



From You To User

Our approach
to legal design

1. Why legal design?

What we'll be covering

[Click to jump!](#)

- [1 Why legal design?](#)
- [2 Human-centricity](#)
- [3 Legal design spectrum](#)
 - Legal products
 - Legal services
 - Legal and business systems
 - Information design
- [4 What legal design requires](#)
 - Mindset
 - Methodology
 - Skillset
- [5 How we do legal design](#)
 - Starting a legal design project
 - Our legal design process
 - What legal design brings to lawyers and organisations
- [6 The future of legal design](#)
- [7 About us](#)
- [8 Quiz answers \(don't peek!\)](#)

If you have not been living under a rock during the past years, you probably noticed a wave of legal innovation rising on the horizon of the juridical sea.

Are you prepared for when it will wash over your shore, bringing accessible, more affordable, multidisciplinary, more efficient, and agile legal services? Or will you drown under an outdated approach to law?

Legal design is a human-centred approach to legal problem-solving and legal innovation.

It is one way to stay surfing on top of this new wave. The creative and solution-oriented approach of legal design offers possibilities for aligning legal services with the actual current needs of clients.

Legal design focuses on people's needs – referred to as **'human-centred design'** or **'user-centred design'** in design jargon. This might sound peculiar to lawyers; legal work is always targeted at humans, right?

However, many legal products and services are not oriented towards actual, underlying human needs.

In practice, lawyers will often work within their legal cocoon: based on sound expertise, jargon, and regularly outdated habits, having been taught by experienced colleagues. Often with the feeling that their work is so complicated that it cannot be made accessible to others.

That is how we were taught, and nothing seemed wrong with that.

But we can do better, and we should.

2. Human-centricity

Law done by humans for humans

Let's take a contract. Contracts are often documents made by lawyers for lawyers. How contracts are drawn up is based on what lawyers believe must be included in a contract, inspired by the law, case law, and habit.

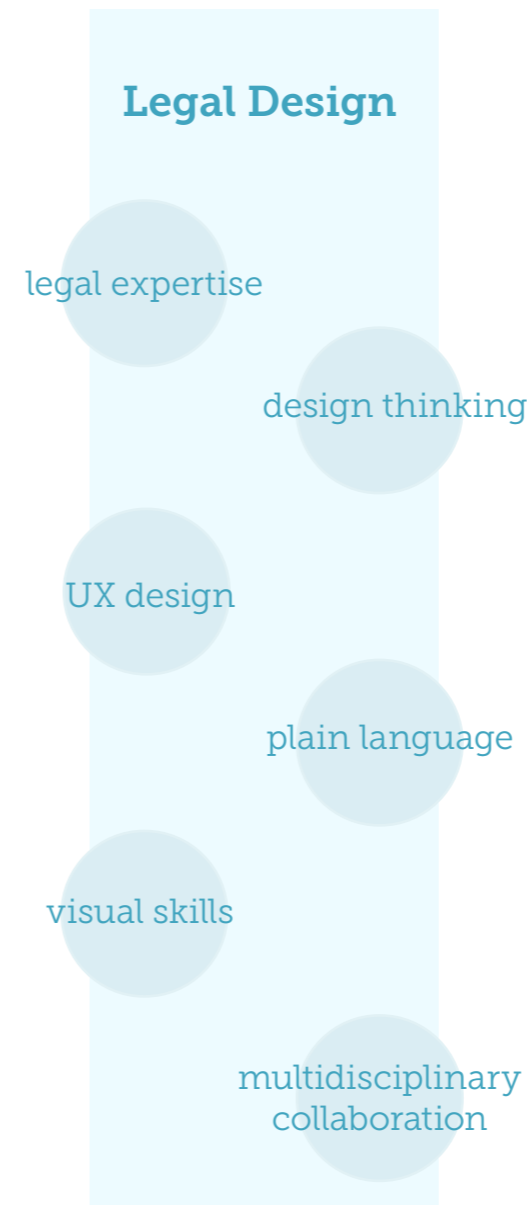
The result is usually **legalese**, which is difficult to read, with overly correct phrasing. The average user of a contract – the parties to it, for example – often finds it difficult to understand the contract.

Has anyone in your family ever asked for your help understanding a legal document? We often forget that our documents end up in the hands of someone's grandparents, neighbours, or children.

Business deals are translated into a contract with unrecognizable phrases and terminology, making it difficult to discern mutual obligations. At the very least, this leads to many additional costs due to the time involved in contract negotiations, dotting i's and crossing t's, potential misunderstandings, and even conflicts.

What happens when the needs of these users are assessed from a truly **human-centred** perspective? What would a contract say, and what would it look like from that perspective?

