

## Usability Methods in Interface Design Affinity Diagramming

Affinity diagramming is a very simple but powerful usability method for grouping single pieces of information, finding patterns and bringing structure to an unsorted amount of data. Thus helping to understand the underlying system and to process the data that others (users) can find their way around. Affinity diagramming is primarily a method for interpreting and evaluating previously collected qualitative data. When to use Affinity Diagramming? Affinity diagramming is the right usability method when you have to deal with a vast amount of unsorted data, like qualitative statements from a user survey. And the name says it all: with this usability method you look for affinity in a set of data pieces and plot them on a whiteboard (or the like). The structured approach of [affinity diagramming](#) should always be conducted when there is more than one &lsquo;right&rsquo; and teamwork is required to find the best (most comprehensible) solution for the users. Grouping information is a process where the point of view influences the different data groups thus what&rsquo;s logical from a designer&rsquo;s perspective might be incomprehensible for an ingenious user not familiar with the site&rsquo;s context. Bringing different views into the structuring of large amounts of data makes affinity diagramming so objective. How is Affinity Diagramming conducted? The easiest and most common way is to write down all single pieces of information on sticky notes and then gather with all participants around the data. When the end result of that sorting and grouping process is for purposes where users are involved, they should also be part of the affinity diagramming team. When you conduct an affinity diagramming workshop, make sure the group of participants is smaller than 7 or 8, since it is almost impossible to keep everyone focused (depending on the amount of data the affinity diagramming workshop might even take two sessions) and when working in turns participants must bring some patience until all other members have finished. Note: When there is a lot of data in a non printable format, ask the participants of your affinity diagramming session to write things down on stick notes, so you split the workload. After preparing the information and getting the users on board, the next step in affinity diagramming is to put the notes on the whiteboard (or wall), grouping similar content in the same area (do not label it yet). When certain groups of your affinity diagram get too &lsquo;fuzzy&rsquo;, it might be useful to split a group in various aspects (sub groups) so that you keep the data sets consistent. When you do the affinity diagramming alone, it might also be usable to work digitally (like with MS Excel or mind [mapping tools](#)), but when team work is required, it has proven more effective to work offline with pen and paper. At some time you will have arranged all sticky notes in groups and may do a quick review of your affinity diagram to make sure everybody agrees on the grouping results. For later processing of the data, now it might be useful to name the groups making them identifiable (or when the data sets represent areas on a website, think about appropriate navigation topics or headlines). What you get from Affinity Diagramming? Independent of the data, the purpose and the group of participants, affinity diagramming is a simple and cost effective usability method for extracting and grouping ideas from qualitative data and for obtaining consensus on how information should be structured.

### About the Author

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