at work.

## 1. Empathize

The first stage is to understand the people that we are designing for. We observe them, talk with them and, where possible, try the experience ourselves. The aim is to discover their real needs and feelings, which are often different from what we expect. We listen more than we talk, and we put our own assumptions aside.

**Example:** A young man wants to help his grandmother with her new phone. He starts by empathizing: he sits with her and watches how she uses it. He discovers that the real problem is the small text, not the apps.

**At work:** Omar, an operations manager, hears that staff send their expense claims late. Before changing anything, he empathizes with them by watching three sales colleagues submit a claim. He sees that they lose paper receipts while they travel.

## 2. Define

The second stage is to turn what we learned into a clear problem statement. A good statement focuses on the people and their need, not on a particular solution. Many teams write it as a question that starts with the words: how might we. A clear definition keeps the team focused and stops it from solving the wrong problem.

**Example:** A family believes that it needs a bigger house. When they define the problem, they ask: how might we give the children a quiet place to study? A corner of a bedroom becomes a study space, and there is no need to move.

**At work:** Omar defines the problem for his team: how might we help travelling staff record an expense in under a minute? This question is much clearer than the old complaint that staff are slow.

## 3. Ideate

The third stage is to generate many possible solutions. In this stage, quantity matters more than quality, so we do not judge ideas too early. Bold ideas are welcome, because they often lead to practical ones. At the end, the team chooses a few promising ideas to try.

**Example:** Friends planning a birthday surprise ideate together and write down twenty ideas without criticising any of them. One funny idea, a treasure hunt, turns into a picnic with small clues. Everyone agrees that it is the best plan.



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**At work:** Omar's team ideates for thirty minutes and writes forty ideas on sticky notes. They choose two of them: taking a photo of the receipt at the moment of payment, and recording a short voice note.

## 4. Prototype

The fourth stage is to build quick and cheap versions of an idea. A prototype can be a sketch, a paper model, a simple screen or a role play. Its purpose is to make the idea real enough to learn from it. Because a prototype costs little, we can change it or throw it away without regret.

**Example:** Before buying a new sofa, a couple makes a prototype: they mark its size on the living room floor with tape. They see at once that it would block the door.

**At work:** In one afternoon, Omar's team builds a prototype of the expense tool with simple screens drawn on paper. It shows only three steps: take a photo, choose a category and press send.

## 5. Test

The fifth stage is to try the prototype with real users and to learn from their reactions. We watch what people do, not only what they say. Testing often reveals new problems, so the team may go back to define, ideate or prototype again. Each round improves the solution before large amounts of money and time are spent.

**Example:** A family tests a new meal plan for one week before buying food in bulk. The children reject two of the dishes, so the plan changes before any money is wasted.

**At work:** Omar tests the paper prototype with five sales colleagues. They like the photo step but find the list of categories confusing, so the team goes back and reduces it to four categories. After the second test, claims start to arrive on time.

## Conclusion

In summary, design thinking solves problems by starting with people. Its five stages are empathize, define, ideate, prototype and test, and teams move back and forth between them as they learn. The method does not need special talent, only curiosity, openness and the courage to try simple things early. When we test small ideas quickly, we avoid expensive mistakes later.

### Sources


- Stanford d.school (Hasso Plattner Institute of Design): Design Thinking Bootleg (the five modes) – https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources/design-thinking-bootleg
- Stanford d.school: Getting Started with Design Thinking – https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources/getting-started-with-design-thinking
- IDEO U: What is Design Thinking? – https://www.ideou.com/blogs/inspiration/what-is-design-thinking
- Note: the five stages are explained in our own words; this summary is independent and not endorsed by Stanford University or IDEO.




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