For the past decades, clients have been struggling to swim through law. Clients find them dense, uncommercial, hard to monitor, frustrating, confusing, complicated, inaccessible, incomprehensible, and difficult to level with.



We believe legal design combines legal expertise, design thinking, UX design, visual skills, plain language and multidisciplinary collaboration.

Legal design creates better legal services among which by improving the communication of legal content.

But before heading for this particular island in the legal design ocean, let's first explore the legal design spectrum.



Want to know how law and design differ, and how they are alike? Read our blog [here](#).



Let's test your legal design vocabulary!
Are you ready?

Question 1: What is a design pattern?

Find the answers [here](#) (no cheating!)

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3. Legal design spectrum

Legal design methodology and mindset can be applied to the full spectrum of the legal experience: legal products, services, and legal and business systems.

Legal Products

Contracts, documents, and every other deliverable you can think of.

Legal Services

Like consultancies and every other intangible aspect of legal work.

Legal and Business Systems

The blueprint of your legal department or the legal journey of people within your business. It focuses on how people navigate the legal part of your operations.

So yes, there is an extensive range of creatures living under the legal design ocean, and maybe figuring it all out might feel like staying underwater for longer than your lungs can take.

But fear not: swimming through legal design will feel like any other kid's pool once you get the hang of it.

The legal design spectrum



Information design

Not everyone in legal design distinguishes information design as a separate area, but it's important to highlight. At Aclara Legal Design, we (re)design legal information, and our expertise stems from a basis in information design. **We distinguish information design from UX/UI design and research** because information design does not necessarily require user research (although we do!). And because certain designs don't have user interfaces, like printed documents.

Information design is the design of information, usually through a combination of images, text and numbers. Many are familiar with information design in the form of infographics – information that has been structured and made visually accessible, but there are various other forms of information design.

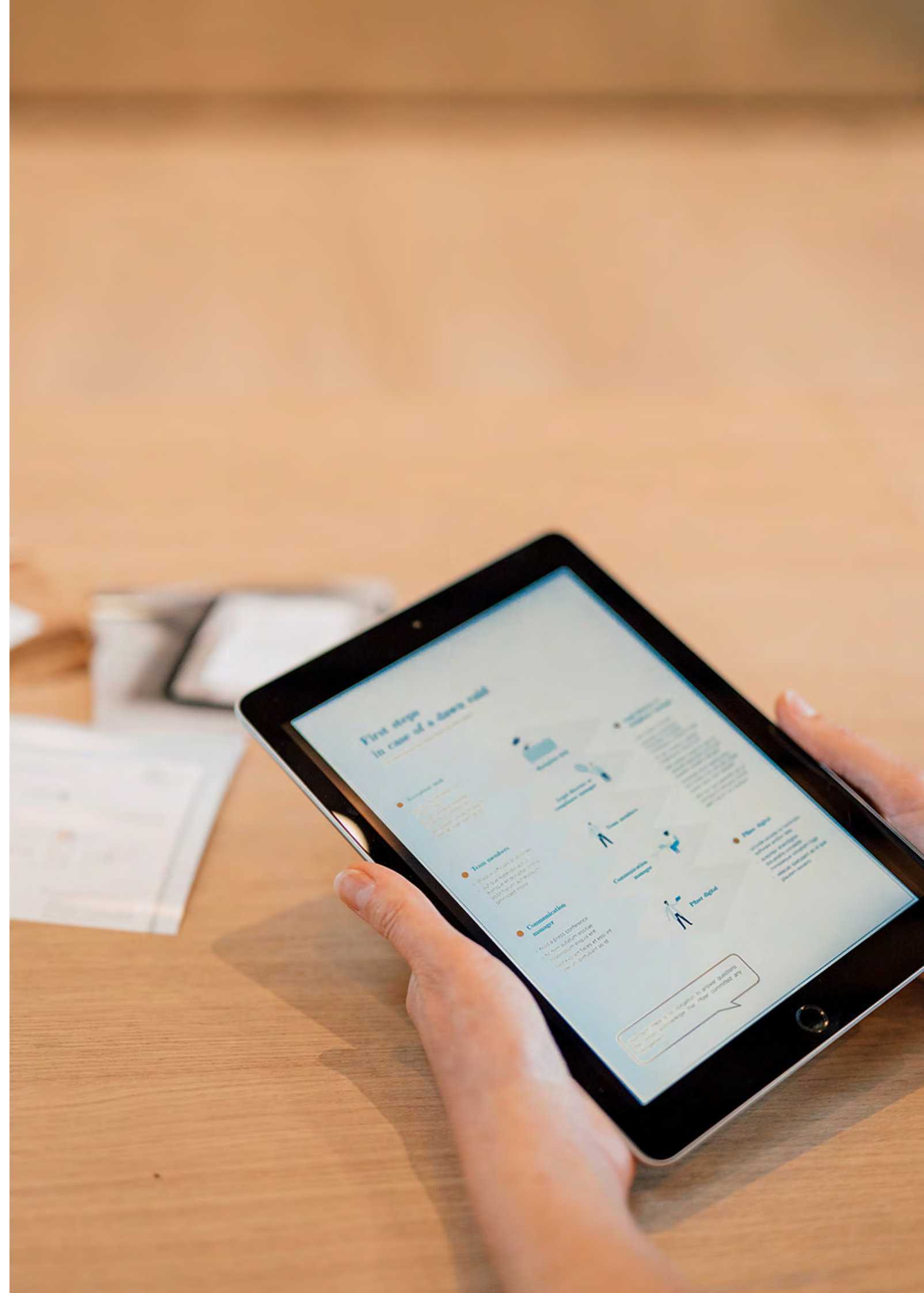
The objective of information design is communication: to inform, provide insight or convince. Central is the user: for whom is the information intended, and what 'story' needs to be told? The information designer analyses the user, the information and the story and creates

