

# Comprehensive Anatomy of All Design Thinking Workshops | UX Collective

*Slava Shestopalov*

22-28 minuti

---

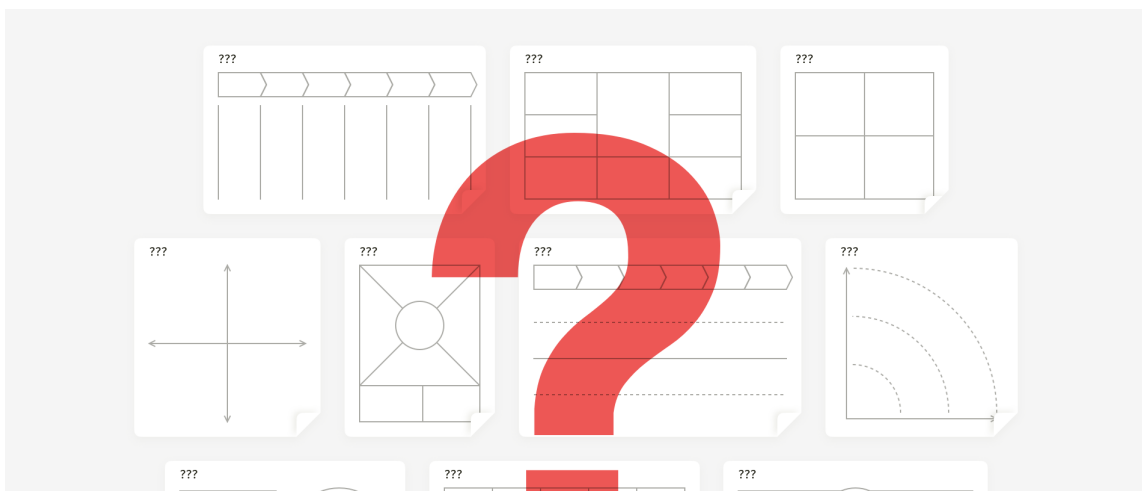
## Comprehensive Anatomy of All Design Thinking Workshops

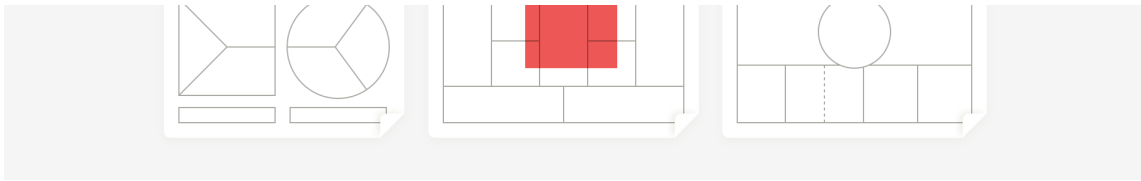
**An attempt to figure out the workshop nature once and for all**



*You can read this article in [Ukrainian](#) and [Portuguese](#).*

A lot has been written about why workshops are important for product teams, but today I'll focus on what they actually are. It's an attempt to debunk the myth that workshops are rocket science. But first, let's play a game.





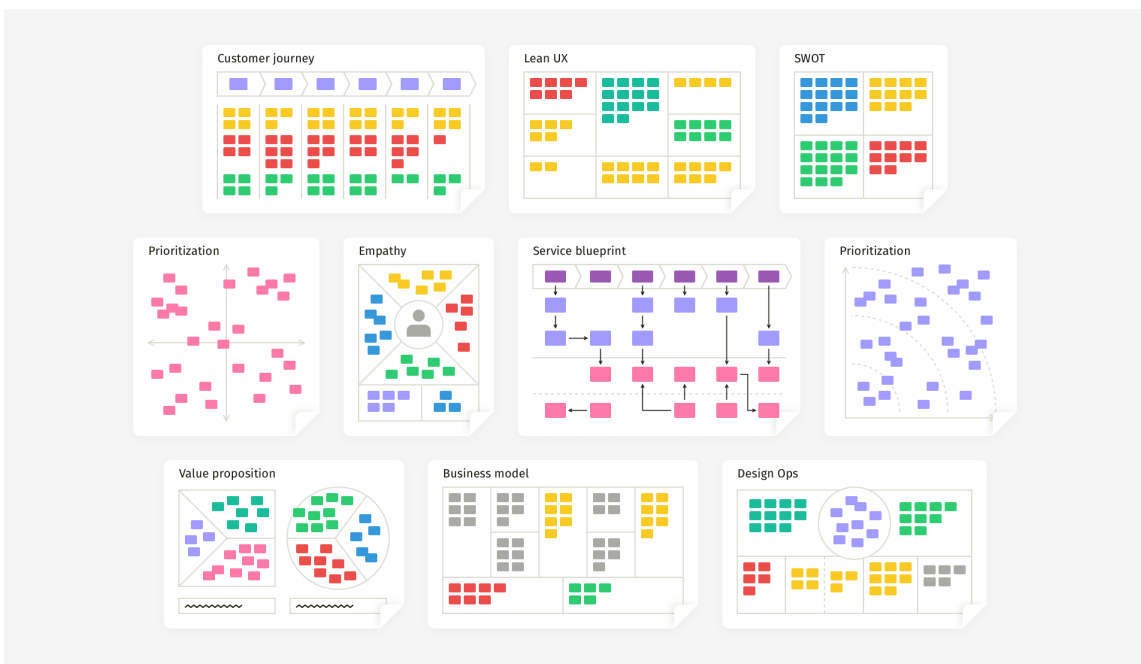
What types of workshops do these canvases represent?

How many workshop canvases on the picture above do you recognize? And which of them have you already tried in practice?

Not many design projects run without colorful sticky notes and team exercises on the whiteboard these days. But the number of workshop types scares! Empathy mapping, value proposition, customer journey, personas, business model, design sprint, etc. And these are just several “classic” examples without countless derivations and mixtures.

But I’ve got good news: all workshops are *atomic* — just like design systems. Anyone can easily grasp the nature of any complex workshop by learning its elementary parts and key principles.

By the way, here is the answer to the question above:



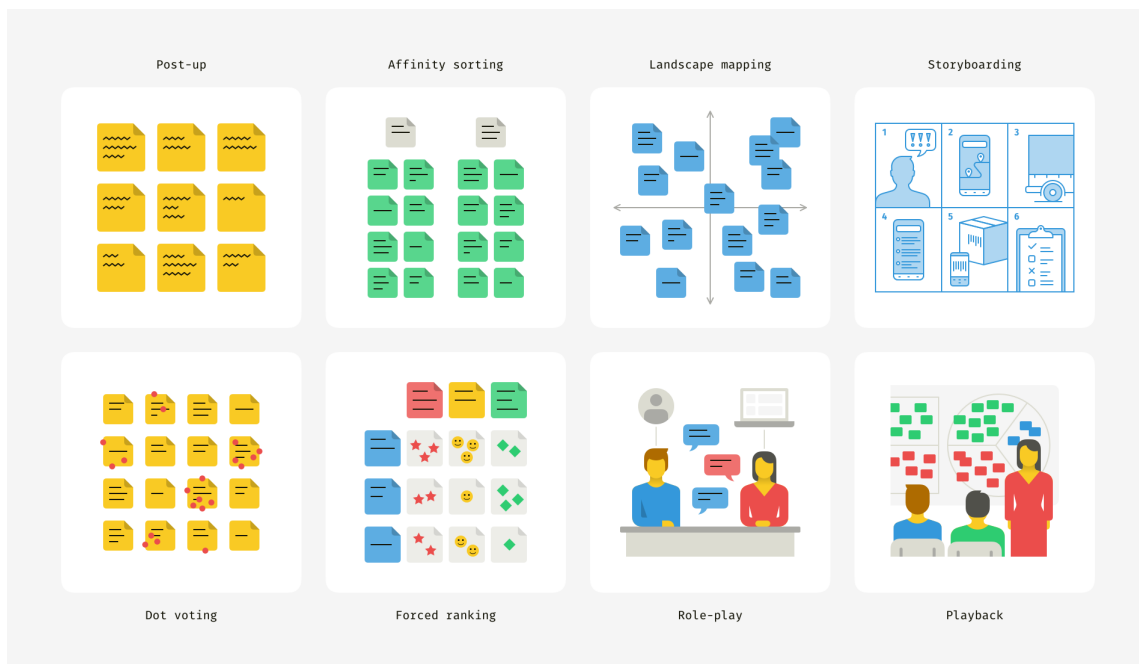
There are so many types of workshops that one cannot

remember them all.

Let's go straight to the point and check if various workshops are so much different as they are often portrayed.

## Chapter I. Foundational activities

Any workshop has a structure. Every time a facilitator asks participants to do something different, it's, in fact, starting a new stage, new activity. Foundational activities are “atoms,” the elementary particles of workshops. Although they are [well-described by NNGroup](#), I see nothing wrong in refreshing and extending this knowledge.



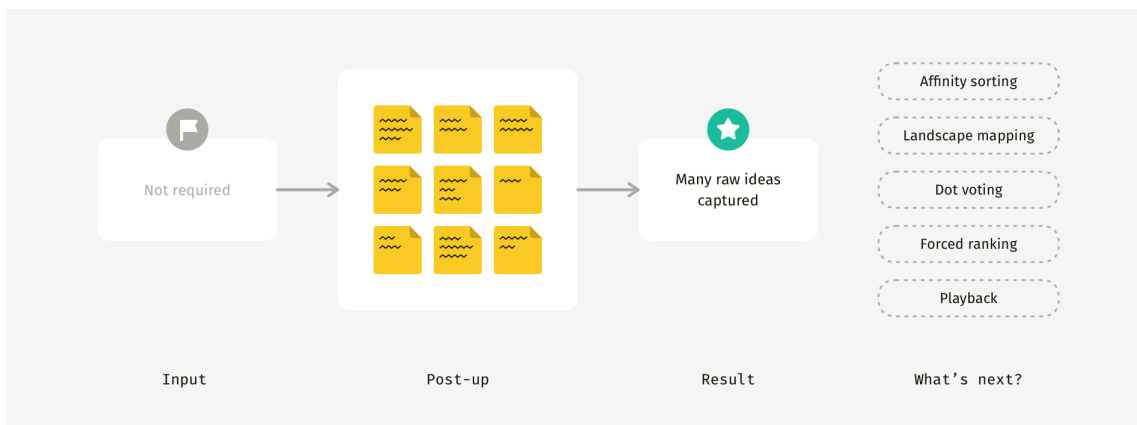
Foundational activities (according to Nielsen Norman Group with my humble adjustments).

