

Facilitating Asynchronously

de·sign

/dəˈzīn/

1. a plan or drawing produced and function of working or other object before "he has just unveiled museum" synonyms: plan, b outline rep

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Why a Design Sprint?



Why a Design Sprint?

A Design Sprint is a process that, though flexible, centers on several principals:

- **Focusing on one problem (that everyone feels is meaningful) without being bothered by day-to-day distractions allows participants to be fully present & innovative**
- **Concentrated time with the right people is critical for product success**
- **Constraints force you to focus on what you want to test, not the final product.**
- **Removing politicization of ideas & decisions help the best ideas come to the surface**
- **It's more important to work well than it is to work a lot**

If tweaking the “traditional” Design Sprint process to be shorter, longer, remote, asynchronous, etc. leads to compromising one or more of these values, stop and reevaluate!

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What is Synchronous & Asynchronous work?



What is synchronous vs. asynchronous work?

	Synchronous work is	Asynchronous work is
Time	Happens at same time	Doesn't happen at the same time
People	Interacting with others	By yourself
Space	Shared	Your own
Terms	Someone else's	Your own
Personality	Leans towards extroversion	Leans towards introversion
	Synchronous work is not	Asynchronous work is not
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual contributions on your own • Summarizing / learning / communicating information • Wasting people's time • "Divide and conquer" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Splitting into a smaller team to work on a single topic together • Aimless or optional • Results of bad facilitation (e.g. "We ran out of time, so we're forced to do this on our own") • Exploiting the free/ down time of participants • Changing the path, answering wrong questions, reverting to previous assumptions, etc.
	See Appendix for more	See Appendix for more

Also see Appendix for [Criteria](#), [Goals](#), [Pros & Cons](#)

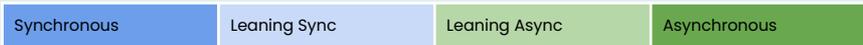
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Considering when to work synchronously or asynchronously



When to use what?

There aren't cut and dry rules for when to go asynchronous vs synchronous. However there are some key questions that may help you think through the tradeoffs between them.



Questions to ask

Legend: Synchronous Leaning Sync Leaning Async Asynchronous

Overarching

End point: 3-5 key questions for each section

Everyone highlight their most - emoji

Next step: move to Trix?

Maybe these are not binary, but "questions to consider"...

What is the group's capacity for onscreen time?

People

ID	Question	Scale	
1	Does the group know each other?	Not well	Very well

Questions to consider

When deciding **how much of the sprint** is synchronous vs. asynchronous:

People

Are there participants who have strong personalities / opinions that would likely sway others?

Does the group know each other?

Logistics

How much overlap exists between the working hours of the participants?

Problem

How much pre-existing problem framing exists which can be built upon, and how much needs to be aligned on?

How much does your sprint require generation or alignment of ideas across individuals?

Does your sprint require a shared understanding of relatively meaty concepts?

When deciding whether **a sprint activity** should be synchronous vs. asynchronous:

People

Does the work build on contributions from another participant?

Can you provide documented, clear instructions on what to do?

How much do you usually help participants (answer questions etc.?)

Does this activity benefit from deep thought/attention to detail?

[Full table of questions](#)

We've color coded the answers to these questions to indicate where they fall on the sync -- async spectrum.

Legend	Synchronous	Leaning Sync	Leaning Async	Asynchronous
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ID	Question	Scale	
1	Does the group know each other?	Not well	Very well
2	How well do you know the participants?	Not well	Very well
3	How likely is it that the participants reach out and ask you for help if they are stuck?	Unlikely / don't know	Very likely
4	How experienced are the participants with sprinting?	Inexperienced / don't know	Experienced
5	Are there participants who have strong personalities / opinions that would likely sway others? 🗣️	Likely	Unlikely
6	Are there participants whose perspective you'd like to hear on a more equal footing with others? 🗣️ 🗣️	Yes	No
7	Is there a mix of participants who prefer to take time to reflect deeply vs. thinking at their feed in a group	Yes (or no-only deep thinkers)	No, only group thinkers
	Are there participants who are going to be unable to attend the entire sprint, and who are difficult to schedule with? 🗣️	Less so	Yes