a design based on these. **Information design is not about adding an image or prettifying things but about effective communication.**

Nerd alert!

There is a difference between data, information, and knowledge. Data means a quantity of information that has not been organised or made accessible. Information is data that have been organised, adding an informative value to them. Knowledge is the interpretation of information.

Read more about applying visual design skills to contracts in this [blog](#).



4. What legal design requires

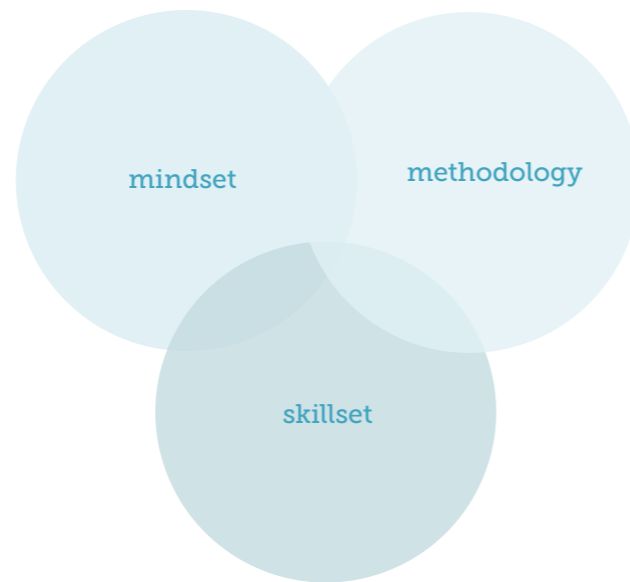
Okay, so legal design is like water: it's everywhere! But how does it work? What does it look like? Is it like one of those underwater creatures living so deep under see that it goes blind?

Well, the ones scuba diving for those particular specimens are the **hyperspecialized lawyers**. They make sure the legal expertise is thoroughly covered and secure.

Legal designers, on the other hand, are swimming further, on surface level, through different expertise and abilities, in groups.

Legal design and lawyers share some skills, training, and mindset. We'd like to share more about how we do legal design: our mindset, methodology and skillset.

Legal design requirements



Mindset

Legal design requires lawyers to change their approach. **Empathy, user-centricity, multidisciplinary collaboration, experimentation, curiosity, and openness** are central to legal design.

Centring the user's needs means putting yourself in their shoes, feeling their needs and experience – in other words: empathy.

A more exploratory approach means that problems are investigated more precisely, not based on assumptions, in search of solutions. Involving people from other disciplines, like designers, IT, marketing and sales, provides a new perspective and results in questions that lawyers themselves would not ask or are no longer asking. **The view of an outsider** – someone who questions the how and why and contributes their expertise – **can help improve legal products and services.**

This development process or innovation needs room to experiment, test and fine-tune because lawyers tend to avoid risks and consider precedents.

An experimental approach will take work. It requires lawyers to leave their comfort zone: not to start by advising or drawing up documents, as they were taught, but to take a more in-depth inventory of the user's needs and then adapt the substance and form accordingly.

Figuring out **people's actual - often latent - needs is crucial** but often neglected in legal services. Clients mostly show up to lawyers only with symptoms of their whole disease, and the legal remedies treat them but do not fight the root cause.

Taking time to analyze needs and experiment with different solutions and approaches is how legal design can combat clients' 'illnesses'.