Foundational activities are so elementary that you can explain them in a couple of sentences.

### ***Activity 1. Post-up***

- *Description:* writing ideas on sticky notes (instead of just talking). It's a door-opener to the majority of other activities.

- *Goal:* gather and expose participants' opinions and expertise.
- *Needed input:* none, you are free to start from scratch.

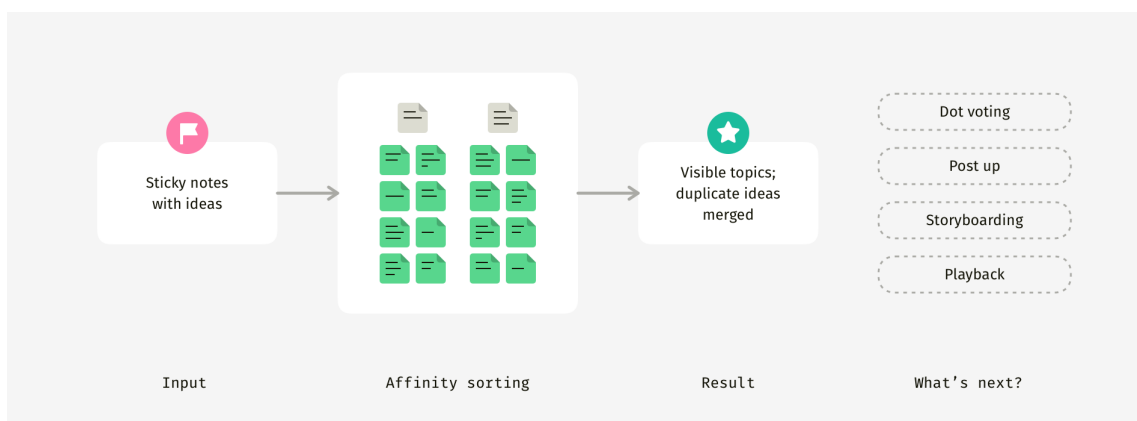


Post-up aims at extracting and exposing ideas from team members' heads.

*Example:* You invited experts in marketing, technology, and customer support, and they all have different experiences and goals. Neither you nor the invited people have a full picture of who thinks what. You ask the team to write their opinions on sticky notes. As a result, you have a vast panorama of perspectives instead of uncertainty.

## Activity 2. *Affinity sorting*

- *Description:* grouping related sticky notes and naming the groups.
- *Goal:* merge duplicates and define the key topics or directions.
- *Needed input:* some previously created sticky notes.

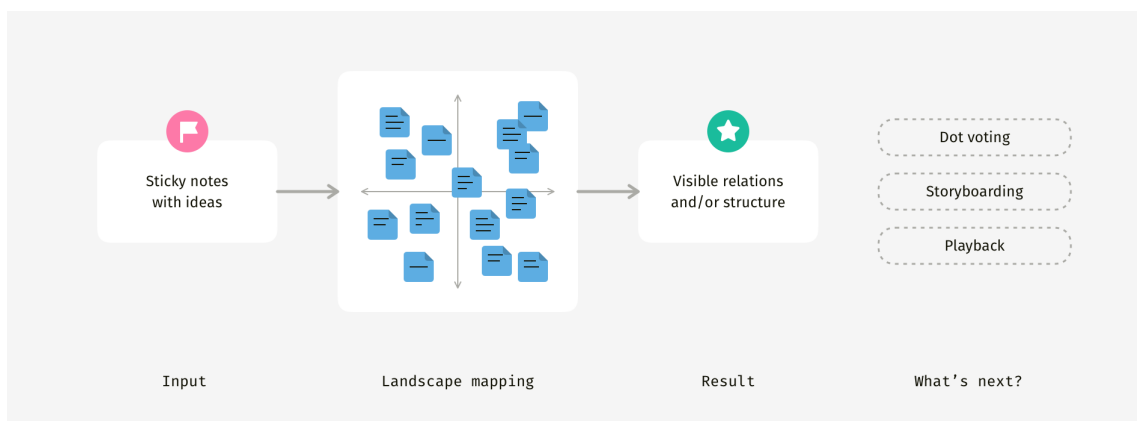


Affinity sorting helps to see tendencies in many separate ideas.

*Example:* A team has written a hundred sticky notes with ideas for a new mobile app. Some of the notes tell the same thing in other words, and, generally, there are too many pieces of information. You ask people to group related ideas, stick duplicates together, and give names to the groups. In the end, you have a handful of topics instead of separate ideas.

### Activity 3. *Landscape mapping*

- *Description:* organizing sticky notes in some order on a canvas (matrix, sequence, grid, etc.). It is usually time- or priority-based.
- *Goal:* see relations and tendencies or define the priorities.
- *Needed input:* some previously created sticky notes.

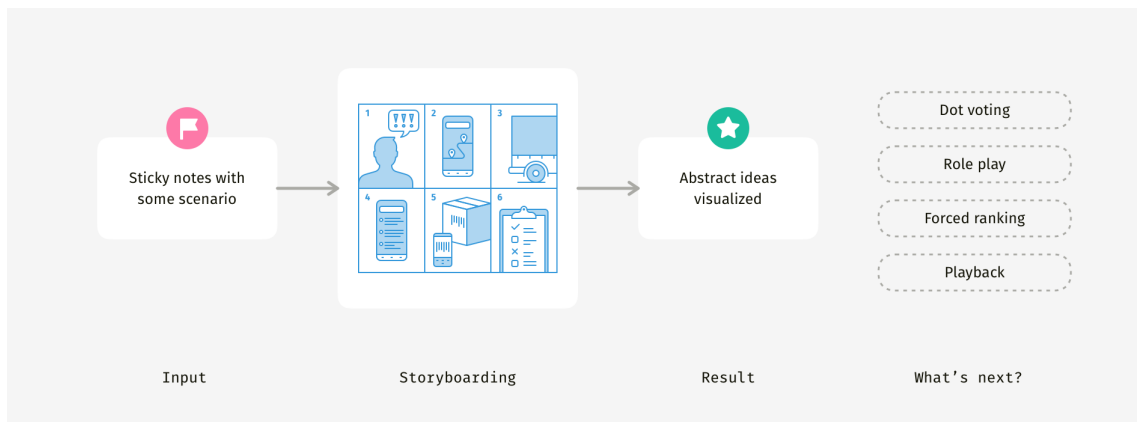


Landscape mapping creates a structure out of different pieces of data.

*Example:* A team has generated many ideas of useful features, but a relationship between these ideas is not clear yet. You ask people to place the sticky notes on the matrix “Value vs. Feasibility.” As a result of this exercise, you understand which ideas have the highest value and feasibility and which ideas are neither feasible nor valuable.

### Activity 4. *Storyboarding*

- *Description:* sketching the key steps of a scenario.
- *Goal:* visualize abstract ideas.
- *Needed input:* sticky notes that describe a scenario textually.

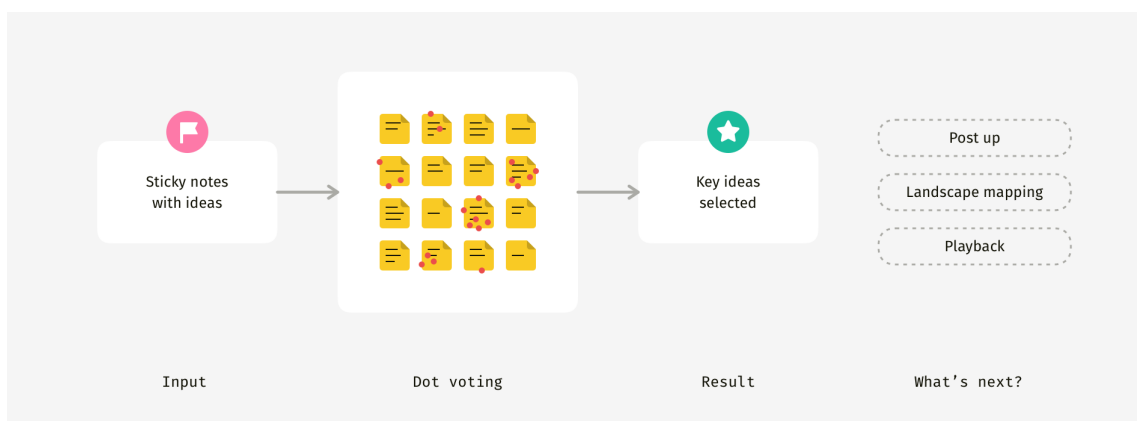


Storyboarding is a way to vividly picture an abstract story.

*Example:* A team has a sequence of sticky notes that describe the process of using a new web application. However, such a sequence is too vague and difficult to imagine. You ask people to take sheets of paper and sketch 6–8 keyframes of the scenario. As a result, participants visualize how exactly a user might interact with the application.

## Activity 5. Dot voting

- *Description:* voting with sticky dots for ideas on sticky notes.
- *Goal:* shortlist the most valuable or high-priority items.
- *Needed input:* some previously created sticky notes.

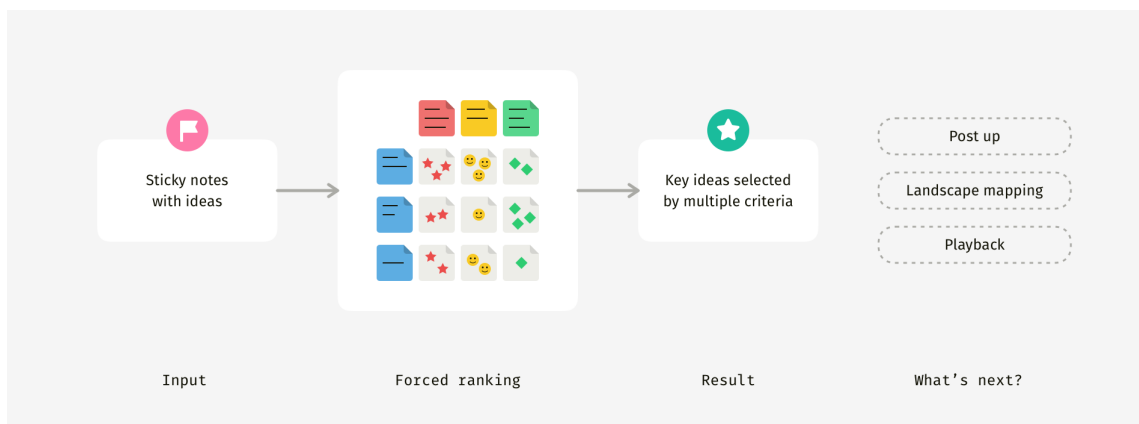


Dot voting is a quick-and-dirty decision-making method.