ID	Question	Scale	
1	Is this something participants are familiar with	No	Yes
2	Does the activity require sharing while conducting it	Yes	No
3	How much do you usually help participants (answer questions etc) 😊	A lot	Not much
4	Does this exercise benefit from having time pressure	Yes	No
5	Does the activity build on newly acquired knowledge	Yes	No
6	Is the outcome essential for the next step in the sprint	Yes	No
7	Is it a group activity?	Yes	No
8	Does the work build on contributions from another participant? 😊	Yes	No
9	Do participants have to leave their comfort zone for this activity?	Yes	No
10	Can you provide documented, clear instructions on what to do? 😊	No	Yes

[Full table of questions](#)

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Combining Synchronous & Asynchronous Work



The Intersection of Sync & Async

Synchronous and asynchronous work have their unique strengths, opportunities, and goals... but how does that impact a Design Sprint?

To answer this question, there are three different assets included that will equip you to evaluate what works best for your skill sets, your technologies, your team, your time zone(s), and your Sprint.

These assets include:

- 1. Maximizing Time Together:** How to run a Design Sprint using only two hours of synchronous work per day.
- 2. Maximizing Time Apart:** Opportunities to capitalize on async processes for several Design Sprint Activities
- 3. Activity Map:** A map of core Design Sprint activities, the time they take, the difficulty of conversion to async, and the risk associated with that move

Maximizing time together

What do you do if you only have 2 hours of time each day that the team can be together?

The reference below can be used to plan the activities of your sprint, by phase. The activities to the left of the 2 hour cutoff line can be prioritized as synchronous work. Then, the activities to the right of the cutoff can be completed asynchronously.