Question 2: What is working memory?

Find the answers [here!](#)

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Methodology

Design thinking is a problem-solving approach that involves five interrelated stages.

Empathize

The first stage is empathize, where we seek to understand the needs, goals, and challenges of the people for whom we are designing. This involves gaining a deep understanding of the user, their environment, and their needs.

Define

Like charting your course and setting your compass to navigate the waters ahead, this step involves clearly articulating the problem you are trying to solve and ensuring everyone involved in the design process is aligned.

Ideate

Setting sail, using the winds of creativity to explore the vast possibilities that lie ahead. This step involves generating potential solutions to your defined problem.

Prototype

Prototyping means creating a tangible representation of the ideas that have emerged. This stage involves creating

a rough sketch, 3D model, or a detailed mock-up that can be tested and refined. It can even be just a paper prototype.

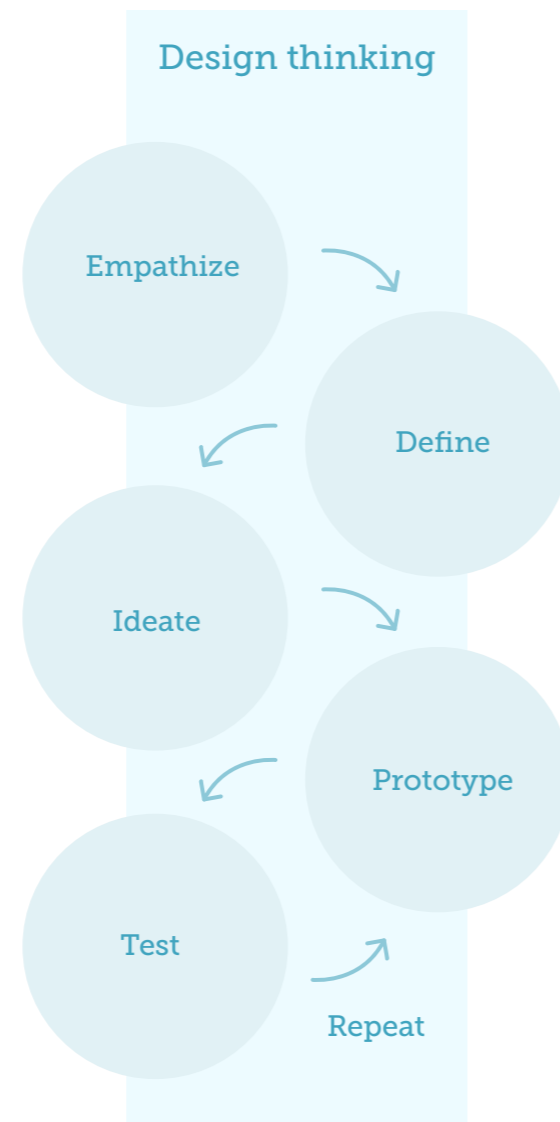
Test

Finally, when testing, we gather user feedback and use it to refine our prototypes until they arrive at a final solution that meets the target audience's needs. Testing provides valuable insights into what works and what doesn't, allowing you to iterate and improve your solution until you have a validated,

effective, and satisfying result for the users.

The design thinking process is iterative and collaborative, where designers move back and forth between stages until they arrive at an effective solution. The process requires creative thinking, empathy, and a willingness to experiment and learn from failure.

You can find our favourite books and other resources on design thinking and creativity on our [favourites page](#).



Skillset

Why plain language is your best friend

One of the primary skills every lawyer knows how to use is language, at least when talking to other lawyers and practitioners. **But we sometimes struggle to translate our lingo into everyday language.**

Remember how having a human-centred approach to law and empathizing with its users is one of the cornerstones of legal design? The language law uses, and the language we use to talk about law is often very distant from what non-lawyers can understand. We regularly don't even agree with or understand each other.

Take this clause, for example:

"The obligations included within the provisions of the Terms & Conditions you received on 30 January 2023 are a result and consequence of the contractual agreement you accordingly signed on the date of 5 January 2023."

Is this the best we can do?

Working with words daily made us overthink them, and what was just

We're not a big fan of calling it 'plain' language by the way. It's not about being 'plain' (oversimplified? stale and boring?), but about communicating clearly, using language people understand.

complex also became unclear.

Plain language is the search for the clearest message possible for the receiver.

We want to be understood, after all. And we can only truly help our clients if they understand us.

Legal documents and services often involve unnecessary jargon that can and should be removed from all communications with non-lawyers.

