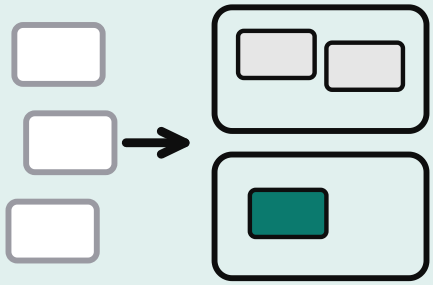
Method

Card sorting

A method in which people group and name cards with content items to reveal how they mentally organize information.



Origin

Miller (1969), in psychology; on the web, Nielsen and Sano (1995); systematized for design by Spencer (2009)

Output

The groups and labels people use to organize the content

What it's for

It helps you structure menus, categories or websites according to people's logic, not the institution's.

Key elements

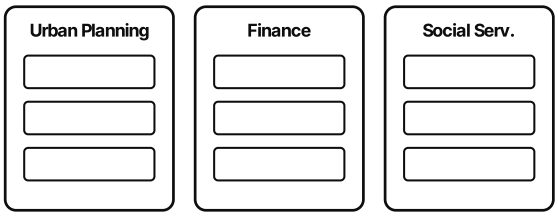
Open
People create and name their own groups.

Closed
People sort the cards into predefined groups.

An example

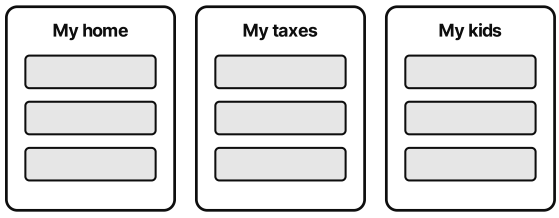
A city government website with dozens of procedures.

By the org chart



Procedures are grouped by department: Urban Planning, Finance, Social Services. **Internal logic.**

By the people



When grouping the cards, people create groups like "My home," "My taxes" or "My kids." **The searcher's logic.**

Card sorting shows how people would search, which often doesn't match how the institution is organized.

How it's done

1 

Each content item is written on a card.

2 

People group them and name the groups.

3 

You look for the patterns that repeat across participants.

Applications in design

When to use it

Before defining the menu of a website or app with a lot of content.

Avoid

Using cards with technical names only the team understands.

Don't fall for it

After an open card sort, validate the structure with a closed one or with findability tests.

Connections

Used by

- Information architecture
- UX design
- UX research

Related to

- Tree testing

Authors and works

2009	**Donna Spencer**	Brought together the practice of card sorting in Card Sorting: Designing Usable Categories.
1969	**George A. Miller**	Used the task of freely sorting words into groups in psychology to infer how concepts are organized.
1995	**Jakob Nielsen and Darrell Sano**	Documented one of the first uses of card sorting to organize an internal website.

Sources

Original sources

- Miller, G. A. (1969). A psychological method to investigate verbal concepts. Journal of Mathematical Psychology, 6(2), 169–191. View source (https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-2496(69)90001-7)
- Nielsen, J., & Sano, D. (1995). SunWeb: User interface design for Sun Microsystem's internal Web. Computer Networks and ISDN Systems, 28(1–2), 179–188. View source (https://doi.org/10.1016/0169-7552(95)00109-7)

Secondary sources

- Spencer, D. (2009). Card sorting: Designing usable categories. Rosenfeld Media.

Last reviewed: October 25, 2026

Atlas público de diseño, de Adriana Ojeda. Texto e ilustraciones bajo licencia CC BY 4.0.