# Topic Mapping

Topic Mapping (also known as Affinity Mapping) is a method for organising and structuring large amounts of information, statements, or ideas. Individual contributions are collected, grouped according to their similarities, and organised into thematic clusters.
The method is particularly useful after workshops, interviews, surveys, or participation activities when a large number of diverse results need to be analysed.

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|---|---|
| **Participation Depth** | Inform · Participate · Have a say |
| **Project Phase** | Reflection & Evaluation · Finalisation & Impact |
| **Goals** | Structuring & Prioritising |
| **Format** | Digital · Analogue |
| **Duration** | 1 - 3 Hours |
| **Target Group** | Directly Affected · Organised Actors |
| **Group Size** | Small Group up to 15 |
| **Characteristics** | Simple · Structured |

## GOAL OF THE METHOD

The aim of Topic Mapping is to identify patterns, relationships, and key themes within a large collection of information. Rather than considering individual statements in isolation, the method explores how they relate to one another.

The result is a structured overview showing which topics are most important to participants and which issues should be explored further.

## PROCEDURE

### Preparation

#### 1. Collect the Results

Gather all available materials, such as workshop notes, interview transcripts, photographs, documents, and audio recordings. Each statement, idea, or observation should be written on its own card or sticky note.

Prepare the Workspace

Decide whether the mapping will be carried out physically or digitally.

**For an analogue session, prepare:**

- a large wall or table
- moderation cards or sticky notes
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markers

- a pinboard or whiteboard

**For a digital session, suitable tools include:**

- Miro
- Mural
- Conceptboard
- digital whiteboards

**2. Define the Guiding Question**
Before starting, consider:

- What are we looking for?
- What do we want to understand?
- Which connections are we interested in?
- What insights do we hope to gain?

Examples include:

- "Which challenges are mentioned most frequently?"
- "What needs or wishes do participants express?"
- "Which topics appear repeatedly?"

## Execution

**1. Display All Statements**
Place all cards on the working surface without sorting them into categories.

The goal at this stage is simply to gain an overview of all available information.

Group Similar Statements

Begin grouping together cards that address similar ideas or topics.

Helpful questions include:

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Which statements belong together?

- Which topics are similar?
- Which cards describe the same challenge?
- Which ideas pursue a similar objective?

At this stage, avoid overanalysing the results. The first structure often emerges intuitively.

**2. Create Thematic Clusters**
The initial groups gradually develop into broader thematic clusters.

Examples:

Mobility

- missing cycle paths
- poor public transport connections
- unsafe intersections

Quality of Public Space

- additional seating
- more greenery
- shaded areas

Communication

- lack of information
- unclear responsibilities
- desire for better communication

**3. Name the Clusters**
Give each cluster a meaningful and descriptive title.

Avoid overly broad labels and instead use specific themes.

Examples:

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"Road Safety"

- "Meeting Places for Young People"
- "Accessibility"

The title should capture the shared meaning of the grouped statements.

**4. Identify Relationships**
Next, examine the clusters as a whole.

Helpful questions include:

- Which topics appear most frequently?
- Which clusters are connected?
- Which findings are surprising?
- Which perspectives are missing?
- Where do conflicts become visible?

**5. Prioritise Key Themes**
If necessary, prioritise the most important themes.

Possible methods include:

- dot voting
- multi-voting
- team discussions

This helps identify which topics should be addressed first.

## Evaluation

**1. Follow-up**
The outcome is a structured overview of the collected information.

Possible results include:

- thematic clusters
- key priorities
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recurring patterns and relationships

- priority topics
- a basis for further analysis
- a foundation for future decisions and measures

Topic Mapping does not directly answer the question of what should be done. Instead, it helps to understand which themes exist, which concerns are raised most frequently, and how different issues relate to one another.

The resulting clusters can then be used to identify appropriate stakeholders, responsibilities, or areas of expertise. For example, they may indicate which issues should be forwarded to municipal departments, political committees, project groups, or other relevant organisations. A well-structured overview also enables policymakers and public administration to quickly understand the outcomes of a participation process.

The original collection of sticky notes should then be transformed into a clear and accessible format. Possible formats include:

- tables
- topic summaries
- mind maps
- presentations
- reports
- digital whiteboards
- infographics

This makes the findings easier to understand, communicate, and document over the long term. In larger participation processes, it is particularly useful to digitise the thematic clusters so that they can be further developed, commented on, or expanded by different stakeholders.

Source: Kerr, J., Cheers, J., Gallegos, D., Blackler, A. & Kelly, N. (2023): *The Art of Co-Design: A Guide Through Creative Collaboration*. BIS Publishers.

## WHEN USEFUL?

- a participation process has produced many statements, ideas, or pieces of feedback.
- large amounts of notes or documentation need to be organised.
- different perspectives should be brought together.
- key themes for further work need to be identified.
- results should be presented in a clear and accessible way for policymakers, public administration, or project teams.
- a foundation for further analysis or decision-making is required.

### WHEN NOT USEFUL?

- only a small number of results or statements are available.
- predefined categories or themes already exist.
- concrete decisions need to be made.
- statistical or quantitative analyses are required.
- the causes or underlying reasons behind issues need to be examined in detail.

### TIPS

- Write only one statement on each card.
- Use participants' original wording whenever possible.
- Name the clusters only after the grouping process is complete.
- Create new clusters if statements do not fit existing ones.
- Work with several people whenever possible.
- Photograph intermediate stages of the process.
- Keep discussions about the "correct" grouping brief.
- After the analysis, prepare the results in a clear and accessible format so that people who were not involved in the process can quickly understand the key findings.

### NOT SUITABLE FOR

- predefined categories already exist.
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only a very small number of results are available.

- concrete decisions need to be made.
- statistical or quantitative analyses are required.

View online: https://methoden.urbankit.de/en/methods/themen-mapping