Human-centricity and empathy mean remembering that our reader can be a dentist, a young girl, a manager who has never faced a legal problem before, a person who is not fluent in your language, a lawyer with experience outside your expertise, or a dyslexic person (or all of the above!). Your language should accommodate those you are communicating with.

Plain language is not about simplicity. It's about making the complex clear.

UX design skills

Legal design is concerned with more than just the message delivered. It's also about how the person receiving it **experiences the communication and service process.**

Have you ever expected mail that got lost for months in the postal service? Or you needed information from your insurance company and had to call five departments for a simple yes or no answer. These **poor customer experiences** can make us irritated, frustrated, and perhaps even anxious.

The same thing happens to people requiring legal services. Going to a courthouse, wandering through several floors, and asking people for directions to find the correct courtroom. Reading poorly clustered and unorganized legal documents five times, trying to find payment timelines and penalty clauses.

That is what user experience design (UX design) studies: **how to improve the user experience when interacting with our product or service.** Good UX design asks for user research and usability testing: knowing your users and testing (and iterating) your designs to best fit your users' needs.

People who interact with the legal sphere are not swimmers and divers like legal designers and lawyers; instead, they stay on a ship, going to a destination through the law, but not concerned with the law beneath them. **Well-organized and clear legal services and information make finding their answers and achieving their goals easier and more satisfactory.**

When we think about it, people needing legal help always try to get somewhere else. They need a car to move around, not a purchase agreement. They want to grow their business, not loan agreements.

The UX design side of legal design ensures that on the surface, where users (customers) navigate their ship, there are enough pin-points and references for the users to go around **as independently and comfortably as possible.**



Question 3: What are mental models?

Find the answers [here!](#)

Multidisciplinary collaboration

The user interface (UI) is the machine interface you interact with as a user, for example, a website. You don't have to know how to code to be able to use a website because of the easy-to-use user interface. **UI design is the process of creating the look and style of a user interface.** Unless you're designing a dashboard, website or app, UI design does not have a separate role in legal design.

Visual skills

You don't have to be great at drawing in order to communicate visually. Learning some basic visual skills, like drawing basic shapes, concepts and people, will help you communicate legal content enormously.

For a complete, professional-looking, finished design, you will need visual design skills: you need a good information designer on your team.

In our [Introduction to Legal Design online workshop](#), we cover the basics of legal design methodology, plain language, visual skills and user research. [Check out our workshop](#) and book your team's start in legal design!

At this point, lawyers think the same thing: I'm only a skilled swimmer! I can scuba-dive deep into a subject or float through different topics, but I don't know how to build a lighthouse or maintain a network of buoys.

There is only so much one person can know. You may not know how to do user research, draw, or test a design. This is where a multidisciplinary team comes in. We need people with different expertise and skills to collaborate.

Lawyers can learn design skills, like UX/UI or visual design, learn to code or learn plain language writing skills. But each area has its experts, so gathering a multidisciplinary team that brings together all knowledge and skills is worth the investment when the stakes are high.

Skills & tools

You may still be at the beginning of your legal design journey and want to develop your skills to understand better how other fields work and how this skillset can help.

Book us for [a custom 1, 2, or 3-day legal design training](#), where we pick a use case from your organisation and walk through all design process steps so you learn legal design skills hands-on.

Or visit www.aclaradesign.nl/favourites and check out our specially curated list of courses, materials, papers, books and platforms you can use to improve your legal design abilities!



Question 4: What are RGB and CMYK?

Find the answers [here!](#)

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5. How we do legal design

So you've decided to get started with legal design. Where do you begin?

Think big, start small

We recommend starting with a current problem: compliance rules that are not being read, or the amount of time the legal department spends answering legal questions. Redesigning a non-binding document (not a contract) will generally be more manageable than changing a contract template that has been used for years.

Gather a multidisciplinary team

Yes, this is essential! Gather the experts you need to make this a successful project.

Embrace the process, methodology and mindset

A good legal designer will facilitate and guide the process. New working processes may feel awkward and need experience. Trust in the process and just get started.

No perfectionism

There is no room for perfectionism in creativity or innovation, at least not until the final stages. Embrace the exploring nature of design and don't get stuck in details or 'But..' mentality.



Question 5: What is a cognitive bias?

Find the answers [here!](#)

Our legal design process

Phase 1: Research & analysis



User research

We map:

- Who is this for? And what are their needs? Through different methods and tools, we discover the users' (often latent) needs.
- What do the users want to achieve?
- What information do they need?
- What is the goal of the communication?

We collect and analyze the insights.

