

Think Better: The Essential Frameworks Guide

Practical tools for strategy, problem solving, decision-making, learning, change, and communication.

What problem, decision, or plan do you need to tackle today? Start with the Quick Selection Guide to choose a thinking framework based on your goal, then click the category name to jump straight to its table of definitions and application ideas.

Quick Selection Guide

Tip: In Word, Ctrl+Click (Cmd+Click on Mac) a category to jump to it. In the PDF version, a single click works.

Need	Use These Frameworks	Category (click to jump)
Understand a business or project	SWOT, PESTLE, Business Model Canvas, Balanced Scorecard	Strategy & Business Analysis
Solve a recurring problem	5 Whys, Fishbone, Root Cause Analysis, Pareto, A3	Problem Solving & Root Cause Analysis
Make a decision	Decision Matrix, Cost-Benefit Analysis, RICE, Pre-Mortem	Decision-Making & Prioritization
Understand complexity	Systems Thinking, Iceberg Model, Causal Loops, Cynefin	Systems Thinking & Complexity
Plan a project	SMART Goals, OKRs, RACI, Gantt, Kanban, MoSCoW	Project Planning & Execution
Create learning programs	ADDIE, SAM, Bloom's Taxonomy, Kirkpatrick, 70-20-10	Learning, Training & Development
Drive change	ADKAR, Kotter, Lewin, Stakeholder Analysis	Change Management & Organizational Development
Innovate or design something new	Design Thinking, Double Diamond, SCAMPER, Jobs to Be Done	Innovation & Creative Thinking
Communicate clearly	Pyramid Principle, SCQA, PREP, STAR	Communication & Information Organization
Evaluate impact	Logic Model, Theory of Change, KPI Framework, ROI Model	Data, Measurement & Evaluation <i>ROI Model: Learning, Training & Development</i>
Improve personal productivity	Eisenhower Matrix, GTD, Time Blocking, WOOP	Personal Productivity & Career Thinking <i>Eisenhower Matrix: Decision-Making & Prioritization</i>
Reduce bias and improve judgment	First Principles, Six Thinking Hats, Ladder of Inference, Red Teaming	Critical, Ethical & Reflective Thinking
Engage stakeholders and understand culture	Power-Interest Grid, Cultural Web, Influence-Impact Matrix, Equity Lens	Social, Cultural & Stakeholder Understanding

Change Management & Organizational Development

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Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
ADKAR	Supports individual change through awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement.	Help employees adopt new systems, processes, roles, or behaviors.
Kotter's 8-Step Model	Guides change through urgency, coalition, vision, action, wins, and anchoring.	Lead culture, process, strategy, or transformation initiatives.
Lewin's Change Model	Describes change as unfreeze, change, and refreeze.	Introduce new processes, structures, or behaviors.
Stakeholder Analysis	Identifies stakeholder interests, influence, concerns, and needs.	Build buy-in for projects, change initiatives, or decisions.
Change Curve	Shows emotional responses people may experience during change.	Support employees through disruption, uncertainty, or transition.
Force Field Analysis	Compares forces supporting and resisting change.	Strengthen drivers and reduce resistance before implementation.
Burke-Litwin Model	Analyzes performance through environment, leadership, culture, systems, motivation, and structure.	Understand complex performance, culture, or transformation issues.
Organizational Network Analysis	Examines informal influence, relationships, and collaboration patterns.	Identify change champions, connectors, bottlenecks, and communication pathways.

Communication & Information Organization

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Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
STAR Method	Structures examples as situation, task, action, and result.	Prepare interviews, resumes, performance reviews, and case stories.
AIDA	Moves from attention to interest, desire, and action.	Write ads, emails, landing pages, and social posts.
Pyramid Principle	Presents the main answer first, then supporting arguments and evidence.	Write reports, proposals, slide decks, and recommendations.
PREP Framework	Makes a point, gives a reason, provides an example, and restates the point.	Use in interviews, coaching, training, and persuasive writing.
What? So What? Now What?	Moves from observation to meaning to action.	Debrief training, coaching, meetings, projects, and lessons learned.
SCQA	Frames situation, complication, question, and answer.	Structure business cases, proposals, presentations, and executive updates.
PAS Framework	Names a problem, intensifies the pain, and presents a solution.	Create persuasive campaigns, offers, and social content.
CAR Method	Structures achievements as challenge, action, and result.	Write resume bullets, LinkedIn summaries, and leadership narratives.

Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
Problem-Solution-Benefit	Explains the problem, solution, and value created.	Use in sales pages, proposals, pitches, and training materials.