Day 1

UNDERSTAND



2 hr

Sync _____ Async



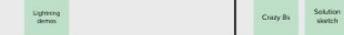
Day 2

IDEATE



2 hr

Sync _____ Async



Day 3

DECIDE



2 hr

Sync _____ Async



Day 4

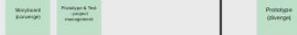
DECIDE



2 hr

PROTOTYPE

Sync _____ Async



Day 5

TEST



2 hr

Sync _____ Async



Day 6

CLOSING



2 hr

Sync _____ Async

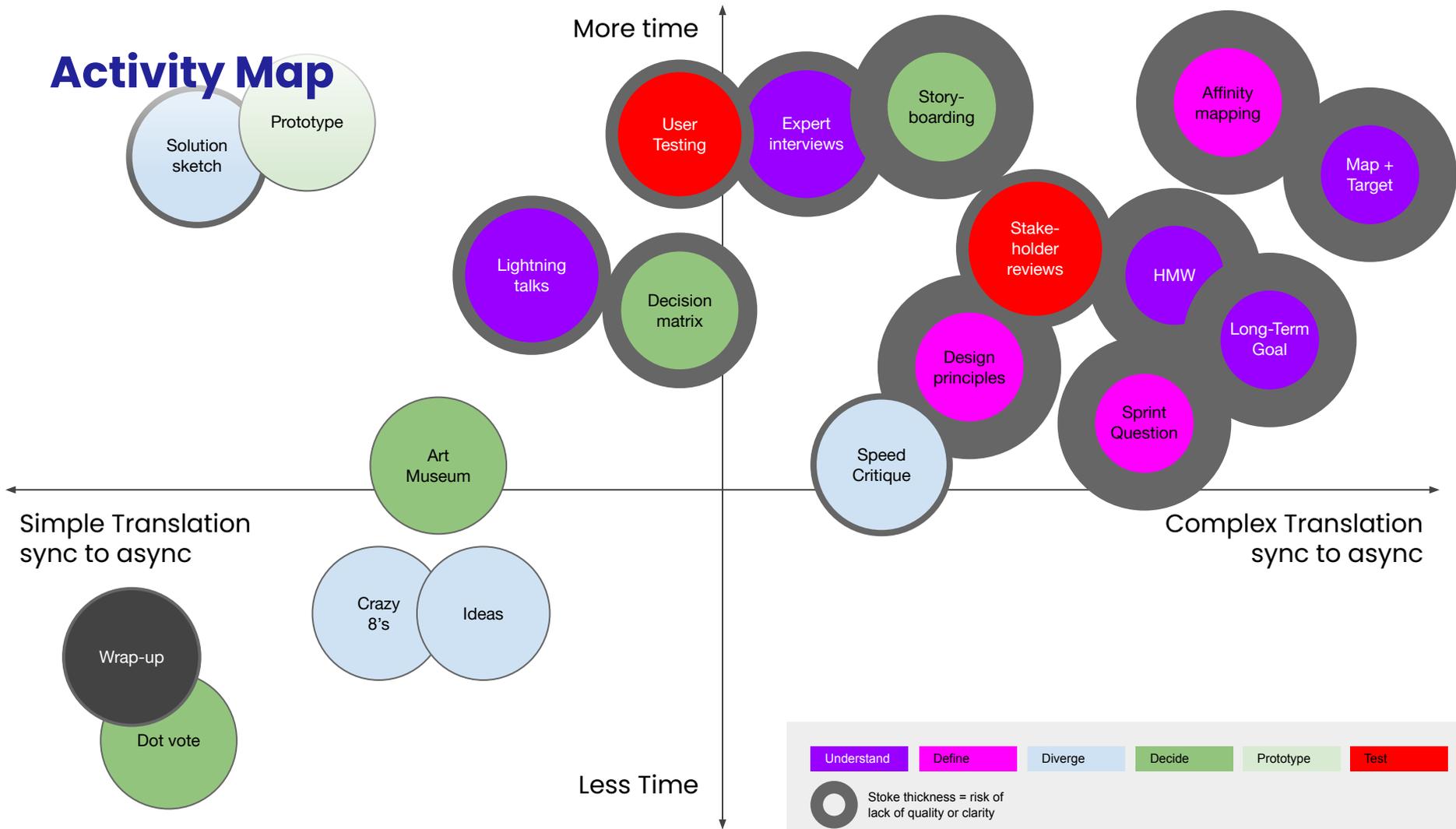


Maximizing time apart

Below are activities that can be adapted to reap the benefits of working asynchronously.

Phase	Activities	Benefits
 <i>Pre-Sprint</i>	Homework: Review background content in advance	Hit the ground running
 <i>Understand</i>	Further review: Review additional resources Interview experts	Deeper understanding of the problem space
 <i>Ideate</i>	Crazy 8s 2.0: Do another round of Crazy 8s prior to narrowing	Increased creativity from “sleeping on it”
 <i>Decide</i>	Storyboard	Higher-quality output from having more “space” to work
 <i>Prototype</i>	Prototype	
 <i>Test</i>	Iterative testing: Add a round of iteration + testing	A more refined prototype

Activity Map



Understand Define Diverge Decide Prototype Test

Stoke thickness = risk of lack of quality or clarity

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How to Make Synchronous & Asynchronous Work Successful



Traits we are working towards

- A good balance between providing structure and participant autonomy
- Openness and honesty
- Trust and empathy
- Realistic time commitments from each team member
- Clarity on what the end goal looks like
- Self-motivated team members to do the work asynchronously

Common pitfalls to avoid!

- Not highlighting upfront that asynchronous work will be required
- Asynchronous work being seen as “additional” rather than a key part of the process
- People overcommitting to what they can do asynchronously

Tips and best practices

Before

Example: Create a deck for each team and insert all of the instructions for activities and templates. These decks will be the work spaces for each team to iterate on their ideas.

During

Example: If someone has a particular way they want to go about solving a problem, they are free to do so. Encourage creativity!

After

Example: Set expectations when switching between working modes (“Now we’re splitting into groups” “Now we’re working individually”)

[See Appendix](#)