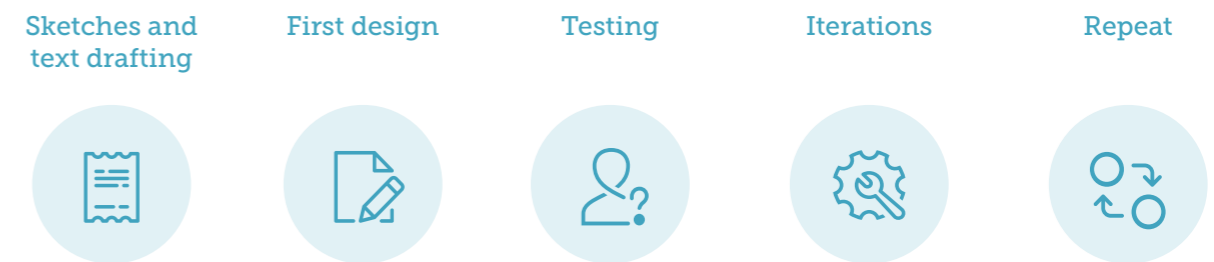
Secondly, we map:

- Are there any technical limitations we need to consider?
- What budget is needed/available?

Information architecture

The next phase is creating the information architecture, based on the user needs and goal of the communication. This creates the blueprint for the design.

Phase 2: Design, testing, iterations



Design & Text

In phase 2, we create the first design sketches and text composition. This is followed by creating the first design version.

Test, iterate, repeat

The next steps involve testing the design with users and making iterations based on the test outcomes. This is repeated as many times as necessary, or the budget allows.

Take a look behind the scenes of our [project with Wolters Kluwer](#) in our blog to read about our design process, and see [the finished result](#) on our showcase page.



Question 6: What's with all the sticky notes being used in design?

Find the answers [here!](#)

What legal design brings to lawyers and organisations

So, what exactly does legal design bring to lawyers and organizations? For lawyers, legal design offers **a new set of tools and techniques** for delivering legal services that are more user-centred, accessible, and engaging.

Putting the user's needs first creates a **better legal product and service experience**. One of the most apparent parts of legal design - but not the most important - is the use of visuals in legal work. In today's world, where people are bombarded with information from all directions, visuals have become essential for communicating complex ideas quickly and effectively. Lawyers can supplement textual information with clear and engaging visuals by using pictures and diagrams in legal work. This enhances comprehension and understanding and increases user engagement and involvement.

Legal design can help lawyers unlock their hidden creative potential. When lawyers start using creative methods, they often discover talents they never knew they had. This leads to greater job satisfaction and a renewed enthusiasm for their work. We regularly see training

participants get a 'spark' in their eyes when discovering their new capabilities.

Even if we just look at the use of visualisations (let alone following a design process), there are various benefits for individual lawyers. For example, visual materials provide a better overview of the information, process, or steps involved in a legal matter, which can lead to fewer mistakes and time savings. Lawyers can gain **better insights into the case or issue faster**, allowing them to spend less time continually verifying facts, reading up, or explaining things to clients. Additionally, making legal work more user-friendly creates **closer relationships with clients**, resulting in greater work satisfaction and joy.

Similarly, organizations can benefit from legal design by improving their legal processes and products, which results in **increased efficiency, cost savings, and customer retention**. Whether your

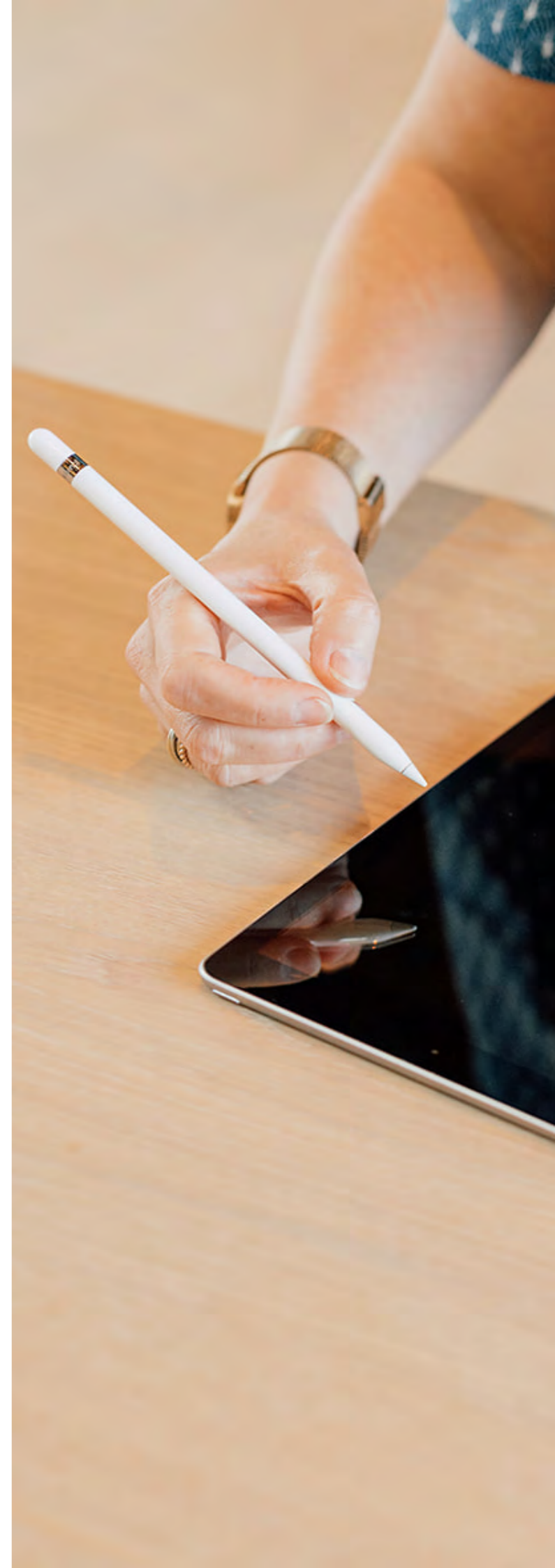
legal team wants to reduce time spent on answering questions, helping their business teams close deals faster or prevent compliance issues, the legal design methodology helps understand the problem and **create validated solutions**.