Critical, Ethical & Reflective Thinking

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Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
First Principles Thinking	Breaks a problem down to basic truths and builds up from there.	Solve problems without relying on assumptions or tradition.
Six Thinking Hats	Separates thinking into facts, emotions, caution, optimism, creativity, and process.	Run meetings, brainstorming sessions, and idea evaluations.
Socratic Questioning	Uses disciplined questions to examine assumptions and reasoning.	Coach, teach, debate, and analyze decisions.
Mental Models	Uses simplified concepts from multiple disciplines to improve judgment.	Support strategy, investing, leadership, and decision-making.
Red Teaming	Challenges a plan by searching for weaknesses and blind spots.	Review strategy, cybersecurity, crisis plans, or major decisions.
Devil's Advocate	Intentionally argues against an idea to test its strength.	Avoid groupthink, weak assumptions, and premature agreement.
After-Action Review	Asks what was expected, what happened, why, and what to improve.	Debrief projects, events, training, operations, and team performance.
Ladder of Inference	Shows how people move from data to assumptions, conclusions, and actions.	Improve communication, conflict resolution, and leadership judgment.
Ethical Decision Framework	Evaluates choices through values, stakeholders, consequences, duties, and fairness.	Use in leadership, HR, policy, AI, compliance, and business ethics.

Data, Measurement & Evaluation

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Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
KPI Framework	Defines key performance indicators tied to goals.	Create dashboards and measure progress against priorities.
Benchmarking	Compares performance against peers, competitors, standards, or past performance.	Identify gaps, targets, and realistic improvement opportunities.
Logic Model	Links inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact.	Design and evaluate programs, grants, interventions, and services.
Theory of Change	Explains how and why desired change is expected to happen.	Plan nonprofit, education, public health, learning, and social impact work.
North Star Metric	Identifies one primary metric that reflects long-term value creation.	Align teams around the outcome that matters most.

Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
Data Storytelling	Combines data, narrative, and visuals to communicate insight.	Turn analysis into decisions, recommendations, and action.
Input-Output-Outcome-Impact	Separates resources, activities, immediate results, medium-term outcomes, and long-term impact.	Measure programs, training, grants, and business initiatives.

Decision-Making & Prioritization

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Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
Cost-Benefit Analysis	Compares expected costs against expected benefits.	Evaluate investments, programs, purchases, or operational changes.
Eisenhower Matrix	Sorts tasks by urgency and importance.	Prioritize daily work, leadership tasks, and personal productivity.
Decision Matrix	Compares options against weighted criteria.	Select vendors, tools, job offers, projects, strategies, or features.
Risk-Reward Matrix	Compares potential upside with possible downside.	Evaluate bold initiatives, innovations, investments, or career moves.
Scenario Planning	Develops multiple possible futures and prepares responses.	Plan for market shifts, economic changes, technology disruption, or policy changes.
Pre-Mortem Analysis	Imagines a future failure and identifies likely causes before starting.	Prevent predictable project, product, or change failures.
Weighted Scoring Model	Assigns weights to criteria and calculates comparative scores.	Rank projects, vendors, jobs, tools, grants, or investments.
OODA Loop	Cycles through observe, orient, decide, and act.	Use in competitive, uncertain, operational, or crisis situations.
Second-Order Thinking	Considers consequences beyond the immediate outcome.	Avoid short-sighted choices and unintended consequences.
RICE Scoring	Prioritizes using reach, impact, confidence, and effort.	Rank initiatives, features, campaigns, or improvement ideas.
ICE Scoring	Scores ideas by impact, confidence, and ease.	Choose quick tests, experiments, or marketing ideas.
Inversion	Works backward by asking what would cause failure.	Improve launches, projects, habits, strategies, and plans.

Innovation & Creative Thinking

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Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
Design Thinking	A human-centered process of empathy, definition, ideation, prototyping, and testing.	Design products, services, learning programs, and customer experiences.

Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
Brainstorming	Generates many ideas before judging or narrowing.	Create campaigns, programs, products, services, or content topics.
Mind Mapping	Organizes ideas visually around a central concept.	Plan content, courses, presentations, products, or strategies.
Human-Centered Design	Designs around human needs, behaviors, motivations, and constraints.	Create practical, accessible, and desirable experiences.
Double Diamond	Uses divergent and convergent thinking across discover, define, develop, and deliver.	Move from broad research to a clear, tested solution.
SCAMPER	Prompts ideas through substitute, combine, adapt, modify, put to another use, eliminate, and reverse.	Improve products, services, workflows, content, or offers.
Jobs to Be Done	Focuses on the job customers are trying to accomplish.	Improve product design, messaging, service, and innovation.
Lateral Thinking	Uses indirect, non-linear approaches to generate fresh ideas.	Escape obvious solutions and challenge stale assumptions.
Concept Mapping	Shows structured relationships between concepts.	Synthesize research, design curriculum, or map complex topics.
TRIZ	Uses recurring patterns of inventive problem solving to resolve contradictions.	Solve engineering, product, or process design problems.

