Design Principles

Cheat Sheet

This cheat sheet is filled with examples of design principles from the aesthetic to the functional, from user experience to interaction, and beyond.

The goal? To spark creativity and conversation, inspiring you and your team to define the principles that will drive your own unique design decisions.

In the world of design, principles are the cornerstone upon which we base our work, providing a shared understanding and alignment in our design approach. A robust set of design principles guides a team's decisions, elevates user experience, and shapes the identity of a product or service. But arriving at these guiding values is not always straightforward.

We've collected a plethora of design principles from some of the world's most renowned design-driven companies, along with a comprehensive list of design values categorized by different design aspects. These are intended to serve as inspiration, not strict templates. Your team's principles should resonate with your project's unique context and goals.

How to use this guide? Simply explore the wealth of phrases and concepts, and discuss them with your team. What resonates with your group? What aligns with your project's goals? What sparks a fresh idea? Use these questions as a launchpad for dialogue, and let the conversation lead you to your very own set of design principles.

Design principles from leading design-driven companies

Airbnb

- Universal: Aims for universally understood language and consistent user experience.
- Iconic: Strives for instantly recognizable design elements.
- Conversational: Prioritizes easy, human-like interactions between users and the platform.

See more at https://airbnb.design/the-way-we-build/

IBM

- Intentional: Make the user's experience the focus of our execution.
- Expressive: Encourage emotion, create surprise, and ignite passion.
- Authentic: Deliver experiences that are honest and that continually earn trust.

See more at https://www.ibm.com/design/language/philosophy/principles/

Microsoft (Fluent Design System)

- Light: Draws attention to what's important.
- Depth: Establishes hierarchy to improve comprehension.
- Motion: Utilizes fluent animations for a natural experience.
- Material: Pushes the boundaries with the innovative use of "material" and "light."

Apple (unofficial)

- Simplicity: Prioritizes user-friendly and intuitive interfaces.
- Attention to Detail: Every detail contributes to the overall user experience.
- Aesthetics Matter: Promotes visually appealing, modern, and clean designs.

Atlassian

- Build trust in every interaction
- Connect people to collaborate better
- Match purpose and feel familiar
- Drive momentum from end to end
- Guide mastery for greater value

See more at https://atlassian.design/resources/atlassian-design-principles

Design principles for your inspiration

As we venture into the realm of design principles, it's important to understand that they're not one-size-fits-all. Just as each design project has unique goals and contexts, design principles also differ across various aspects of design. From aesthetics to functionality, from user experience to interaction, and more, each facet of design has its distinct guiding principles.

This section of the cheat sheet dives into these specific design aspects, presenting you with a rich array of design principles associated with each. The intention? To deepen your understanding of how diverse principles come into play in different design domains and to offer you a broader palette of inspirations for your own design journey.

As you browse these principles, reflect on how they may intersect with your own project's needs. Could one of these principles illuminate a new approach to a design challenge you're facing? Could a principle from one design aspect be creatively adapted to another?

Design Principles Based on Emotional Response

- Joyful: Design that creates happiness and delight.
- Inspired: Design that motivates and encourages creativity.
- Proud: Design that fosters a sense of achievement.
- Accepted: Design that is inclusive and welcoming.
- Powerful: Design that instills a sense of control and capability.
- Peaceful: Design that promotes calm and tranquility.
- Intimate: Design that fosters a sense of closeness and personal connection.
- Optimistic: Design that promotes positivity and hope.
- Liberated: Design that fosters freedom and flexibility.
- Ecstatic: Design that elicits intense joy or excitement.
- Amused: Design that brings joy and entertainment.
- Inquisitive: Design that encourages curiosity and exploration.
- Confident: Design that inspires trust and assurance.
- Respected: Design that recognizes and values users.
- Fulfilled: Design that meets all user expectations.
- Courageous: Design that inspires bravery and boldness.
- Loving: Design that promotes affection and fondness.
- Hopeful: Design that fosters optimism and anticipation.
- Playful: Design that encourages fun and lighthearted interaction.
- Open: Design that is transparent and accessible.
- Inspired: Design that sparks creativity and innovation.
- Energetic: Design that instills dynamism and vigor.

Aesthetic Design Principles

Aesthetic design principles refer to the elements that contribute to the visual appeal of a design. These principles play a critical role in determining how a design communicates visually with its audience.

- Balance: This principle involves the distribution of elements, either symmetrically or asymmetrically, to create visual equilibrium in a design.
- Contrast: Contrast emphasizes the difference between elements, often using opposing elements such as dark vs. light, or large vs. small, to create visual interest.
- Proportion: Proportion refers to the size and scale of elements in relation to one another, contributing to the visual weight and balance of a design.
- Harmony: Harmony involves the arrangement of similar elements to create a cohesive and pleasing design.
- Rhythm: Rhythm, like in music, involves a patterned repetition of elements to create visual tempo and movement.
- Unity: Unity ensures that all components of a design work together to create a visually pleasing whole.
- Emphasis (or Dominance): This principle involves creating a focal point in a design that catches the viewer's attention.
- Variety: Variety involves using different shapes, sizes, colors, and textures to create visual interest.
- Hierarchy: This principle establishes elements in order of importance, directing the viewer's eye to the most critical parts of the design.
- Direction: Direction utilizes lines, shapes, and colors to guide the viewer's eye across the design.
- Space: Space, both positive and negative, defines the area around, between, and within the elements of a design.
- Color: Color can evoke emotions, define importance, create visual interest, and tie elements together.