*Example:* Team members have generated a lot of sticky notes with user pain points. Unfortunately, it's impossible to address them all at once, so you have to decide what to put on the back burner. You give each participant three sticky dots and ask them to vote for the most critical pain points. As a result, the team can focus only on top-voted items.

## Activity 6. *Forced ranking*

- *Description:* evaluating sticky notes by multiple criteria simultaneously.
- *Goal:* back up a complex decision or trade-off.
- *Needed input:* some previously created sticky notes and agreed criteria.



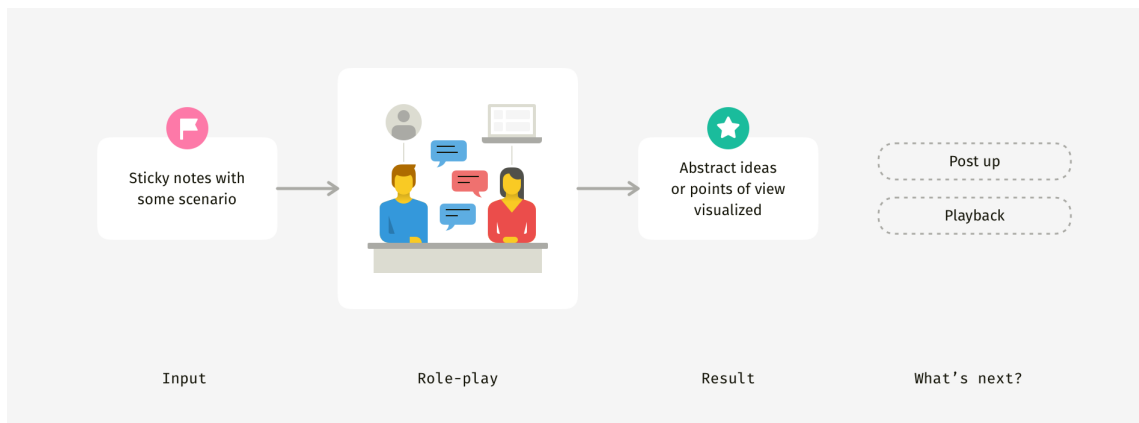
Forced ranking is a decision-making technique that relies on multiple criteria.

*Example:* Your team generated feature ideas; however, you cannot agree on which of them are the best ones to implement. You take the criteria “Feasibility,” “Value to business,” and “Value to customers” and evaluate each idea on a scale from 0 to 3. As a result, you identify a small number of the most feasible, beneficial, and desired ideas.

By the way, I wrote an [article about the subjectivity of team voting and how you can minimize stakeholders' bias](#).

## Activity 7. Role-play

- *Description:* acting out a scenario or someone's point of view.
- *Goal:* build empathy and visualize abstract ideas.
- *Needed input:* sticky notes that describe a scenario or point of view.



Role-play helps to visualize the process of interaction with a product or service.

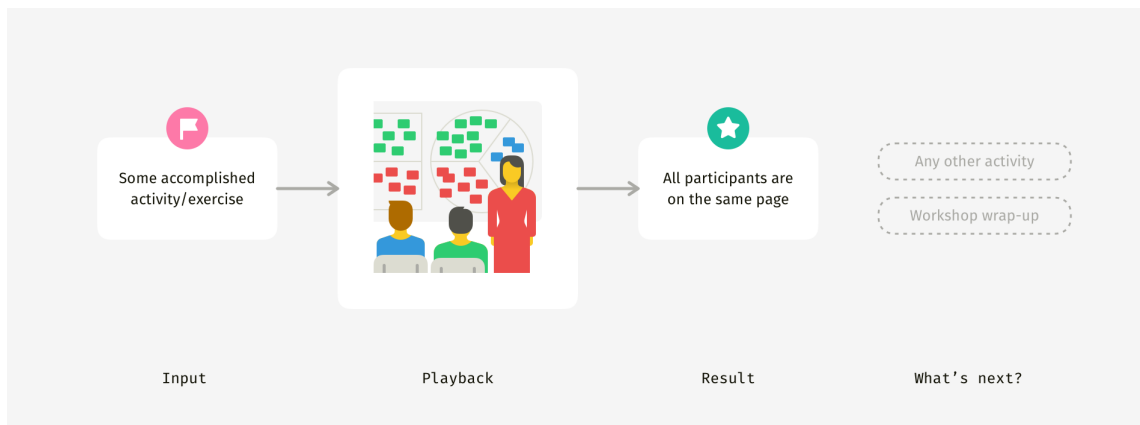
*Example:* Your team described the interaction with a web application as a sequence of sticky notes. Still, it's not clear how such a scenario will look like in reality. You split the team into pairs, assign roles ("Application" and "User"), and ask the pairs to perform a scenario. As a result, the team visualizes the exact ways of how the interaction can appear in real life.

## Activity 8. Playback

- *Activity:* presenting or reflecting on a separate exercise or recalling the results of the previous workshopping day.
- *Goal:* make sure all participants are on the same page.
- *Needed input:* accomplishing at least one of the activities



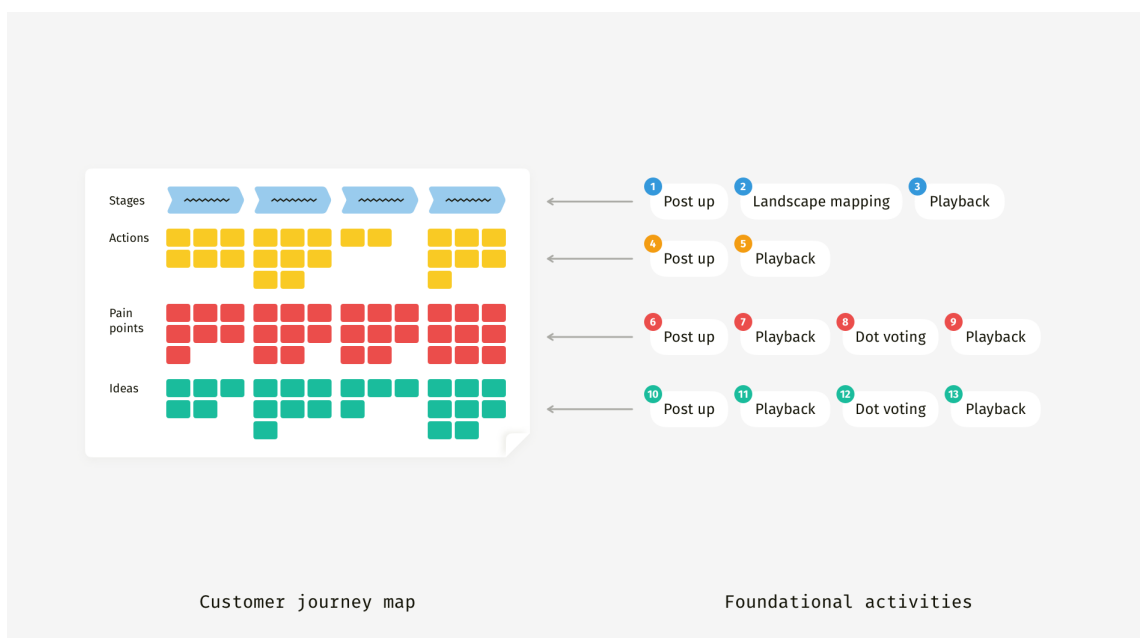
described above.



Playback is an auxiliary activity that ensures the team is on the same page.

*Example:* Team members have just finished storyboarding, but now sketches are obvious only to their respective authors. You give each participant a couple of minutes to present their thoughts, while others are listening. As a result, all team members understand what each storyboard means.

Now, let's take one of the popular workshop formats, customer journey mapping, and examine why it's built this way. Although I selected a simplified version, at first glance, it looks quite complex: several rows, many columns, different sticky note colors. But in a minute, you'll recognize 13 foundational activities that constitute a journey map.

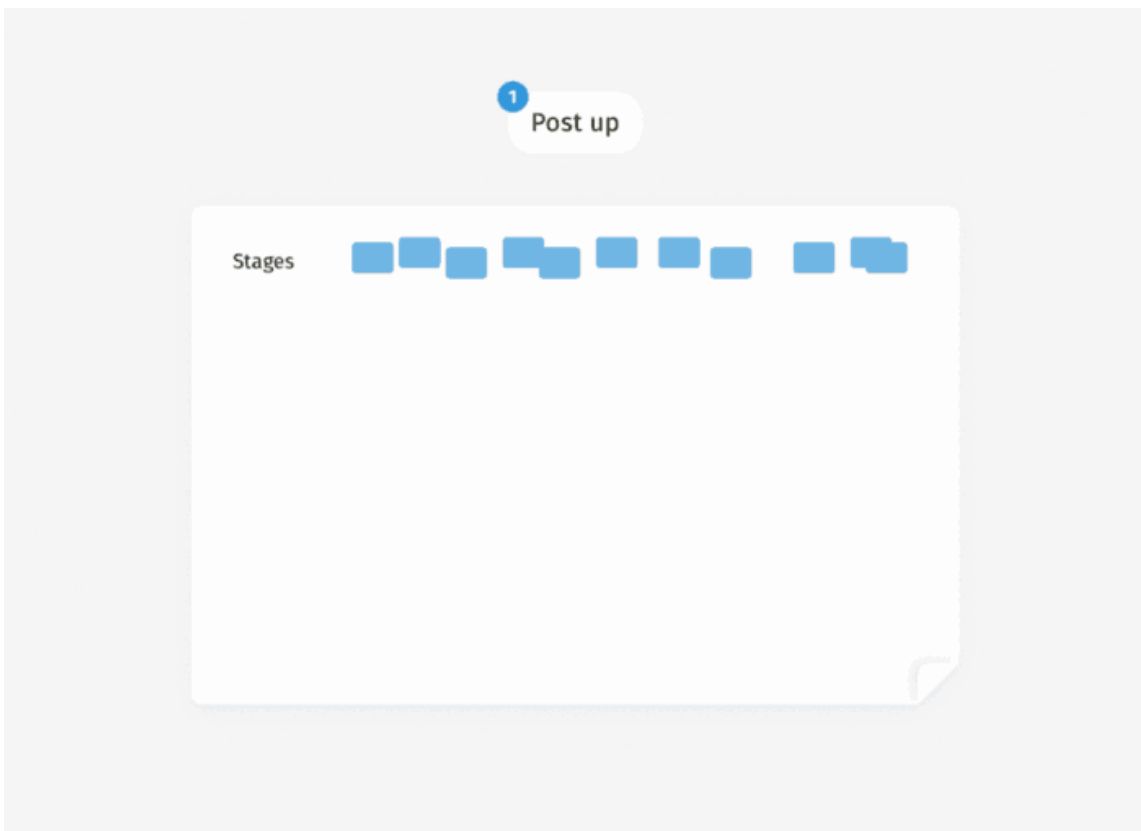


Any complex workshop is just a sequence of foundational activities.

