MaP Quick Guide

Assumption Mapping

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Assumption mapping is a practical tool for improving museum decisions. While it can be used for complex strategic planning, this guide focuses on how to apply it in 30-minute sessions to improve day-to-day museum work.

What Is an Assumption?

An assumption is something we believe to be true but haven't verified.

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In museums, assumptions often take the form of statements about …

- What people want or need
- What will or won't work
- What resources are required
- What outcomes will occur

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Five Categories of Assumptions

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Five Categories

#1: Desirability Assumptions

Beliefs about what people want or value

- "Members want more evening programs"
- "Teachers prefer guided experiences"

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Five Categories

#2: Viability Assumptions

Beliefs about resources and sustainability

- "We can staff this with existing teams"
- "This will increase membership retention"

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Five Categories

#3: Feasibility Assumptions

Beliefs about technical or operational possibilities

- "Our space can accommodate these activities"
- "We can maintain this level of programming"

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#4: Usability Assumptions

Beliefs about how people will interact

- "Visitors will understand this interface"
- "People will follow these instructions"

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Five Categories

#5: Ethical Assumptions

Beliefs about impacts and implications

- "This approach serves diverse audiences equitably"
- "This policy won't create barriers"

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The Basic Framework

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Assumption mapping plots assumptions on two axes:

Importance and Evidence

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#1: Importance

How critical is this assumption to success? What happens if we're wrong?

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#2: Evidence

How much proof do we have? How reliable is our information?

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Importance + Evidence = 4 Quadrants

1. **Leap of Faith** (High importance, Low evidence)
2. **Safe Assumptions** (High importance, High evidence)
3. **Quick Checks** (Low importance, Low evidence)
4. **Validated Low Priority** (Low importance, High evidence)

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1. Leap of Faith

High importance, Low evidence

- Test these first
- Highest risk if wrong

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2. Safe Assumptions

High importance, High evidence

- Worth documenting
- Monitor for changes

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3. Quick Checks

Low importance, Low evidence

- Test if easy
- Otherwise deprioritize

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4. Validated Low Priority

Low importance, High evidence

- Document and move on
- Revisit if context changes

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Starting Small

A basic assumption mapping session can take just 30 minutes.

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30-Minute Mapping

Step 1: List Assumptions (10m)

- What must be true for success?
- What are we taking for granted?

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30-Minute Mapping

Step 2: Plot the most important ones (10m)

- Focus on top 3–5 assumptions
- Be honest about evidence

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It's worth noting that we don't have to be dishonest people to be less than honest with ourselves. We all have positivity (or negativity) biases. You'll see in our practice session that mapping helps address this reality because our map will show the *relative* degree of evidence we have for assumptions. In other words, even if we have a tendency to drastically overestimate the evidence we have to support an assumption, the assumptions for which we have the least evidence will still tend to show themselves on our map. In this way, we can be wrong in our assessment and still identify the correct (most risky) assumptions from a set.

30-Minute Mapping

Step 3: Plan next steps (10m)

- How might we test key assumptions?
- What small experiments could help?

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Two Simple Ways to Test Assumptions

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Testing Essentials

Single Question Surveys

- Ask one clear question
- Target specific audiences
- Example: “When was the last time you visited a museum after 5pm?”
- Useful for: Testing desirability and viability assumptions

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Testing Essentials

Quick Usability Tests

- Show people a prototype or mock-up
- Watch what they do (not what they say they'd do)
- Example: Share a program description, watch how people interpret it
- Useful for: Testing feasibility and usability assumptions

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Remember

- Start small
- Test one assumption at a time
- Real behavior > stated preferences
- Some evidence > no evidence

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What Makes a Good Assumption Statement

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Effective assumption statements are ...

1. Specific
2. Testable
3. Current
4. Relevant

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Example

Specific vs Not Specific

- 🤢 “Teachers will like this."
- 🙂 “Teachers will use this resource weekly.”

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Example

Testable vs Not Testable

- 🤢 “Many members will participate.”
- 🙂 “20% of members will attend.”

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Example

Current vs Not Current

- 🤢 “Audiences always …”
- 🙂 “Today’s audiences want …”

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Example

Relevant vs Not Relevant

- 🤢 “Teachers will use our new online resources weekly.” (When the museum has prioritized developing digital learning tools)
- 🙂 “Teachers will use our new online resources weekly.” (When the museum has prioritized a redesign of its membership program)

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Common Pitfalls

Watch for assumptions that are actually solutions in disguise

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Example:

🤢 “We need to offer virtual programs.” (This is a solution)

🙂 “Online audiences want to participate in our programs.” (This is an assumption we can test)

Common Pitfalls

Watch for assumptions that are too vague to test

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Example:

🤢 “The community will embrace this initiative.” (Too vague)

🙂 “At least 100 people from our target neighborhoods will participate in the first three months.” (Specific and testable)

Common Pitfalls

Watch for assumptions based on outdated contexts

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Example:

🤢 “Millennials prefer digital guides because that's what worked in 2019.” (Outdated)

🙂 “Based on current visitor behavior, digital guides are the preferred format for self-guided tours.” (Current, but needs testing)

Common Pitfalls

Watch for assumptions mixing multiple beliefs

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Example:

🤢 “Members will attend evening events and bring their friends and post about it on social media.” (Multiple assumptions)

🙂 “Members will attend evening events.” (Single, testable assumption)

🙂 “Members who attend evening events typically bring one or more guests.” (Another single assumption)

Using This Guide

Assumption mapping works best as an ongoing practice rather than a one-time exercise. Start with a small decision or initiative. Map your assumptions in 30 minutes. Test what matters most. Build confidence in the process. Then apply it to larger strategic questions.

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Remember: The goal isn't to eliminate assumptions — that's impossible. The goal is to make assumptions explicit so we can test the ones that matter most.

Acknowledgments & Further Learning

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This guide adapts concepts from Teresa Torres' work on continuous discovery and assumption mapping for museum contexts. Learn more about Torres’ work at producttalk.org