Functional Design Principles

Functional design principles are fundamental concepts that guide the practical aspects of a design, focusing on usability, functionality, and efficiency.

- Simplicity: Designs should be as simple as possible. This doesn't mean that the design can't be complex or intricate, but that any complexity should serve a clear purpose.
- Usability: The design should be easy to use and navigate. This is crucial in product design, where usability directly affects user satisfaction.
- Accessibility: The design should be accessible to as many users as possible, taking into account diverse abilities, languages, cultures, and other factors.
- Affordance: The design should suggest its own use or functionality. For example, a button in a digital interface should look pressable.
- Consistency: Elements that function in the same way should appear similar. This helps users understand how to interact with the design.
- Feedback: The design should provide feedback in response to user actions. This helps users understand whether their actions have been successful.
- Efficiency: The design should allow users to complete tasks in the quickest, most direct way possible.
- Flexibility: The design should cater to a variety of user skills and preferences, allowing for customization where appropriate.
- Error Prevention and Recovery: The design should anticipate common mistakes and make them hard to make, but if errors do occur, it should be easy to recover.
- Visibility: Relevant information should be readily visible to the user, with the most important information taking priority.
- Scalability: The design should be able to accommodate growth or change over time.
- Reliability: The design should function as intended every time, creating trust with users.

Experience Design Principles

Experience Design Principles guide the design process to create meaningful and relevant experiences for users.

- **User-Centered:** The design process should start with a deep understanding of who will be using the product or service. User needs, capabilities, and behavior should drive design decisions.
- **Purposeful:** Every element of the design should serve a clear, intentional purpose. Unnecessary elements that don't contribute to the user's experience should be eliminated.
- **Consistency:** Consistency in the design, whether it's the visual style, language, or the way interaction happens, helps users feel more comfortable and quickly understand how things work.
- **Intuitive:** Design should be easy to understand and use without the need for a lot of explanation or a steep learning curve.
- **Engaging:** Good experience design captures and holds user's attention, and leaves them with a memorable impression.
- **Responsive:** The design should respond to the user's actions, giving feedback that helps them understand the effects of their actions, and whether they're moving closer to their goal.
- **Accessible:** Designing for all potential users, including those with disabilities. This can involve things like using larger fonts for visually impaired users, or ensuring that website functions can be navigated using only a keyboard.
- **Humanized:** Human-centered design considers not just the functional needs of the user, but also their emotional needs. It seeks to create experiences that are not just usable, but also pleasurable and satisfying.
- **Contextual:** Understanding the context in which the user will be interacting with the product or service is critical. This includes physical context like where and when they'll be using it, but also social context like what other people might be present.
- **Sustainable:** A good user experience continues over time. Sustainable design considers how the experience will evolve for users as their needs change and as they become more familiar with the product or service.
- **Empowering:** Great experiences make users feel in control. They're straightforward, predictable, and give users a sense of mastery.

Interaction Design Principles

Interaction design principles focus on creating engaging interfaces with well thought out behaviors. They ensure that users can complete tasks and achieve their goals with ease.

- Consistency: The design should be consistent across the entire user interface. This applies to both visual elements and functionality.
- Visibility: Relevant information should be readily visible to users, and the status and next steps should always be clear.
- Feedback: Users should receive immediate feedback on their actions to understand the results or if there are any errors.
- Affordance: Design elements should suggest their usage. For instance, buttons should appear clickable and links underlined.
- Intuitive Use: The design should be easy to understand, even for first-time users. Users should be able to navigate intuitively through the interface.
- Flexibility: The design should cater to different user skill levels and preferences, enabling them to customize the interface to some degree.
- Learnability: Users should be able to quickly understand how to interact with the interface. Good design allows users to learn and master the interface quickly.
- Error Prevention and Recovery: Good design prevents errors from occurring in the first place, and if they do occur, helps users to understand what happened and how to recover.
- Simplicity: Interfaces should be as simple as possible, with no unnecessary elements or complexity. The focus should be on what is most important.
- Contextual: The design should take into account the user's environment, situation, and potential distractions to ensure the interaction is appropriate and easy.
- User Control: Users should feel in control of the interface and the actions they perform within it. They should be able to initiate and control actions.

Information Design Principles

Information design is all about presenting information in a way that is clear, efficient, and understandable to the target audience.