These are the steps to compose such a map on a workshop.

1. *Post up*: Participants write the stages of the user's journey. The stages don't have a particular order or accuracy yet.
2. *Landscape mapping*: The facilitator and participants collaboratively create a sequence of stages and filter out duplicates.
3. *Playback*: The facilitator reads the stage titles out loud.
4. *Post up*: Participants write the user's actions on sticky notes and stick them inside the corresponding stages.
5. *Playback*: The facilitator reads the user's actions out loud.
6. *Post up*: Participants write the user's pain points on sticky notes and stick them inside of the corresponding stages under the row with actions.
7. *Playback*: The facilitator reads the user's actions out loud.
8. *Dot voting*: Participants vote for the most critical user's pain points.
9. *Playback*: The facilitator reads the top-voted pain points out loud.
10. *Post up*: Participants write ideas about addressing top-voted pain points and stick the notes inside the corresponding stages.
11. *Playback*: The facilitator reads the generated ideas out loud.
12. *Dot voting*: Participants vote for the most valuable ideas.
13. *Playback*: The facilitator reads the top-voted ideas out loud and wraps up the whole session.

And here is a simple animation of the whole workshop flow:



13 foundational activities of a customer journey map.

See how we can dissect a complex workshop? It's not rocket science — just a set of activities that build upon one another. Outputs from the previous step become the input for the

following one. Easy as pie: you need to define the stages first to map out relevant user actions; user actions help to recall pain points; finally, solution ideas address those pain points. And two sessions of voting in-between help not to lose focus.

### **In a nutshell:**

- Each foundational activity helps you get unique results and is compatible with particular other activities — just like Lego bricks.
- Almost all the foundational activities require input; only post-up enables generating ideas from scratch.

## **Chapter II. Activity variables**

The trick with foundational activities is that these building blocks can have different properties depending on the objectives and group dynamics during your workshop. Here are several problems you might want to tackle by modifying this or that foundational activity:

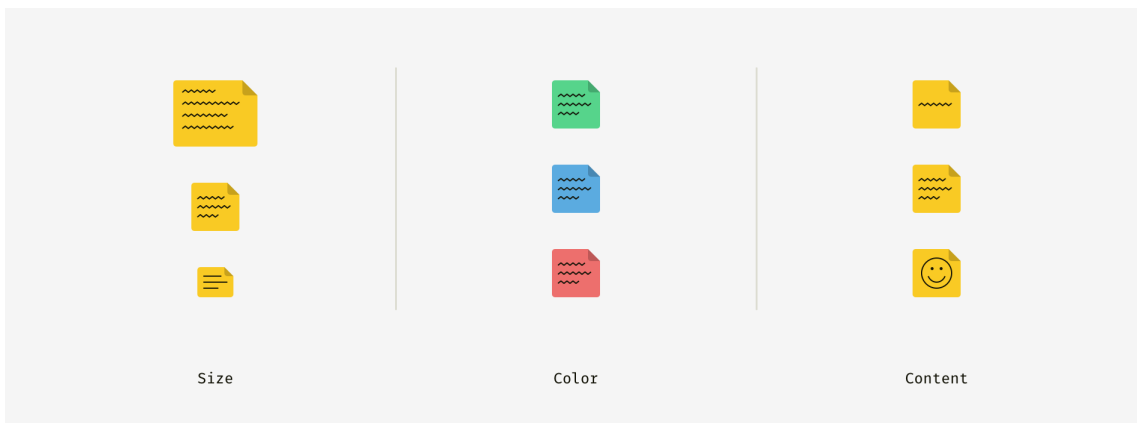
- How to calm down an overwhelming or destructive participant?
- How to engage knowledgeable yet humble participants?
- How to minimize participants' bias?
- How to tackle organizational issues: inconvenient workspace, lack of materials, slow internet connection, tight schedule, etc.?

Below I collected some common *variables*, in other words, ways to adjust foundational activities to your particular case.

### **Variables 1. Post-up**

- *Sticky note size*: large, medium, small.
- *Color*: particular color, any color, or multiple colors.

- *Content*: should follow a certain format (word, phrase, sentence, emoji, doodle) or not regulated.

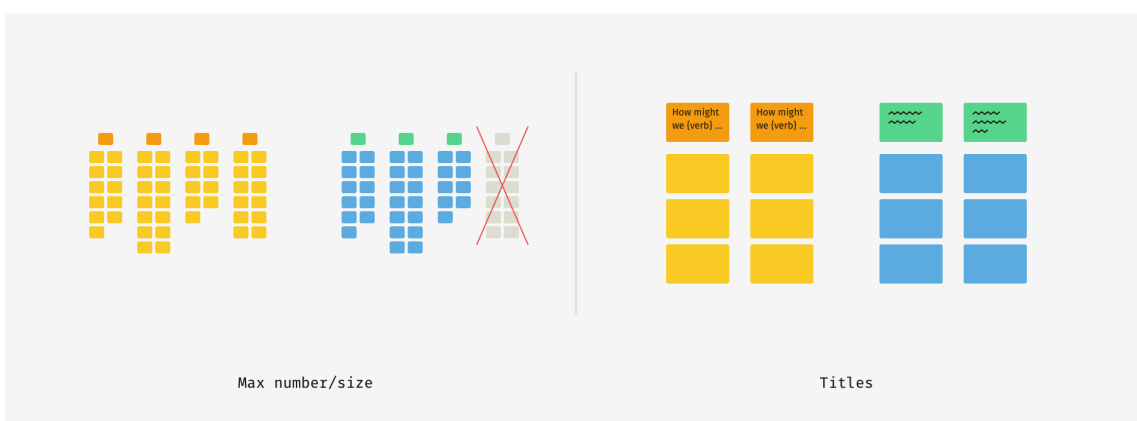


Sticky notes can have different sizes, colors, and content rules.

*Example:* For a warm-up exercise, you distribute small yellow sticky notes and ask participants to depict their current mood with a single emoji. But in another exercise, you provide mid-size red notes, and the task is to formulate project risks and constraints with a couple of key words.

## Variables 2. Affinity sorting

- *Group size/number*: restricted or not.
- *Group title*: should follow some format or not constrained.



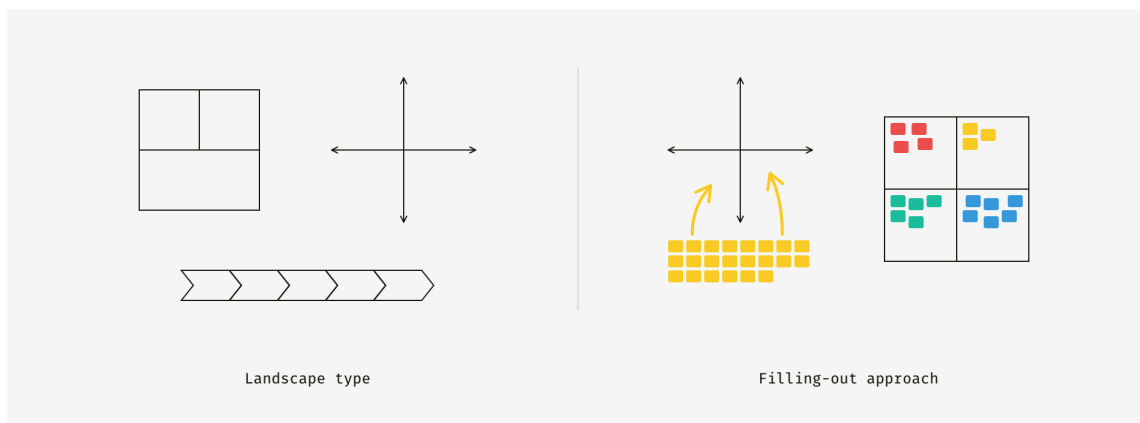
Affinity sorting can have a different number of groups and rules for composing titles.

*Example:* Your team has never participated in such workshops before, so they don't know what the granularity of grouping

should be. So, you ask them to create 3–5 groups of 5+ sticky notes and name them in the format “How might we... {solve problem X}?”

### Variables 3. Landscape mapping

- *Landscape type*: timeline, matrix, quadrants, hierarchical, etc.
- *Filling-out approach*: filling out an empty canvas or transferring existing sticky notes to a canvas.

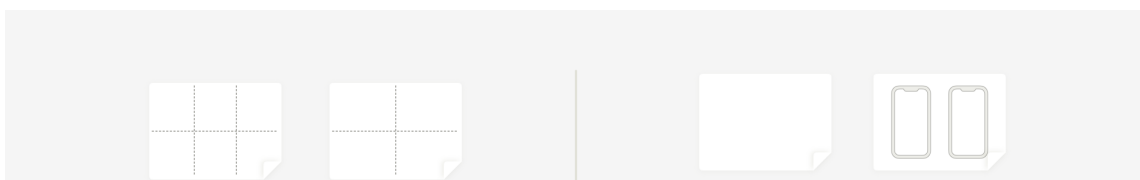


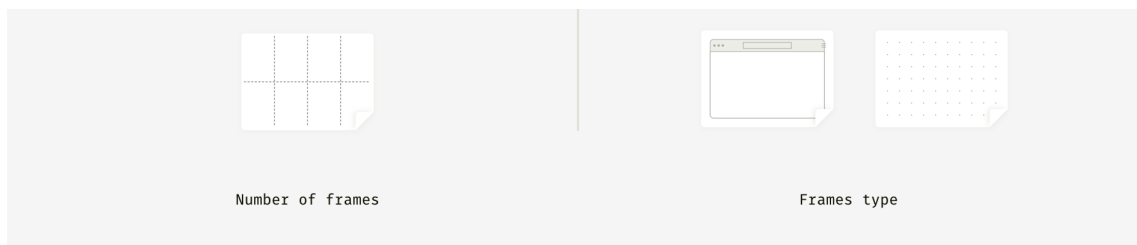
Landscape mapping is usually based on some canvas, which shapes the whole exercise.