Legal design is a powerful tool that can transform the legal industry. **The result is a win-win situation for everyone involved.**



Question 7: How many lawyers does it take to change a lightbulb?

You've heard this joke before. No need to read the answer.



6. The future of legal design

We love looking into the future, and it's essential when you work in innovation. Our hopes and predictions for how legal design will mature and develop for the next five years apply to people, skills, services, and tools.

People and skills

A growing number of people are learning legal design skills, eager to start positions to develop and apply their skills. Legal design job openings are still rare, but as the popularity of legal design grows, we expect to see more soon. There is a greater demand for legal designers in-house than at law firms or other organisations. For the next year or so, we expect more lawyers with legal design skills to start legal design projects from within their current roles.

Designers with visual design and UX design skills will be in demand more, especially at law firms, where skills are still more compartmentalised.

Services

Many people think of attractive, visualised documents when they hear about legal design. The legal design services that focus on service and systems design take longer to adopt because they are newer to people, can require more budget, and require changes in (internal) processes, change management and implementation. Although slower in adoption, we expect more demand for service and systems design services.

Tools

It's not just lawyers who fear being replaced by robots (don't worry! We don't believe that will happen). The AI tools currently on the market are rapidly developing, and that means the tools legal designers use will get more and more sophisticated. More automation and AI assistance in design and editing will likely speed up processes. (And raise questions about intellectual property rights. See, that's where we need the lawyers again.)

7. About us

Aclara Legal Design combines legal expertise with information design. We create clarifying visualisations that communicate legal information effectively and convincingly.

Aclara Legal Design improves the communication and usability of legal information. Inaccessible, complicated legal information is transformed into clear, practical and user-friendly content.

Our clients are attorneys/litigators, in-house legal departments, educators, researchers and others dealing with legal information.



Anna Posthumus Meyjes is a legal designer and founder of Aclara Legal Design. Anna brings creativity, design and a user-centered approach to law.

Anna worked as an attorney-at-law in an international litigation practice for over ten years, amongst others at the top-tier Dutch law firm NautaDutilh. She specialised in liability, insurance and financial law. Designing and using clarifying visualisations became an increasingly important part of her communication and inspired her to start Aclara Legal Design.

Want to learn more?

Get in touch!

For custom legal design projects, training, and products from our shop!

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[Aclara Legal Design](#)



Don't forget to sign up to our [newsletter!](#)

Quiz answers!
.....>

8. Quiz answers

Question 1: What is a design pattern?

A design pattern is a general, repeatable, proven solution to a commonly occurring problem. Design patterns are often used in software development, as creating cohesive patterns speed up development time and help create a consistent UI.

But also in legal design, design patterns help creating recognisable, consistent designs, helping the user understand and remember the contents of the document or interface.

Have a look at the [World Commerce & Contracting Contract Design Pattern Library](#) and see how real-life contract designs use design patterns.

Question 2: What is working memory?

Working memory is the small amount of information that can be held in mind and used in the execution of cognitive tasks, in contrast with long-term memory, the vast amount of information saved in one's life. You could say that working memory is the 'headspace' you have to remember and process information short-term.

