Model

Design hierarchy of needs



A family of pyramids, inspired by Maslow's, that order what is expected of a design, from working to being pleasant or creative, and ask you to settle each level before the next.

In Spanish
Jerarquía de necesidades del diseño

Origin
Lidwell, Holden and Butler (2003); Bradley (2010); Walter (2011)

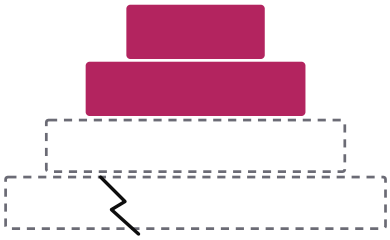
What problem it addresses

Helps decide what to fix first, but it is an analogy for prioritizing, not a proven theory: the levels are their authors' proposals.

An example

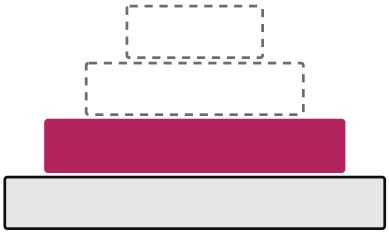
An illustrative example: two versions of the same app.

Showy without the base



Animations and charming details, but it closes when you save. **No one gets to enjoy it.**

Basics first



Plain, but it always works and is understood at first glance. **Now the next level can be improved.**

Delightful details are worth little if what comes before fails.

How it works

1

Start from Maslow: needs at the bottom are met before those above.

2



Each author proposes levels for a design, from what works to what delights.

3



Move up a level once the one below is settled.

Applications in design

Use it like this

To decide the order of work: first make it work and be reliable, then usable, and then what delights.

Avoid

Treating the levels as a law; no studies show they must be met in that order.

Don't fall for it

Waiting for one level to be perfect before starting the next: a pleasant detail can be tested early.

4, 5 and 6

What the research says

These are the numbers of levels in the pyramids compared. Walter (2011) uses four, Lidwell, Holden and Butler (2003) and Bradley (2010) five, and Anderson, according to van Gemert (2018), six.

●●○ **Debated evidence.** That each author uses a different number shows the levels don't come from data. Van Gemert (2018) also finds no direct correspondence with Maslow, and Maslow's hierarchy has weak empirical support (Wahba and Bridwell, 1976).

Connections

Used in

- Kano model

Related to

- Emotional design
- Aesthetic-usability effect

Authors and works

2003	**William Lidwell, Kritina Holden and Jill Butler**	Included in their book a five-level hierarchy, from functionality to creativity.
2010	**Steven Bradley**	Adapted Maslow's hierarchy to web design with five levels and presented it as a guide, not a strict rule.
2011	**Aarron Walter**	Proposed a four-level pyramid (functional, reliable, usable and pleasurable) for designing with emotion.
2017	**Therese Fessenden**	Built on Walter's pyramid to tell surface delight, a pleasant detail, from deep delight, which only comes once the basics work.
2018	**Vasilis van Gemert**	Compared the pyramids of Maslow, Walter and Anderson, and found no direct correspondence with Maslow.

Sources

Original sources

- Lidwell, W., Holden, K., & Butler, J. (2003). Universal principles of design. Rockport Publishers.
- Bradley, S. (2010, April 26). Designing for a hierarchy of needs. Smashing Magazine. View source (https://www.smashingmagazine.com/2010/04/designing-for-a-hierarchy-of-needs/)
- Walter, A. (2011). Designing for emotion. A Book Apart.

Academic reviews

- Wahba, M. A., & Bridwell, L. G. (1976). Maslow reconsidered: A review of research on the need hierarchy theory. Organizational Behavior and Human Performance. View source (https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073(76)90038-6)

Secondary sources

- Fessenden, T. (2017, March 5). A theory of user delight: Why usability is the foundation for delightful experiences. Nielsen Norman Group. View source (https://www.nngroup.com/articles/theory-user-delight/)
- van Gemert, V. (2018, February 8). A comparison of three pyramids. vasilis.nl. View source (https://vasilis.nl/research/2018/02/a-comparison-of-three-pyramids/)

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