Contributors

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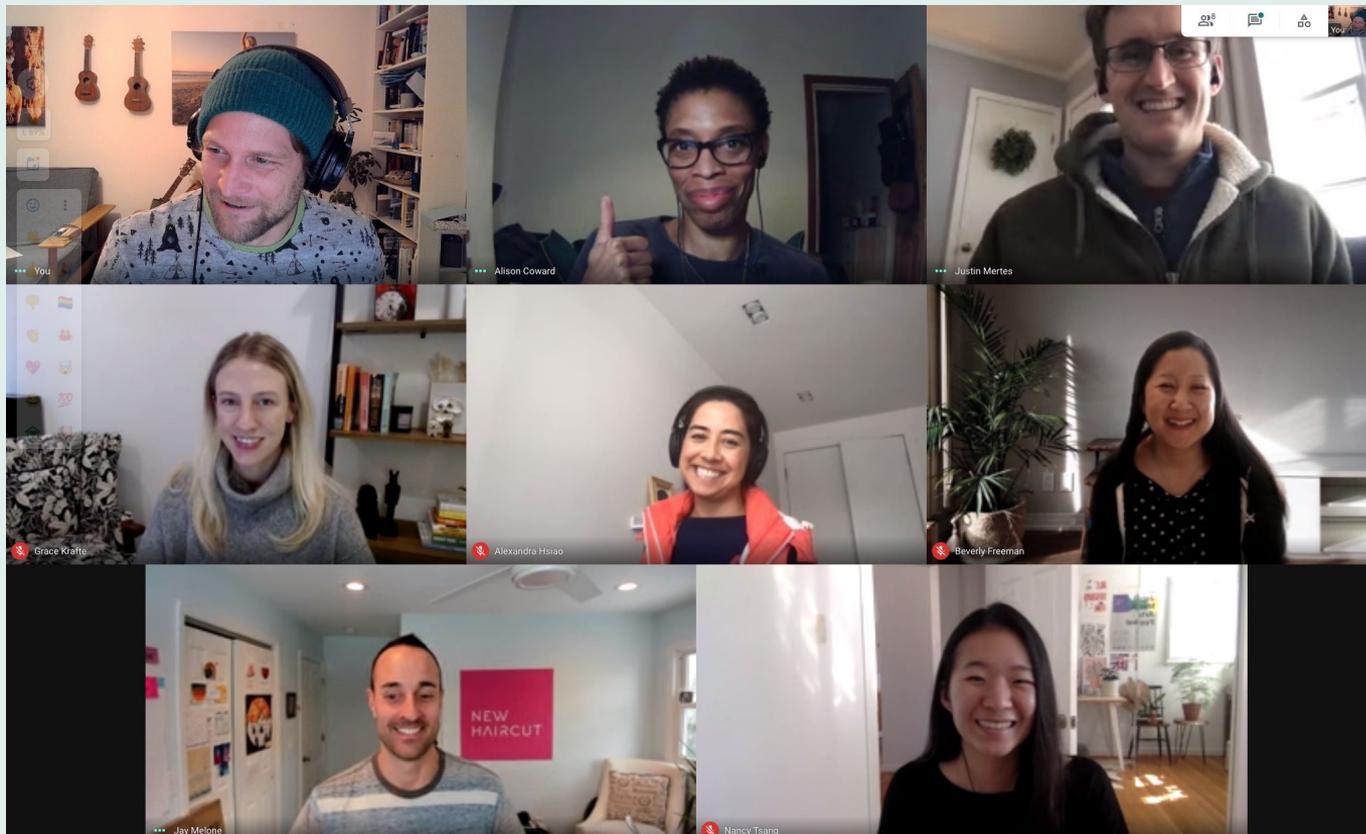
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Appendix



Synchronous work

Headspace

- Real time conversations and feedback
- Working together to share perspectives and strengthen relationships, not just produce
- Shared worked in a shared space
- Visibility / accountability
- More than one person working at the same time, in the same space (physical or digital)

Ideas generation

- More transparency, less safe space, your ideas are seen / judged
- Consensus can be influenced by others
- Real-time exchange of ideas
- Challenging each others ideas in positive ways
- Building off each other's ideas in the moment

Management

- Activity tends to be led by someone
- Structured activities
- Timeboxed
- Everyone works at the same pace
- On someone else's time
- Focusing on what all parties need to focus on

Interaction with asynchronous work

- Can highlight areas that need deeper dives by individuals / specialists

Asynchronous work

Headspace

- Flexible schedule, work when it is best for you
- Heads down, focused, uninterrupted- you don't have to be 'on'
- In parallel but separate, apart

Ideas generation

- Working without influence from others
- Your own safe space for getting ideas out, can be more private
- "I may be building on someone else's ideas, but as a solo activity"
- "I am processing ideas independently (however it is that I do that)"