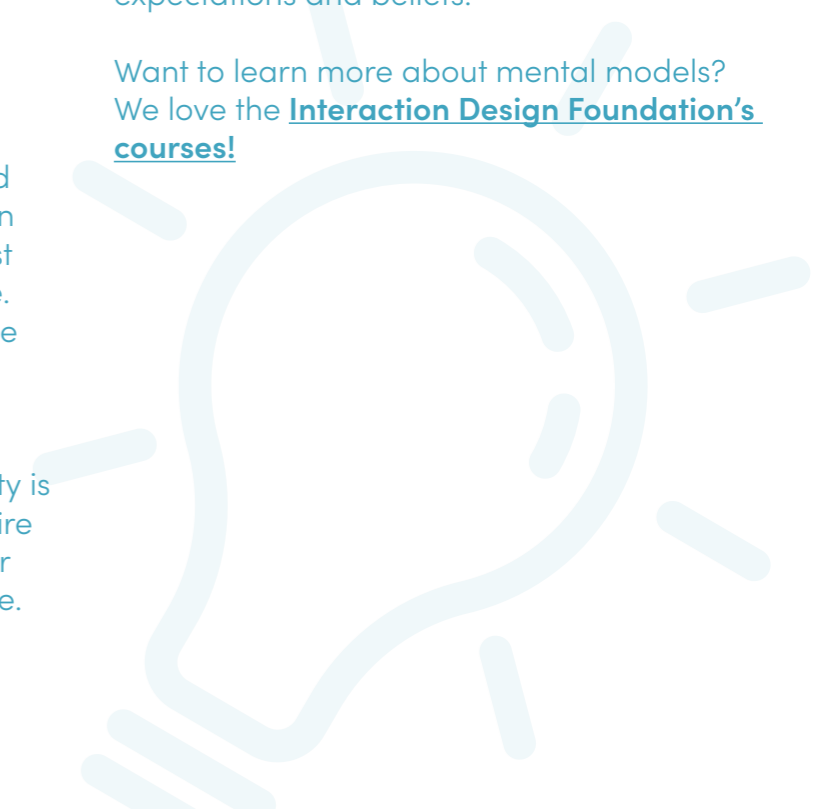
In legal design, working memory capacity is relevant, as many legal documents require a lot of working memory because of their complexity, both in contents and structure.

'Cognitive load' is another term that's used to indicate how much your brain needs to work to process information. We all recognise 'cognitive overload': when your brain tries to process too much information.

Question 3: What are mental models?

Mental models are abstract, inner representations that people have regarding things from the external world. Mental models include your basic ideas of what something is or how it is supposed to work. Designers frequently research to identify users' mental models and apply these findings into the design framework, in order to build on top of the users' existing expectations and beliefs.

Want to learn more about mental models? We love the [Interaction Design Foundation's courses!](#)





Question 4: What are 'RGB' and 'CMYK'?

RGB and CMYK are colour modes. RGB stands for 'red, green, blue'. That's right, the colors of the pixels on your screen. Together with the light of your screen, percentages of red, green and blue form all colours. When designing for screens, be sure to set the colour mode to RGB.

CMYK stands for cyan, magenta, yellow and K (black). On a solid surface, like paper, percentages of cyan, magenta, yellow and black form all colours. Yup, those are the colour cartridges in your printer! When designing for print, be sure to set the colour mode to CMYK.

Nerd alert: There are a million more things we can say about colour modes, but we're sticking to the basics here. Ok, just one more thing: when working with colours online, you regularly see hex codes for colours, like #1f5261 (this teal colour!).

Question 5: What is a cognitive bias?

Cognitive biases are unconscious errors in thinking that arise from problems related to memory, attention, and other mental mistakes. These biases result from our brain's efforts to simplify the incredibly complex world in which we live.

Common cognitive biases include the negativity bias (focusing more on criticism than a compliment, for example), hindsight bias, and confirmation bias (interpreting new information as confirmation of your preexisting beliefs and opinions).

Question 6: What's with all the sticky notes being used in design?

We don't just use sticky notes because they're colourful and look fun. Sticky notes are actually a great medium to sort, categorize, and break up information. The small size forces you to be concise. Their stickiness helps use the space around you and work on a larger scale.

Pro tip 1: always use thick markers on sticky notes, not pens, so they're easier to read from a distance.

Pro tip 2: find a store that sells sticky notes in different sizes, colours and shapes. There are a lot more options than the standard office ones. They help differentiate your information.

Question 7: How many lawyers does it take to change a lightbulb?

Please. Don't even get us started on lawyer jokes. Ask any lawyer, they know the best ones. Share your best jokes with us [here](#).