*Example:* If you prioritize product features it's better to generate them first and then organize on the prioritizing canvas. But when you visualize a process, it's more efficient to fill out an empty time-based canvas step by step.

### Variables 4. Storyboarding

- *Number of frames*: defined in advance (4, 6, 8, etc.) or not restricted.
- *Frames type*: empty or with templates (for instance, dot grid, screens of digital devices, dialog bubbles).



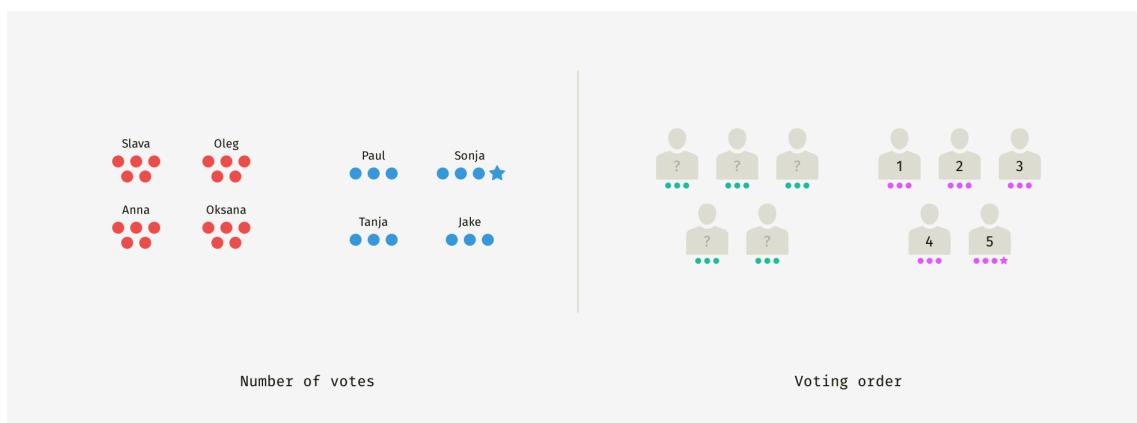


The fidelity and focus of storyboarding depend on templates distributed among participants.

*Example:* Your storyboarding session is about the end-to-end customer journey — not just actions within some digital product (site or app). So, you distribute empty sheets of paper without any predefined elements. But if you want to focus on interface ideas, it'll make sense to distribute templates with grids and schematic depiction of digital devices.

## Variables 5. Dot voting

- *Number of votes:* equal for every one (2, 3, 5, etc.) or the key decision-maker is granted with an additional vote.
- *Voting order:* all together or one by one; if one by one, a random order or the facilitator tells who votes next.



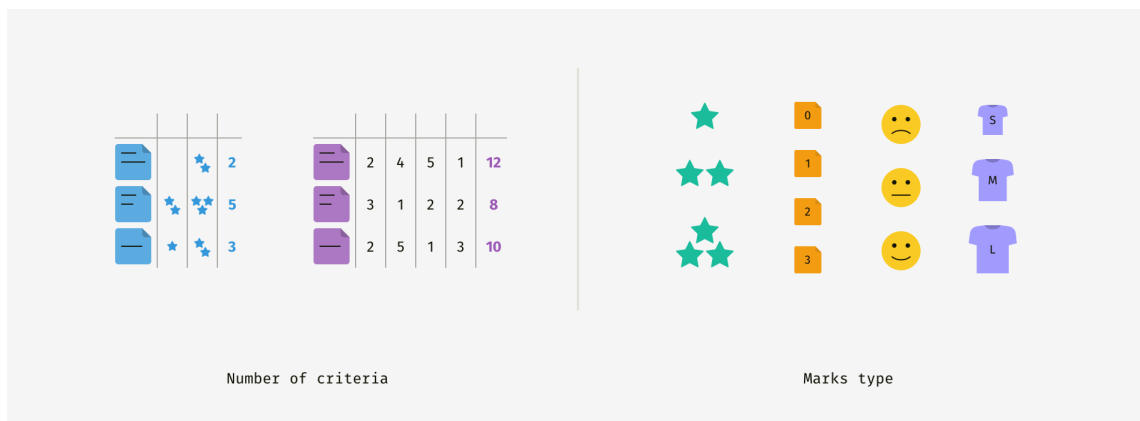
Dot voting shows different results depending on the vote distribution and voting order.

*Example:* One of the executive officers of the company unexpectedly decided to attend your workshop. You know that she has strong opinions about the strategy and likes to pull rank

on team members. So, you grant her an additional voting dot but ask her to vote after everyone else.

## Variables 6. Forced ranking

- *Number of criteria*: minimally 2 but can be more.
- *Marks type*: numeric scales (0–3, 1–5, etc.), symbols (stars, dollars, emoji, etc.), T-shirt sizing (S, M, L, XL), metaphors (pebble/rock/boulder).



Forced ranking depends on evaluation criteria and marks or scales.

*Example:* Your team needs to prioritize feature ideas, and you should take into account three significant criteria: technical feasibility, expected profitability for the business, and expected desirability for customers. You create a grid with three columns and use numeric marks so that you can sum them for each feature idea and understand the final scores.

## Variables 7. Roleplay

This activity is probably the most customizable and has not many standard elements. The number and type of roles differ from one workshop to another. You can either prepare some props for more realism (for example rapid paper prototype) or participants can improvise and pretend they are using digital

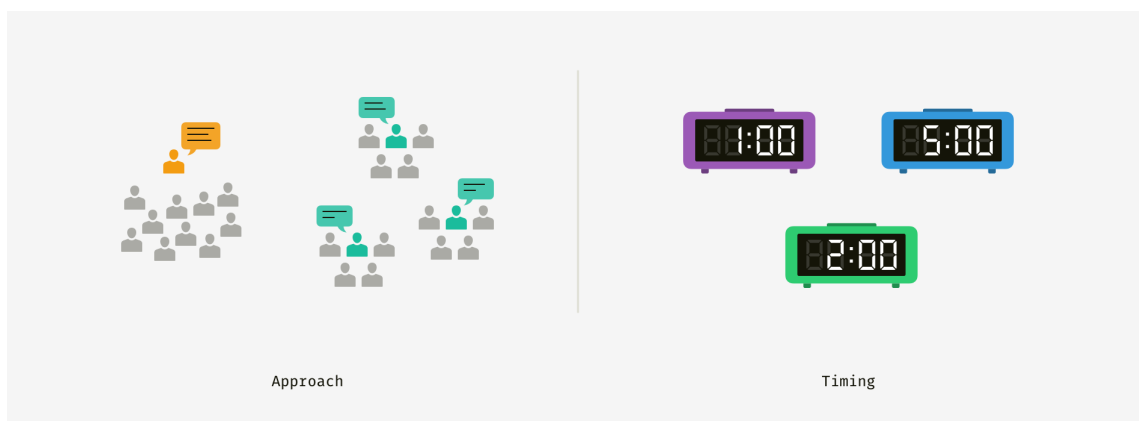


devices or mock some actions.

*Example:* You understand that the team has never practiced roleplay before and might feel fear and embarrassment. So, you show an example of roleplay with the co-facilitator and equip people with props (rapid prototypes) so that they feel more confident and get into character quicker.

## Variables 8. Playback

- *Approach:* the facilitator comments on what the team has done, or each participant or subgroup presents their results one by one.
- *Timing:* strictly defined (1, 3, 5, etc. minutes) or not limited.



Playback can involve everyone or be done by a facilitator alone, hence different duration.

*Example:* The previous exercise was roleplay, and participants worked in the groups of three. To create common understanding, you give each group 3 minutes to share what they've discovered or understood during this activity.

## In a nutshell:

- As a facilitator, you can and should adjust any foundational activity to your needs and situation.

- Variables help to make a workshop smooth and productive.

### ***Surprise-surprise, homework!***

Now, let's see how you will solve the following cases. Feel free to write your answers in the comments to the article.

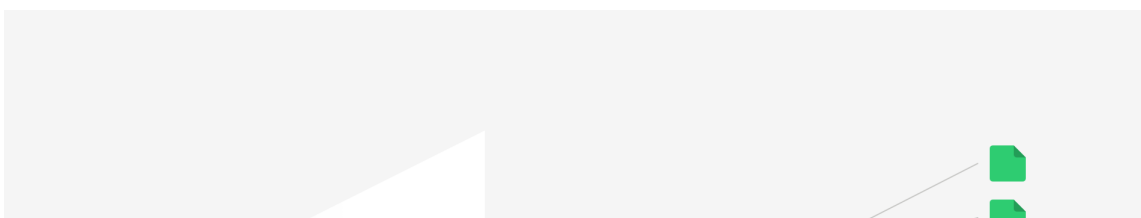
1. An authoritarian boss is on the workshop, and you are about to facilitate dot voting. What do you do to neutralize her influence?
2. Your team is short on time but has to Affinity-sort over 200 sticky notes. How do you organize them to finish on time?
3. Workshop participants have never role-played before and are very sceptical. How do you organize the exercise to engage them?