Learning, Training & Development

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Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
ADDIE	Designs learning through analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation.	Build courses, workshops, onboarding, and training programs.
Bloom's Taxonomy	Classifies learning outcomes from remembering to creating.	Write objectives, assessments, curriculum, and learning activities.
Kirkpatrick Model	Evaluates training through reaction, learning, behavior, and results.	Measure learning effectiveness and business impact.
70-20-10 Model	Frames learning as experience, social learning, and formal training.	Design blended learning ecosystems and development paths.
Backward Design	Starts with outcomes, then designs assessment and instruction.	Create outcome-driven courses, programs, and learning paths.
Gagné's Nine Events	Structures instruction through attention, objectives, content, practice, feedback, and transfer.	Create effective live, virtual, and digital training sessions.
Competency Model	Defines the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and abilities required for success.	Build career paths, assessments, hiring profiles, and development plans.
Learning Needs Analysis	Identifies gaps between current and required performance or capability.	Determine whether training, process, tools, or support are needed.



Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
SAM	Uses rapid design, prototyping, feedback, and iteration.	Create training quickly while involving stakeholders.
Phillips ROI Model	Adds financial return on investment to training evaluation.	Show the monetary value of training and development programs.
Performance Consulting	Solves business performance gaps before defaulting to training.	Diagnose if gaps come from skill, process, tools, incentives, or environment.

Personal Productivity & Career Thinking

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Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
Time Blocking	Assigns dedicated calendar blocks to important work.	Protect deep work, planning, content creation, and leadership priorities.
Getting Things Done	Captures, clarifies, organizes, reviews, and executes commitments.	Manage many responsibilities without losing track.
Habit Loop	Explains habits through cue, routine, and reward.	Build or break personal and professional habits.
Essentialism	Focuses on doing fewer, more important things exceptionally well.	Reduce overwhelm and strategic overcommitment.
WOOP	Uses wish, outcome, obstacle, and plan.	Turn intentions into action plans with obstacle planning.
Wheel of Life	Rates satisfaction across major life domains.	Use in coaching, goal setting, and life balance planning.
Ikigai	Explores the overlap of what you love, are good at, the world needs, and what can pay.	Plan career direction, entrepreneurship, and purpose-driven work.

Problem Solving & Root Cause Analysis

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Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
5 Whys	Repeatedly asks “why” to move from symptom to root cause.	Investigate recurring issues, process failures, or performance gaps.
Root Cause Analysis	A structured method for identifying underlying causes rather than surface symptoms.	Prevent repeated errors, failures, delays, or complaints.
Fishbone Diagram	Maps possible causes of a problem across categories.	Diagnose quality, service, operational, or training problems.
PDCA Cycle	Plans, tests, checks results, and acts on what was learned.	Iterate processes, workflows, programs, and experiments.
Pareto Analysis	Uses the 80/20 principle to find the few causes driving most results.	Identify high-impact issues, customers, tasks, risks, or defects.

Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
Gap Analysis	Compares current state to desired future state.	Identify missing skills, processes, resources, capabilities, or tools.
DMAIC	Defines, measures, analyzes, improves, and controls a process.	Reduce defects, variation, rework, and process inefficiency.
MECE Principle	Organizes categories so they do not overlap and cover the whole topic.	Build reports, frameworks, slide decks, decision trees, and taxonomies.
FMEA	Anticipates failure modes, their causes, and their effects.	Design safer processes, products, training, or operational controls.
A3 Problem Solving	Uses a concise one-page format to define, analyze, and solve problems.	Align teams around operational issues and improvement actions.
Issue Tree	Breaks a complex problem into smaller, logical branches.	Frame consulting-style problems, executive recommendations, and research plans.
Constraint Analysis	Identifies the bottleneck limiting system performance.	Improve capacity, productivity, speed, or workflow.

Project Planning & Execution

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Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
SMART Goals	Sets goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.	Create personal goals, team objectives, and performance plans.
Agile	Emphasizes adaptive planning, iteration, collaboration, and feedback.	Manage projects where requirements may change.
Scrum	Uses sprints, roles, ceremonies, and backlogs for iterative delivery.	Build products, learning programs, or complex team outputs.
Kanban	Visualizes work across stages such as to do, doing, and done.	Manage operations, content pipelines, design work, or tasks.
Gantt Chart	Displays tasks, timelines, milestones, and dependencies.	Manage project deadlines, dependencies, and delivery plans.
OKRs	Connects ambitious objectives to measurable key results.	Align teams around quarterly or annual priorities.
RACI Matrix	Clarifies who is responsible, accountable, consulted, and informed.	Manage cross-functional projects with many stakeholders.
Waterfall	Completes sequential project phases before moving to the next.	Use for fixed-scope, compliance-heavy, or low-ambiguity work.
Work Breakdown Structure	Breaks a project into smaller deliverables and tasks.	Estimate effort, assign work, and organize execution.
Critical Path Method	Identifies the sequence of tasks that determines total project duration.	Manage large projects with complex dependencies.
MoSCoW Prioritization	Classifies requirements as must, should, could, and will not have.	Prioritize product features, project requirements, and launch scope.