- Clarity: Information should be presented in a clear and concise manner. Avoid ambiguity, jargon, or overly complex language.
- Hierarchy: Important information should be presented first or made the most prominent. This can be achieved through the use of size, color, and placement.
- Consistency: Similar types of information should be presented in a consistent manner. This helps the user to understand and predict the structure of the information.
- Relevance: Only include information that is necessary and relevant to the user. Unnecessary information can distract or confuse the user.
- Accessibility: Information should be accessible to all users, regardless of their abilities. This can involve considering font sizes, color contrast, and alternative text for images.
- Simplicity: Information should be as simple as possible, but not oversimplified. The goal is to make it easy for the user to understand the information.
- Organization: Information should be organized logically. This often involves grouping related information together.
- Emphasis: Use visual cues to guide the viewer's eye to the most important information. This can be achieved through the use of color, contrast, size, and positioning.
- Balance: Avoid overwhelming the viewer with too much information at once. The layout should be balanced and not overly crowded.
- White space: Utilize white space effectively to give the information room to "breathe", aiding in readability and focus.
- Legibility: The information should be easy to read. This involves considering typography, size, line height, letter spacing, and color contrast.

Sustainable Design Principles

Sustainable design principles aim to minimize environmental impact and maximize social and economic benefits

- Life Cycle Thinking: Understand the full life cycle of a product, from sourcing materials, through use, to disposal or recycling. Design to minimize environmental impact at each stage.
- Resource Efficiency: Minimize the use of resources including materials, energy, and water. Consider renewable and recycled resources where possible.
- Longevity: Design durable, timeless products that will be used and valued for a long time, reducing the need for replacement.
- Minimize Waste: Consider waste at every stage of the design process, from the waste produced in manufacturing to the end-of-life disposal of the product. Look for ways to reduce, reuse, and recycle.
- Energy Efficiency: Design products and systems to minimize energy consumption. This includes considering energy use in production, operation, and disposal.
- Use of Sustainable Materials: Where possible, use materials that are renewable, recycled, or have a low environmental impact.
- Biodegradability: Consider the end-of-life of products and aim for them to be biodegradable, to minimize their impact on the environment.
- Low-Impact Manufacturing: Aim for production processes that have low environmental impact, considering factors such as energy use, emissions, and waste production.
- Social and Economic Fairness: Consider the social and economic impacts of design decisions, aiming for fairness in terms of labor conditions, pay, and impact on local communities.
- Localism: Where possible, source materials and manufacture locally to reduce carbon footprint and support local economies.
- Educate and Communicate: Inform users about the sustainable features of your product, and how they can use and dispose of it in a sustainable way.

Ethical Design Principles

Ethical Design Principles are centered around creating products and services that respect the user's human rights, experience, and privacy.

- Respectful: Always design with respect for the user's dignity and value as a human being. Avoid anything that could be offensive, degrading, or harmful.
- Fair: Aim to promote fairness, equality, and justice. Ensure your design does not disadvantage or discriminate against any user.
- Inclusive: Design for all users, regardless of age, gender, ability, or culture. Your design should be accessible and easy to use for everyone.
- Transparent: Be open about your data practices. Make it clear what data you collect, why you collect it, and how it is used.
- Privacy-Focused: Respect users' privacy rights. Collect and store only the necessary data, and ensure it is securely protected.
- Consent-Based: Obtain explicit consent from users before collecting or using their data.
- Sustainable: Consider the environmental impact of your design. Aim to reduce waste, use resources efficiently, and minimize your carbon footprint.
- Honest: Avoid misleading or manipulative practices. Your design should provide accurate information and function as advertised.
- Beneficial: Design to improve the user's life or solve a problem. Avoid creating unnecessary or harmful products.
- Accountable: Accept responsibility for the impact of your design, both intended and unintended. Be ready to make changes if your design causes harm.

Inclusive Design Principles

Inclusive Design Principles focus on ensuring that designs and services are accessible, usable, and effective for as many people as possible.

- Equitable Use: Design should be useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities.
- Flexibility in Use: Designs should accommodate a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.
- Simple and Intuitive Use: Use of the design should be easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level.
- Perceptible Information: The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities.
- Tolerance for Error: The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.
- Low Physical Effort: The design should be used efficiently and comfortably, with a minimum of fatigue.
- Size and Space for Approach and Use: Appropriate size and space should be provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of the user's body size, posture, or mobility.
- Representation: Ensure that diverse identities and perspectives are represented in your designs.
- Responsiveness: The design should be flexible enough to meet the needs of users in different contexts or situations.
- Accessibility: Prioritize accessibility to ensure that your design can be experienced and used by all.

Other General Design Principles

- Art For Art's Sake: Design for the pure joy of creativity.
- Ban The Average: Strive for the extraordinary.
- Causality: Ensure each design element has a purpose.
- Do No Harm: Consider the ethical implications of design.
- Fit For Purpose: Design should fulfill the intended function.
- Interchangeable: Design components should be easily replaceable.
- Less Is A Bore: Encourage variation and complexity.
- Less Is More: Prioritize simplicity and clarity.
- More Is Different: Recognize that quantity can affect quality.
- Path Of Least Resistance: Design should facilitate easy user journey.
- Preserving Ambiguity: Maintain room for interpretation.
- Principle Of Least Astonishment: Users should find your design intuitively understandable.
- Principle Of Least Effort: Design should make tasks easier for the user.
- Structure Follows Strategy: Align design strategy with business goals.
- There's More Than One Way To Do It: Allow for flexibility and different approaches.
- Worse Is Better: Accept that perfection is often the enemy of good enough.