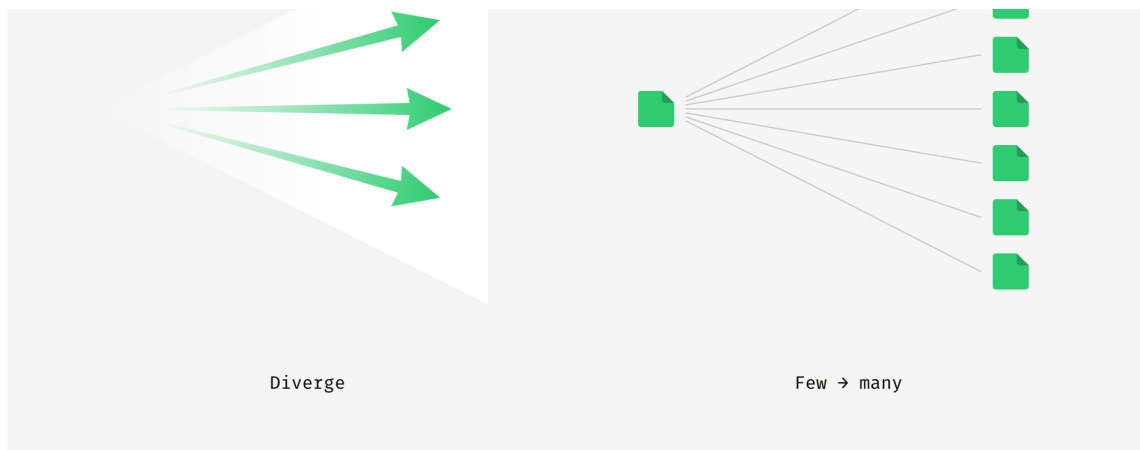
## **Chapter III. Work with information**

You might have heard about the so-called “double diamond,” but what does it mean in practice? First things first, we'll start from the basics and then gradually move to the diamond, not to mention the double one. You already know eight foundational activities, but they can do only two things with information: *diverge* and *converge*.

### **Step 1. Diverge**

Diverge means to produce information from scratch or expand a few pieces of information. You can memorize this term associating it with more familiar words “diverse” or “dive deeper.” In real life, it means you have one or several sticky notes and, through a certain activity, get many sticky notes.





Diverging expands initial information to a variety of ideas and perspectives.

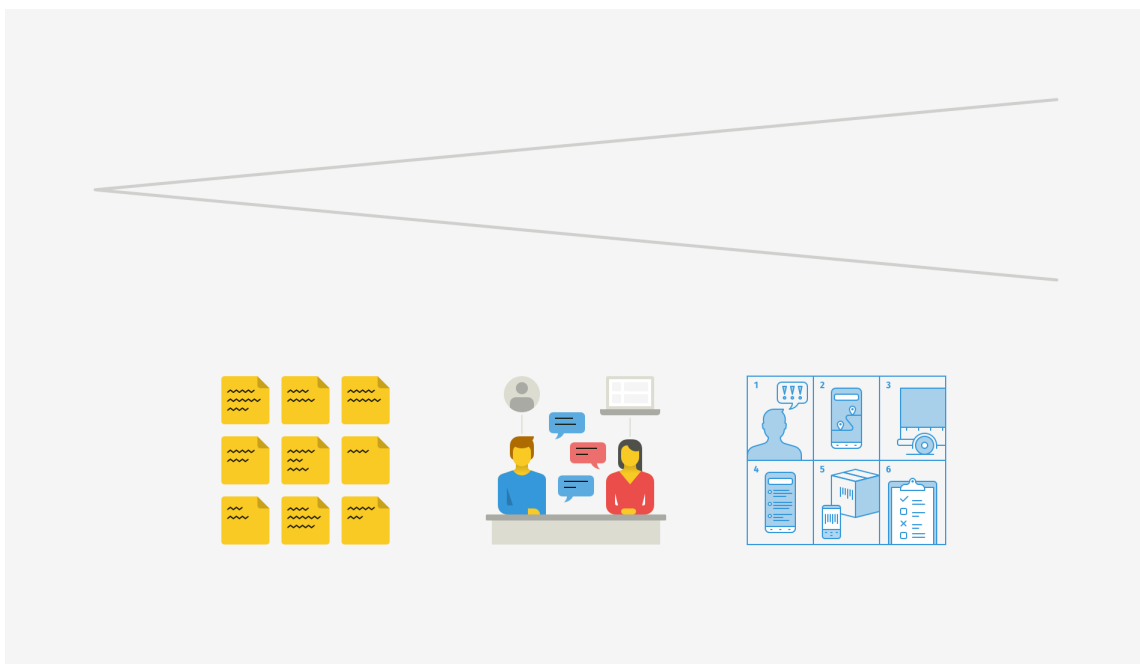
*Examples:*

one client problem → hundred of solution ideas;

dozen of user pain points → lots of suggestions for potential benefits;

three client goals → many ideas to fulfill those goals.

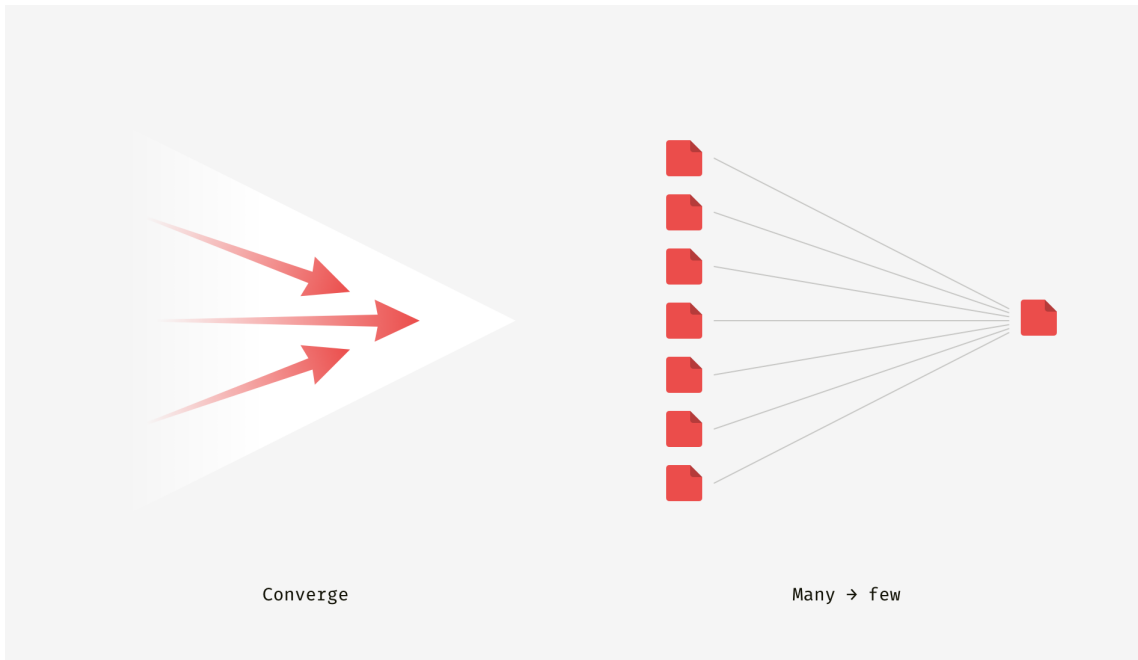
Diverge is not just a theoretical thing; it's closely connected with certain foundational activities. For example, your team can diverge by means of post-up, storyboarding, and roleplay.



Diverging activities: post-up, storyboarding, and roleplay.

## Step 2. Converge

Converge is opposite to diverge and means to extract the most significant or top-priority part of the information. “Converge” sounds like “condense” or “conclude.” On the practical side, it’s getting a comparably small selection of thoughts out of many sticky notes.



Converging narrows down a lot of information to several key points.

*Examples:*

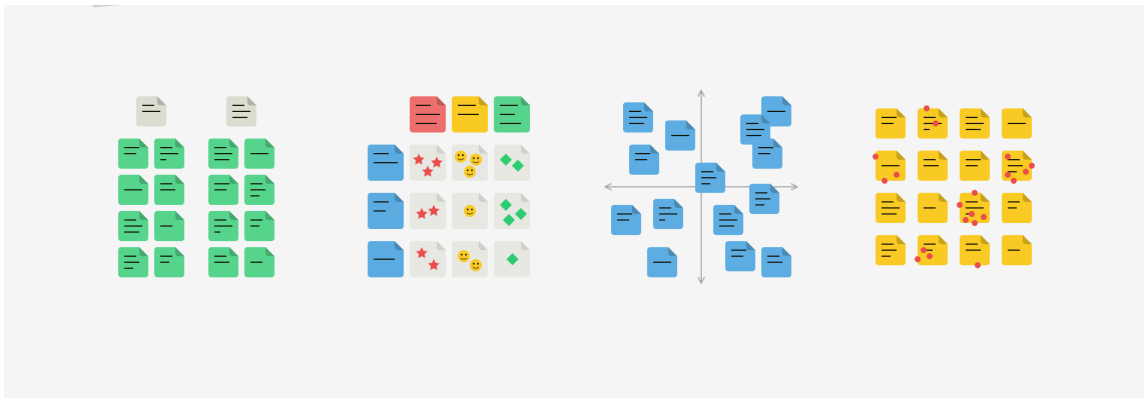
hundred of solution ideas → few ideas selected for implementation;

lots of suggestions for potential benefits → one benefit to focus on;

many ideas to fulfill client goals → three most feasible ideas.

And again, converge is related to foundational activities, namely affinity sorting, landscape mapping, dot voting, and forced ranking.



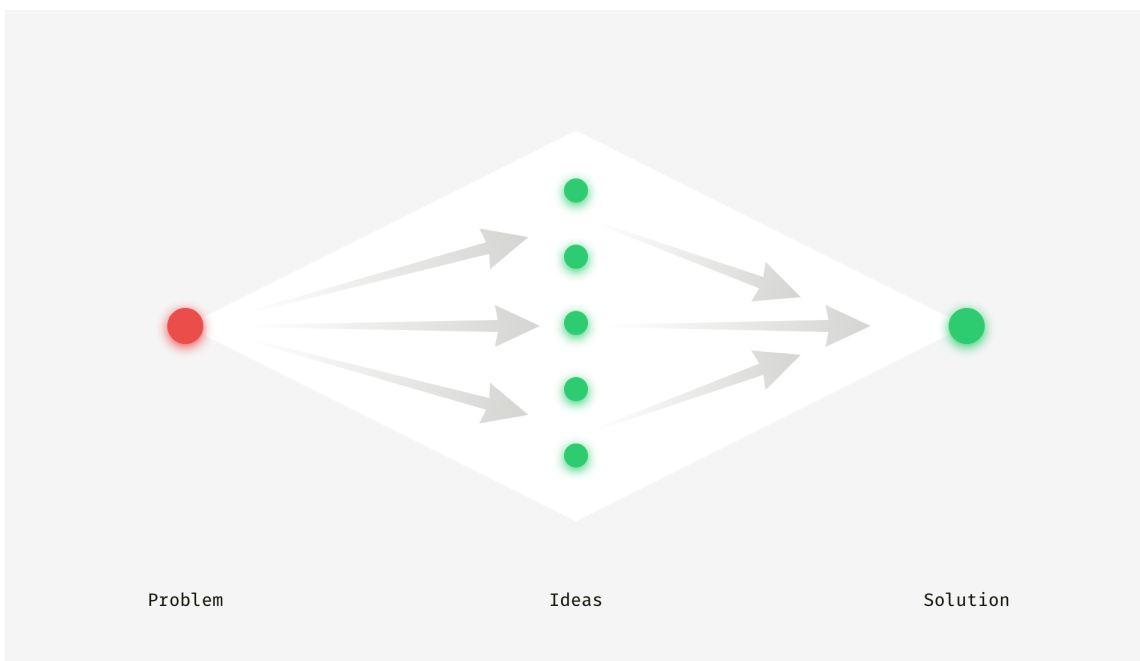


Converging activities: affinity sorting, landscape mapping, dot voting, forced ranking.

