Card Sorting

Card sorting reveals how people actually think about information—not how you think they should. You hand participants a stack of cards with content or features...

H HOW TO RUN

1 Setup   5 min

- Write each item on an index card—one concept per card. For a website, this might be page names or features. For an app, it could be menu items or tasks. Keep it to 30-50 cards; more becomes overwhelming. Shuffle them. Give each participant or small group an identical shuffled deck.

2 Open Card Sort

- Tell participants: 'Group these cards in whatever way makes sense to you. There's no right answer.' Let them work. Resist the urge to explain what the cards mean—if they don't understand a label, that's data. When they've made groups, ask them to name each category. Write the name on a sticky note and place it with the group. Don't suggest names; use their words exactly.

3 Closed Card Sort Alternative

- If you already have categories and want to test them, create labeled bins or sections. Give participants the same cards. Say: 'Sort these into the categories that make the most sense.' Watch where they hesitate. Note which cards get placed in the wrong bin or don't seem to fit anywhere.

4 Think-Aloud Protocol

- Ask participants to narrate their thinking as they sort. 'I'm putting this here because...' and 'I'm not sure if this belongs with...' are gold. Record these explanations—they reveal the reasoning behind groupings that raw data can't capture.

> **KEY TIP**
> *Choosing What Goes on Cards**

O OBJECTIVES

- › Discover how users naturally categorize and group information
- › Identify terminology that matches user expectations (not internal jargon)
- › Find where your current information architecture confuses people
- › Build navigation and labeling based on actual mental models

M MATERIALS

- ☐ Index cards or sticky notes (one item per card, 30-50 cards per set)
- ☐ Markers for labeling category names
- ☐ Large table or wall space for physical sorting
- ☐ Camera or phone to photograph final sorts
- ☐ Spreadsheet to record results across participants

P PARTICIPANTS

5-15

F FACILITATOR NOTES

REMEMBER
- Every card should be at the same level of specificity.
- Don't mix 'Account Settings' with 'Change Password'—one is a category, one is a task.
- If you're testing navigation, use what people will actually see in the menu.
- If you're testing content, use article titles or topic names.