Social, Cultural & Stakeholder Understanding

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Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
Power-Interest Grid	Maps stakeholders by power and level of interest.	Plan communication, sponsorship, and change engagement.
Cultural Web	Analyzes stories, symbols, rituals, routines, power, controls, and structures.	Understand workplace culture and change barriers.
Social Ecological Model	Looks at individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and policy influences.	Design interventions that address multiple levels of influence.
Influence-Impact Matrix	Prioritizes people based on influence and likely impact.	Identify sponsors, blockers, champions, and affected groups.
Equity Lens	Examines how decisions affect different groups and whether outcomes are fair.	Use in HR, learning, healthcare, policy, and community programs.

Strategy & Business Analysis

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Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
SWOT Analysis	Evaluates strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.	Assess a business, project, team, product, career move, or strategic option.
4Ps of Marketing	Organizes product, price, place, and promotion.	Structure campaigns, offers, pricing, and distribution choices.
Business Model Canvas	Maps customers, value proposition, channels, relationships, revenue, resources, activities, partners, and costs.	Launch or refine a business, product, nonprofit, or consulting offer.
PESTLE Analysis	Examines political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental forces.	Understand market conditions, industry shifts, expansion risks, and policy pressures.
Porter's Five Forces	Analyzes competitive pressure from rivals, suppliers, buyers, substitutes, and new entrants.	Evaluate market attractiveness, pricing power, and competitive strategy.
Balanced Scorecard	Measures performance across financial, customer, process, and learning/growth dimensions.	Build KPIs, dashboards, leadership scorecards, and strategy reviews.
Ansoff Matrix	Frames growth through market penetration, market development, product development, and diversification.	Choose expansion paths for products, services, or markets.
BCG Matrix	Classifies offerings as stars, cash cows, question marks, or dogs based on growth and share.	Decide where to invest, maintain, harvest, or divest.
Value Chain Analysis	Breaks organizational activities into value-creating and cost-driving steps.	Improve efficiency, margins, customer experience, or differentiation.

Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
Blue Ocean Strategy	Seeks uncontested market space by increasing unique value and reducing direct competition.	Design offers, services, or business models that stand apart.
McKinsey 7S	Analyzes strategy, structure, systems, shared values, skills, style, and staff.	Diagnose why strategy execution is stalled or misaligned.
Lean Canvas	A startup-focused canvas emphasizing problem, solution, metrics, channels, and unfair advantage.	Test early business ideas quickly before overbuilding.
VRIO Framework	Tests whether resources are valuable, rare, hard to imitate, and organizationally supported.	Identify which capabilities truly differentiate a company or team.
STP Framework	Segments the market, selects targets, and positions the offer.	Define who you serve, what they need, and why your offer is distinct.
7Ps of Services Marketing	Adds people, process, and physical evidence to the 4Ps.	Design consulting, education, healthcare, hospitality, or professional services.

Systems Thinking & Complexity

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Framework	Definition	Optimal Use Cases
Systems Thinking	Examines relationships, feedback loops, patterns, and interdependencies within a system.	Understand organizational behavior, public health, education, operations, and culture.
Theory of Constraints	Improves the whole system by focusing on the primary constraint.	Improve operations, project flow, learning throughput, or service capacity.
Iceberg Model	Looks beneath events to patterns, structures, and mental models.	Move from visible symptoms to underlying causes and beliefs.
Feedback Loop Analysis	Studies how outputs influence future behavior in a system.	Understand recurring customer, employee, or organizational behavior.
Causal Loop Diagrams	Visualizes reinforcing and balancing feedback loops.	Explain why problems persist, grow, or resist simple fixes.
Cynefin Framework	Classifies situations as clear, complicated, complex, chaotic, or confused.	Decide whether to use best practices, experts, experiments, or crisis action.
Ecosystem Mapping	Maps actors, relationships, incentives, dependencies, and flows.	Understand partnerships, communities, markets, and service systems.
Leverage Points	Identifies places in a system where small changes can have large effects.	Choose interventions that address root structures, not just symptoms.
Stock and Flow Diagrams	Shows accumulations and movement through inflows and outflows.	Analyze inventory, capacity, finances, population, pipelines, or learning demand.