And what about playback? Well, this unique exercise doesn't modify the information — it just ensures everyone has understood all the findings and agrees with them.

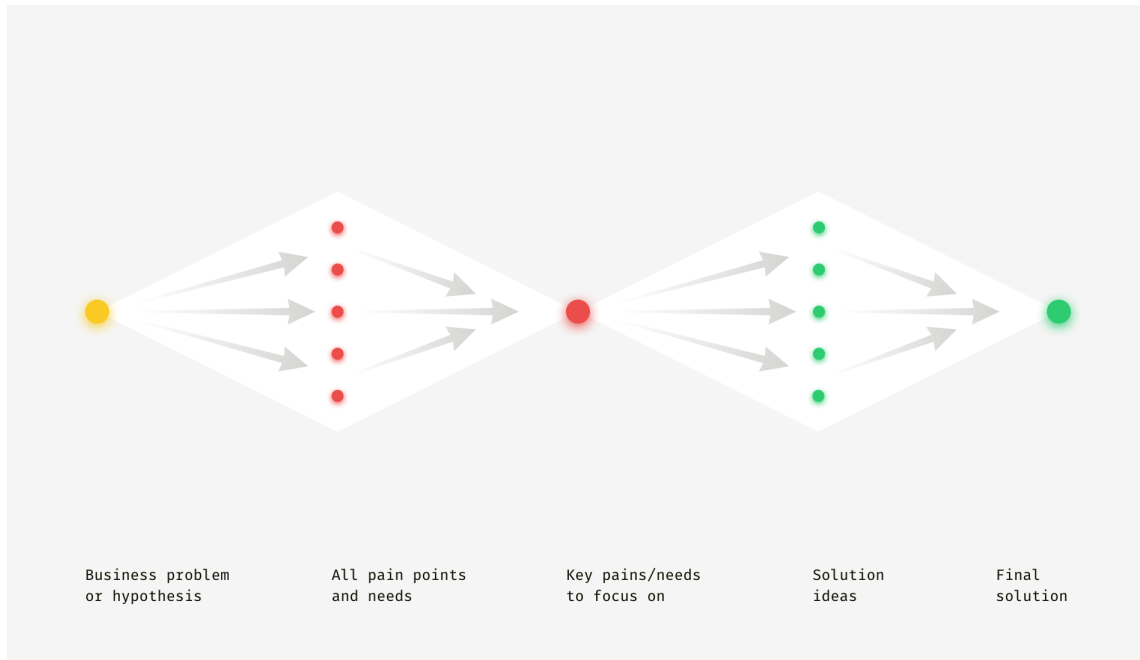
### Step 3. Double diamond

A diamond appears as a result of consequent diverge and converge stages. For example, your team identifies a problem, then brainstorms on the solutions, and finally selects the best solution to be implemented.



A combination of diverging and converging during a workshop forms a “diamond.”

But why the *double* diamond? It's a minimally meaningful combination of the “diverge/converge,” which has become so popular that people sometimes forget what its parts mean. The double diamond describes how one should think to identify a problem and find a solution.



The double diamond symbolizes a meaningful alternation of “diverge/converge” in a workshop.

### **In a nutshell:**

- There are two ways of working with information — converge and diverge. You either generate stuff or make a choice.
- Team dynamics looks like diamonds: team members expand or shrink information several times during a workshop.

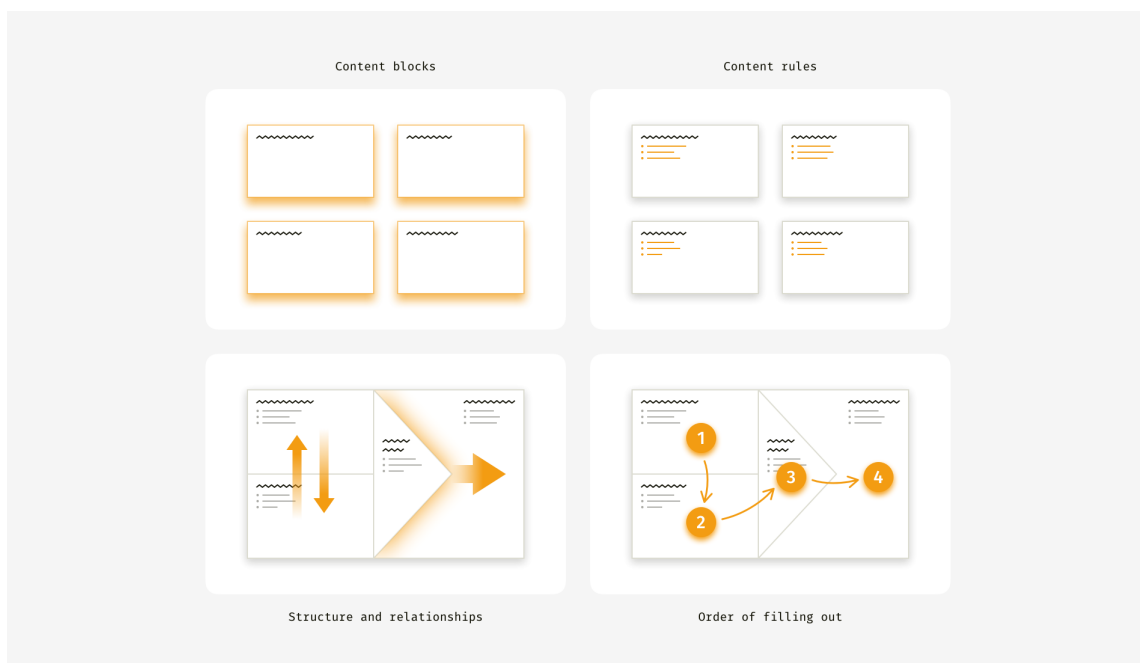
## **Chapter IV. Canvas anatomy**

Remember landscape mapping? This exercise is always based on some canvas — either thoroughly prepared or improvised.

Canvases help decompose and convey complex ideas, but the variety of these grid sheets confuses. Proud authors often

declare their canvas is unique and the only “right” one; to be fair, quite a few canvases have become standard in the area of innovation. However, all canvases are similar by nature and consist of the four main components:

- content blocks;
- content rules;
- structure and relationships;
- order of filling out.

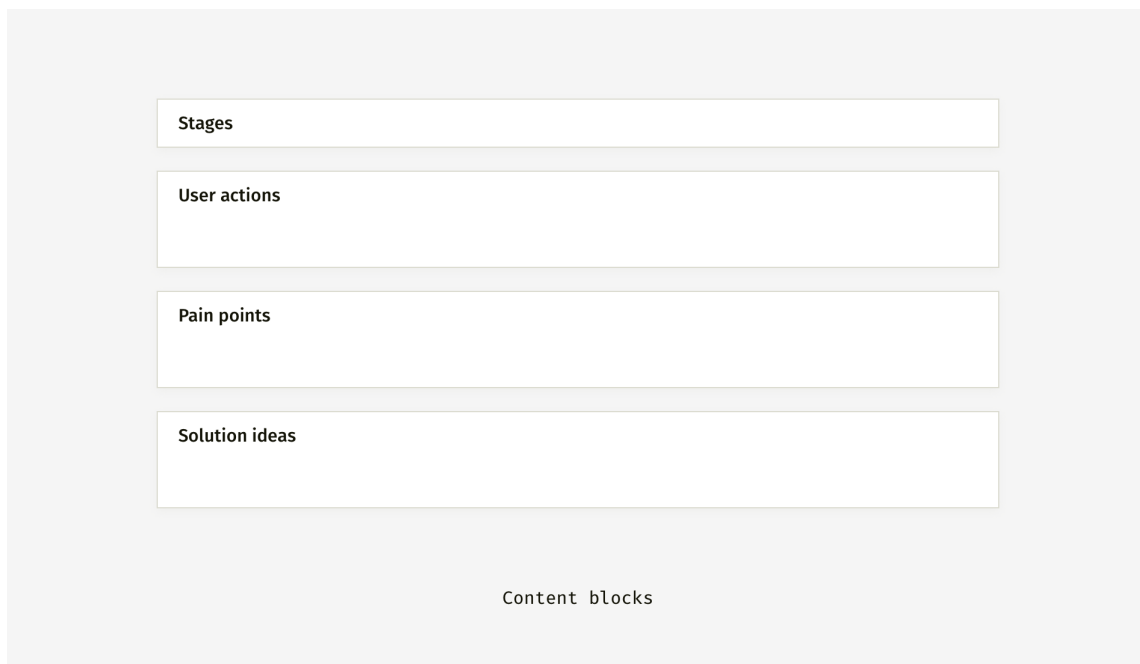


All canvases have the same nature: blocks, rules, a structure, and filling-out order.

Let's take a closer look at each of the elements.

## Part 1. Content blocks

Canvases gather information in a structured way; that's why they cannot exist without blocks of content. Blocks are like drawers and shelves in a cupboard where you store household stuff. The purpose of a canvas largely depends on its blocks. For instance, some canvases form a holistic vision, whereas others smash opposite perspectives.