Management

- Self-managed, but generally with prior instruction from activity leader
- Individual accountability (time spent/output)
- More time for experimentation
- Can be done at different times, in different contexts, with access to many resources
- Any amount of people working at no specific time and in no specific space
- Work at your own pace
- I have the space / time / quiet to do so, but can be timeboxed as well

Interaction with synchronous work

- Additive to team's sync work
- Working towards clear/ known expectations/ goals
- Preparing for the next synchronous touch point

Criteria

Sync	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sufficient overlapping hours• Dedicated time from participants (cleared schedules)• Facilitator to lead activities• Accessible technology and activities
Async	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Team must have access to all software needed on their own devices• Participants must self-manage and hold themselves accountable• Facilitators must provide clear goals for sprinters to work towards independently• Appropriate amount of time to allow people to work asynchronously on different schedules and with competing priorities• Accessible technology and activities

Goals

Sync	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Facilitate a shared understanding• Make decisions as a group• Find alignment• Complete tasks in a certain amount of time
Async	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accommodate different thinking / working styles• Work across different time zones• Avoid Meet/Zoom fatigue• Work around people's existing commitments and schedules

Pros & Cons

	Pros	Cons
Sync	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Build on each others' ideas quickly and iteratively• Relationship building• Clear tasks and activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Brainstorming can be mistaken for productivity• Forced to come up with ideas on the spot• Decisions driven by consensus might prohibit other ideas from evolving• Those with strong opinions may dominate the conversation
Async	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The additional time and/or different environments (e.g. going for a walk) facilitates creativity and less-obvious ideas• Reduces group-think dynamics, bias• Surface ideas from people who do their best thinking solo• Able to concentrate, digest information, reflect at their own pace• People in different time-zones or locations can participate more easily• Can't just hide in the output of the group, it's obvious if they haven't participated• Fast workers finish quicker• Allows participants who are not dominant to explore their ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Time is "not our own" when we go home• May be unfamiliar with the tools the facilitator chose (MURAL, Miro, etc.)• Unclear instructions lead to not following directions• It's easy to go down rabbit trains without someone to "bring you back"• Potential for participants to get too far along in their individual work, resulting in polished 'gems'• People in different time-zones or locations could potentially get lost on their own without real-time help• Potential for participants to misunderstand information and not have ability to easily confirm their understanding of it with others• Could be tough for those who do their best thinking by bouncing ideas off another person• Difficult to ensure participation and accountability

Before

- Send a survey for team members to communicate how much time they have available for asynchronous work
- As the facilitator, work to create an environment where people can be open and honest about the time they have/do not have to commit
- Make it an invitation rather than a requirement- what would people want to self-select for?
- Work to create a good balance between providing instructions and giving autonomy
- Create a deck for each team and insert all of the instructions for activities and templates. These decks will be the work spaces for each team to iterate on their ideas.
 - When creating a template, provide:
 - Clear instructions with time allotment (e.g. “Go to section A and fill out..”)
 - Get creative with the design of your materials to direct focus and reduce drop-off with your participant (e.g. Contextual info, CTA links, arrows, etc)
 - Instructions should be easily referenceable at any time
 - Create templates for the required deliverables to ensure consistency and lighten the workload
 - Access to relevant reference materials (if applicable)
 - Dedicated individual workspace
 - Access to help line if needed (e.g. “Ping ___ if you have questions!”)
 - Understanding of what to do when they’re done, whats next

During

- Get a loose, verbal commitment to the task(s) that people agree to do before the end of the synchronous session
- Connect each group over email and in Chat/Slack so there is a channel of communication while sprinters are working asynchronously.
- Provide clear written & verbal instructions for each required activity
- Be clear on what is the end goal / the finished task
- Ideally, each group should have a group captain, who is in charge of scheduling meetings and ensuring the team is completing their activities. The group captain can be one of the sprint masters, or a participating member of the group who has agreed to take on this responsibility ahead of time.
- If someone has a particular way they want to go about solving a problem, they are free to do so. Encourage creativity!

After

- Make time in your next synchronous session to review documents and explain the work created
- Set expectations when switching between working modes (“Now we’re splitting into groups” “Now we’re working individually”)