



Better Lawyering Through Design Thinking

5 Design Principles Every Lawyer Should Know

BY NYSSA P. CHOPRA

Law school taught us to think like lawyers. Clients need us to think like humans. The best legal minds can dissect complex regulations and craft airtight arguments, but those same brilliant lawyers sometimes produce 20-page memos when their audience needs a two-minute conversation. Or draft contracts so dense that the people who must live with them can't actually understand their obligations.

The gap is in our legal training—we learn to analyze problems brilliantly but not how to frame, structure, and deliver solutions in ways that truly serve the humans who need them. That's where multidisciplinary thinking becomes

essential. Borrowing frameworks from outside the law, such as design, helps us reimagine how we work, communicate, and serve our clients.

This challenge isn't unique to law. When fields like statistics, computer science, and journalism faced similar problems of complexity and data proliferation, they developed visualization cultures—charts, diagrams, and graphics that made dense information accessible. Legal design applies this same approach to our profession, using visual tools and human-centered thinking to bridge the gap between legal expertise and client understanding.

Design thinking, born in the world of product and service design, is not just for startups or

Design thinking, born in the world of product and service design, is not just for startups or creatives. At its core, it is about solving problems with empathy, clarity, and iteration.

creatives. At its core, it is about solving problems with empathy, clarity, and iteration. In its classic form, the design thinking cycle is *empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test*. What follows are five principles drawn from that framework, translated into lessons lawyers can use every day to practice smarter, communicate more clearly, and create better client experiences.

1. Empathy First

In law school, we're trained to start with the issue (think: IRAC). In design, you start with the human.

For lawyers, that means looking beyond the legal question to the lived experience of the person asking it. *Who are you helping? What do they need? What do they fear?*

Take a client facing eviction. You could walk them through statutes and case law, and technically you'd be right, but if they're panicked about their safety and where their children will sleep, your explanation won't land. Empathy means framing your advice in a way that meets them in that moment: *Here are your immediate options, here's what to expect next week, and here's how I'll guide you through it.*

Or take a client facing a lawsuit. You could walk them through procedural timelines and discovery rules, but if they're deeply concerned about their reputation and business relation-

ships, empathy means starting with: *Here's what we can do to protect your interests right now, here's the likely timeline, and here's how we'll keep you informed every step of the way.*

Empathy doesn't dilute legal rigor. It translates rigor into advice that is usable, relevant, and responsive to the real human on the receiving end—whether that's a client or a partner.

2. Define the Right Problem

Lawyers are trained to provide answers. Designers are trained to question the question.

Too often, we mistake symptoms for root causes. For example, consider a partner who keeps returning drafts with heavy edits and frames the problem as “junior lawyers not paying attention.” In reality, the feedback shows the team never received clear guidance on the client's priorities. So, the real problem is alignment at the start of the project, not the diligence of the associates.

Design thinking challenges us to pause before rushing to solutions. By clarifying the real problem, we avoid solving the wrong one and wasting effort. The lawyers who excel at defining problems by listening closely, reframing issues, and digging beneath the surface are often the ones who deliver the most strategic and helpful advice.

Try this: The next time you receive an assignment, ask yourself (or your client/partner): *What are we really trying to solve here?* Reframing the problem often changes the solution.

3. Design for Action

Every deliverable should answer one question: *What do I want the reader to do next?*

Too often, legal work stops at analysis. But clients, colleagues, and courts need more than knowledge—they need a path forward. A 20-page memo that explains the law but leaves the client unsure what to do is less valuable than a two-page summary with a clear recommendation.

Whether it is an email, a contract, or a compliance policy, structure your work so the next step is obvious. Lead with takeaways, highlight key decisions, and make action items

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Stanford Legal Design Lab, with Margaret Hagan, <https://www.legaltechdesign.com>

Designs on the Law, Harvard Law School, <https://clp.law.harvard.edu/knowledge-hub/magazine/issues/adaptive-innovation/designs-on-the-law>

Lawyers Design School, by Hannele Korhonen, <https://lawyersdesignschool.com>

unmistakable. Good design turns information into direction, and direction builds trust.

4. Visualize to Clarify

Design thrives on visuals in the form of timelines, diagrams, white space, and contrast. Law often resists them. But visual thinking can be a game changer.

Take a complex merger timeline. Instead of burying deadlines in dense paragraphs, create a simple visual roadmap: *Week 1: Due diligence begins. Week 4: First draft purchase agreement. Week 8: Final negotiations.* Add color coding for different workstreams. Your client can see at a glance what's happening when and where potential delays might occur.

Visuals don't “dumb down” the law. They distill it. Hierarchy, alignment, and contrast aren't just design terms; they're tools lawyers can use to guide attention and build trust.

5. Information Architecture

Information architecture is about organizing content so people can find what they need,

when they need it. Designers obsess over how people navigate and use information. Lawyers should too.

Long, dense documents may satisfy formal requirements, but they rarely serve the reader. Break down information the way a client or end user actually looks for it. Use headings, bullets, and modular sections. Lead with “what this means for you.” Call out key takeaways at the top.

Consider a 50-page employment handbook. Most employees will never read it cover to cover. Instead, they'll search for specific answers when problems arise. Structure it the way they think: *What can I do? What can't I do? What happens if . . . ?* Use clear section headers, bold key policies, and put the most-needed information (like complaint procedures) up front where it's easy to find.

Good information design isn't cosmetic. It's structural. It makes your work more navigable, more actionable, and ultimately more valuable.

Small Shifts, Big Impact

You don't need to reinvent your practice to apply design thinking. Start with small experiments:

- Rewrite an email with empathy. If you're sending a draft to a busy partner to review, *what do they need to know up front?*
- Map a client's journey from first contact to final invoice. *Where do they get confused or frustrated?*
- Replace one dense paragraph with a visual summary. Turn a complex process into a simple step-by-step list or timeline.

Over time, these changes compound. You'll spot friction points, improve communication, and deliver work that feels not only legally sound, but also thoughtfully designed.

Good lawyering isn't just knowing the answer—it's delivering it in a way people can understand, trust, and act on. 



Nyssa P. Chopra is a technology, privacy, and trust and safety attorney at Perkins Coie LLP, where she advises some of the world's largest online platforms on data disclosure, cross-border data governance, child safety, AI governance, international human rights, and platform liability. She is also co-chair of the Data Privacy and Security Committee at the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association (NAPABA) and Denver City Lead at the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity (LCLD). Previously, she was corporate counsel at Microsoft and has held fellowships with the Aspen Institute, LCLD, World Affairs Council, and Washington State Bar Association—nyssapchopra@gmail.com; nyssapchopra.com.