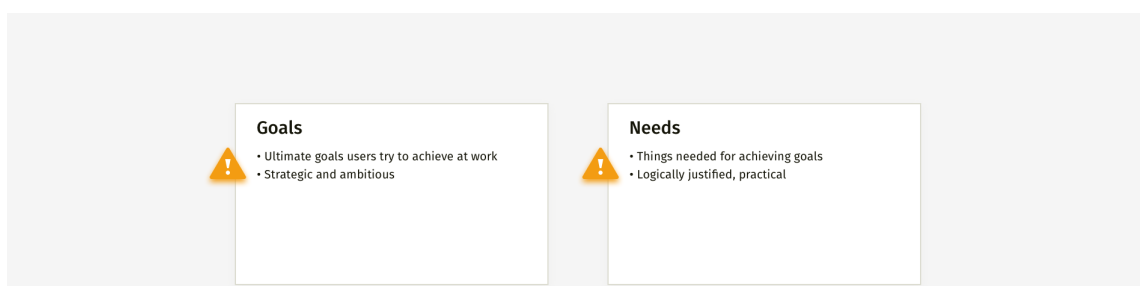


Content blocks are like drawers for collecting information step by step.

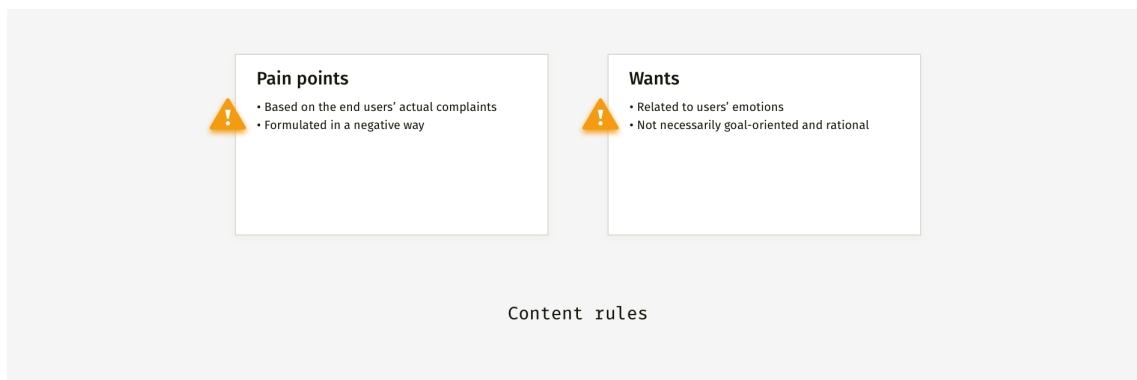
*Example:* The well-known customer journey map canvas consists of stages, user actions, pain points, and solution ideas. These blocks picture the timeline of users' interaction with a product or service.

## Part 2. Content rules

Alright, we have blocks. Now you should ensure workshop participants fill them with high-quality content — concise, relevant, and based on experience. People think and formulate thoughts differently: for instance, some people are solution-oriented, while others immediately spot risks. That's why canvases include guidelines about expected content. Without content rules, you run the risk of getting feature ideas in the "Pain points" or complaints in the "Opportunities" block.





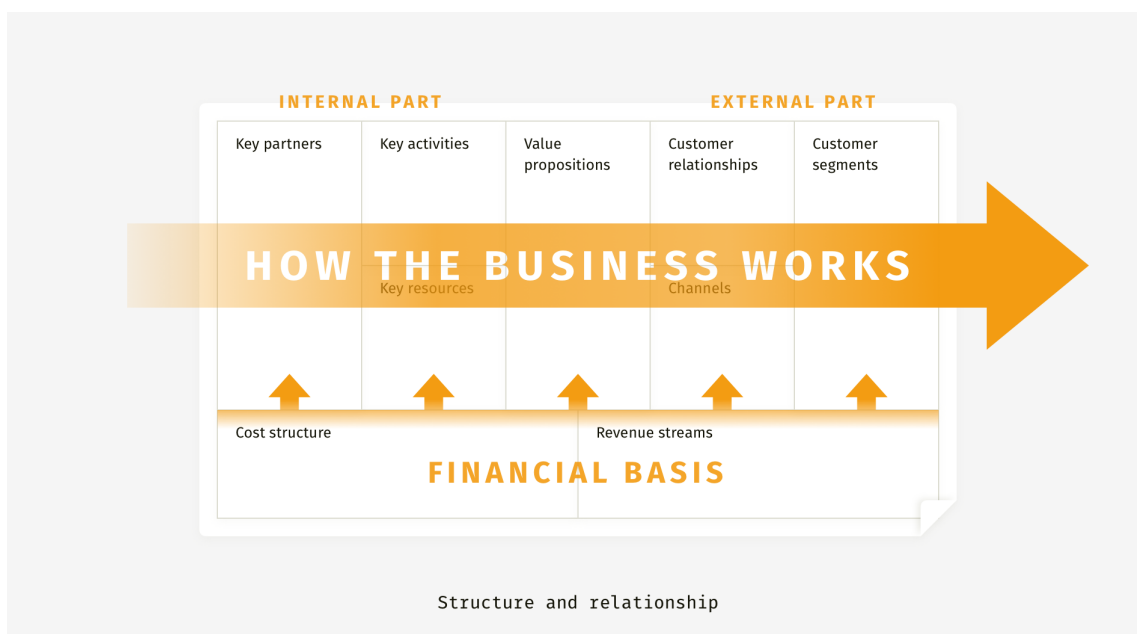


Content rules ensure people generate relevant information.

*Example:* On the empathy map canvas, there is a block “Pain points.” It should include things that frustrate users. Pain points are formulated negatively (phrases “lack of,” “difficult to,” prefixes un-, in-, non-). If you don’t explain it, your team members might jump into solutioning too soon and write how they are going to address the pain points.

### Part 3. Structure and relationships

Blocks and content rules guarantee information gathering, but what about reading the canvas after it’s complete? At this point, we need to establish logical connections between the parts. The size and shape of blocks, adjacent sections, overall layout — these and other settings convey a deeper message than separate sticky notes.

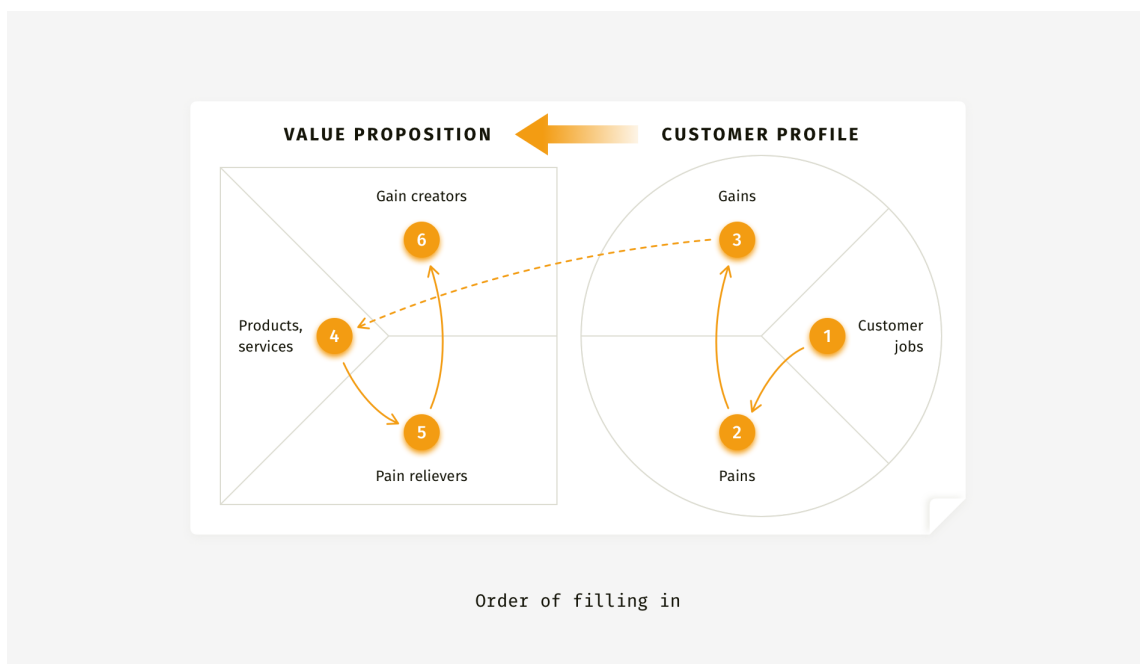


Overall canvas design conveys a deeper message than separate parts.

*Example:* The business model canvas tells a story of how the business operates. Imagine that it's just a very long sentence: Together with {Partners}, our business that performs {Activities} and owns {Resources} sells products with {Value Propositions} through {Channels} and {Relationships} to our {Customers}. As a result, the business bears {Costs} and generates {Revenue}.

## Part 4. Order of filling out

And finally, canvas creators and practitioners should understand that reading them and filling them out are two different processes. As a facilitator, you need to direct teams' thinking, minimize bias, and ensure people don't jump over essential steps. Sometimes you have to start from the end — set the goal first and then brainstorm about how to achieve it.



A specific order of filling out a canvas minimizes the team's bias and destructive debates.

*Example:* The famous value proposition canvas has two sides,

and is filled out from right to left. Participants work on the “Customer profile” first and then go to the “Company’s offering” side. This reversed order helps to prioritize the customer perspective and check the product-market fit.

## **In a nutshell:**

- Even the most complex canvas consists of elementary parts, which define how exactly it’ll shape the team’s thinking.
- The trickiest part about canvases is not how they look but how the team should work with them.

## **Summary**

### **1. Even a complex workshop consists of simple steps**

Workshops can have different titles, but they always consist of basic exercises. Depending on the order and number of exercises, a workshop obtains its shape and leads to certain results.

### **2. Any atomic activity can be adjusted**

Details matter: the number of frames in storyboarding, the order of voting with dots, the color of sticky notes, etc. Variables help to save time, overcome misunderstandings, and avoid destructive conflicts.

### **3. You either expand or reduce information**

First, you generate options, and then you select the best ones to focus on. Consequent diverging and converging form so-called “diamonds,” and this is how workshops function.

## 4. Any canvas is a tool — not a religion

All canvases follow the same basic principle, although they look different. It's a great way to structure information visually and combine participants' expertise and experiences.

- *Feel free to get in touch elsewhere: [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [Dribbble](#), [Behance](#).*
- *Got a conference or webinar? I'd be glad to [become a speaker](#).*
- *Bored by "how-to" articles? Check my [blog about overlooked architecture](#).*