

02 Affordance

Aim for completion of this task by: **Sunday 26/10/25**

This task is linked to the Input (Contexts) wk02 talk on Tuesday 07/10/25

Affordance is a key psychological principle, first utilised in the design world by, amongst others, Donald Norman.

Watch these three short videos (c.21mins total - sorry about the YouTubeAds!)

Vox. It's not you. Bad doors are everywhere. 2016. [Accessed 13/10/25].

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yY96hTb8Wgl>

Interaction Design Foundation. Affordance in UX Design. 2023. [Accessed 13/10/25].

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNqTmuCOC6I>

Read this

If you prefer to read about affordances or you want more depth, this article, also by the IDF, is a good place to start.

Interaction Design Foundation. Affordances. [Accessed 13/10/25].

<https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/book/the-encyclopedia-of-human-computer-interaction-2nd-ed/affordances>

Alternatively, find a library copy of Don Norman's classic book - cited below.

Norman, D. A. (2013). The design of everyday things 7th ed. MIT Press.

Tasks

1. Use the videos and reading to offer a simple explanation of the concept of 'affordances'. Focusing on the features of the device and basic applications it ships with, highlight the different affordances offered by a mobile phone, tablet and a laptop eg iPhone, Ipad, Macbook. (Min. 250 words + list)

2. What are signifiers? Find an online source on the concept and write a short description - try searching 'Donald Norman' or 'IxDF' in the first instance.

Illustrate your written notes with appropriate images.

Understanding the Concept of Affordances

The concept of affordances describes the relationship between a physical object and an interacting agent (such as a human, animal, or even a robot). Originally coined by psychologist James J. Gibson and later popularized in the design world by Don Norman, affordances define what actions are possible.

As noted in the Interaction Design Foundation (IDF) reading, an affordance is not a property of the object alone but emerges from the interaction between the object's features and the agent's capabilities. For instance, a ladder affords climbing to an adult who can balance, but it does not afford climbing to a baby who lacks that capability. In design, affordances are "strong clues to the operations of things" (Norman, 1988). When a door has a flat metal plate, it naturally affords pushing because there is nothing to grab. Conversely, a "Norman Door" is a poorly designed object where the physical cues (like a pull handle on a push door) mislead the user, necessitating a sign to correct the confusion.

In digital design, affordances help users discover what is possible without needing a manual. A button on a screen that looks "raised" or "3D" affords clicking, while a slider affords dragging. Effective design ensures that these possibilities are easily discoverable and provide immediate feedback, so the user understands that their action has been successful.

Affordances of Mobile Phone (e.g., iPhone)

- **Portability:** Its small form factor affords "always-on" connectivity and fits comfortably in a pocket, making it the primary device for communication on the go.
- **Single-Handed Interaction:** The screen size affords thumb-based navigation and one-handed "vertical" scrolling.
- **Haptic Feedback:** Physical vibrations afford immediate, tactile confirmation of digital actions (like a "click" when typing on a glass screen).
- **Point-and-Shoot:** Integrated cameras and the "Photos" app afford instant, spontaneous capturing of the environment.

Affordances of Tablet (e.g., iPad)

- **Expanded Tactile Surface:** The larger screen affords more complex touch gestures, such as "pinch-to-zoom" and multi-finger swiping, which are more precise than on a phone.
- **Digital Ink:** When paired with a stylus, the device affords handwriting, sketching, and artistic creation in apps like Notes or Procreate, bridging the gap between paper and computer.
- **Media Consumption:** Its weight and size afford comfortable handheld viewing of videos or reading of e-books in a "lean-back" posture.

Affordances of Laptop (e.g., MacBook)

- **Precision Typing:** The physical keyboard affords high-speed "touch typing" and long-form content creation that a touchscreen cannot match.
- **Cursor Accuracy:** The trackpad or mouse affords "pixel-perfect" selection and complex multitasking, such as dragging files between windows.
- **Complex Multitasking:** The operating system and large horizontal screen afford "windowing," allowing users to view multiple applications simultaneously for professional workflows.
- **Durability and Stability:** The hinged design affords a "self-standing" display, allowing for hands-free use on a desk or lap for extended periods.

Sources:

Vox (2016). It's not you. Bad doors are everywhere.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yY96hTb8Wgl>

Interaction Design Foundation (2023). Affordance in UX Design.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNqTmuCOC6I>

Kaptelinin, V. (2014, January 1). Affordances. IxDF - Interaction Design Foundation.

<https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/book/the-encyclopedia-of-human-computer-interaction-2nd-ed/affordances>

What are signifiers?

According to Donald Norman, as detailed in the Encyclopedia of Human-Computer Interaction (IxDF), signifiers are the perceivable cues that communicate where an action should take place and how an object should be used.

In his revised work, Norman defines a signifier as "any mark or sound, any perceivable indicator that communicates appropriate behavior to a person." While an affordance represents a possibility for action, a signifier is the signal that makes that possibility visible to the user.

Key Concepts:

1. Affordances are often invisible (e.g., a touch-sensitive area on a smooth plastic surface). Signifiers are the design elements—such as a "Push" sign, a handle, or a highlighted button—that tell the user what to do.



2. Norman argues that signifiers are more important to designers than affordances because designers care most about whether a user can actually perceive and understand the product.
3. Signifiers can be intentional (a label on a door) or accidental (a visible path worn through grass signifying where people usually walk).

