

Determining your database goals and queries

Goal of this document: This document provides step-by-step guides, examples, and frameworks to help you determine the goals for your database and your research questions.

Audience: Human rights defenders who are interested in using a database to manage their information about human rights violations.

Contribute: Please feel free to share this resource if you find it helpful or know someone who might have experiences to add. This document is open to the public to view and comment.

Status: This is a living document, and everyone is welcome and encouraged to add to it. Ideas that need some expansion are flagged with a sprout. 🌱 Last updated May 6, 2022

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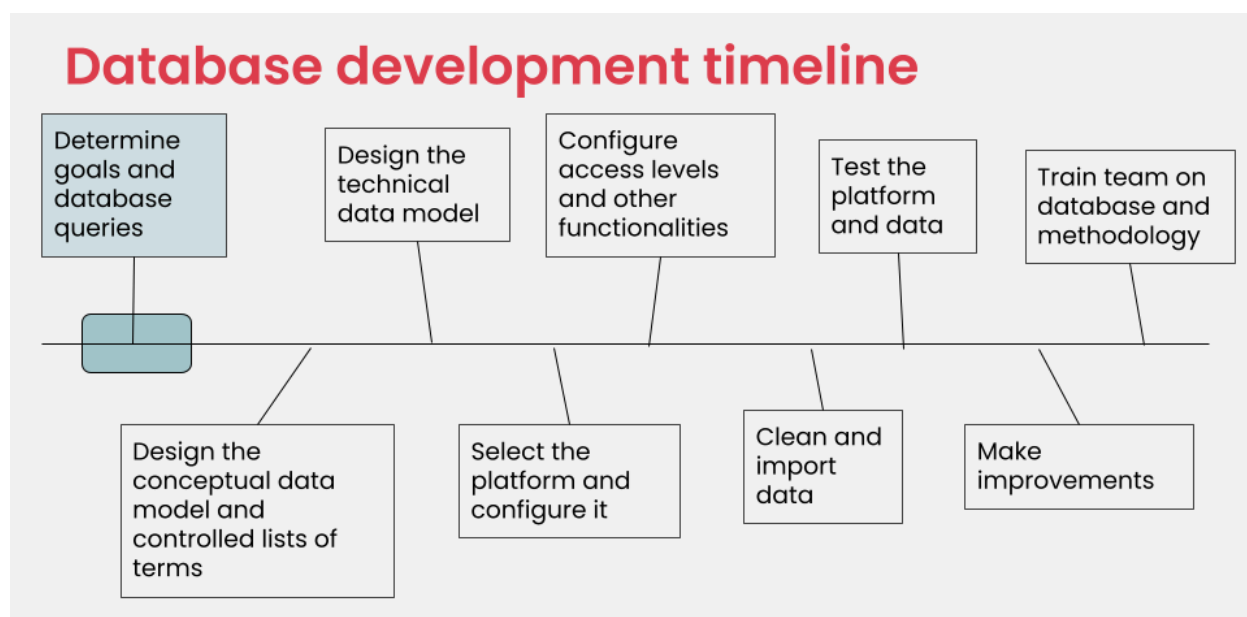
How to use this resource

If you have determined that a database is right for you, then it is important to create a common understanding of *why* this database is being developed (the goals), *for whom* we are creating this database (the user), and *what questions* those users want or need to be able to ask the database (the queries). This resource will walk you through the process of defining your database goals and queries.

Firstly, this resource will discuss how to determine the goals of your database before we turn to a discussion of how to determine the questions that you need to be able to ask your database (we will refer to these questions as *database queries* throughout this resource). As part of this process, you will think through the user personas for your database, or the potential users who could use it. With a series of examples and interactive activities, this resource will help you consider the goals of your database and provide a fundamental foundation as you move forward in the process of developing it.

This resource may prove most useful if read by all members of your organisation who collect, organise, or structure your information. To avoid any future disagreements about what the database does and does not do, your team members should discuss and come to a consensus on the database goals and queries before moving forward in the process of building your database. If you already have a database in place, this resource may help to refocus your efforts and ensure an understanding of the functions and purpose of the database across your organisation.

In the context of the database development timeline, you are now at the stage of determining your information goals and database queries.



Defining the goals of your database

Before you begin to build your database, the best place to start is by thinking about what you want to accomplish with it. This may seem an obvious step, but it is crucial to determine the scope of your database project. By determining your goals, you can establish what is essential to the project, what you might want to exclude from your database, and what is realistic to achieve with the information you have available to you.

To determine your database goals, there are a few key questions that you should answer:

1. What are you collecting information on?

Perhaps you are collecting information about police violence against protesters in your country or data on violations against migrant workers. Whatever your area of investigation, it is important to capture the focus of your data collection to establish the scope of your database project.

2. What do you want your users and stakeholders to be able to do with this information?

Ultimately, your database will be utilised to accomplish specific tasks. It may be a tool for preserving evidence to be used in a court of law, it may house reliable statistics for advocacy purposes, or it may create evidence-based stories that can help to change the narrative.

3. What is the scope of the information you collect?

As you think through the information you collect and the ways in which you hope it

will be utilised, you may learn that there is information that falls outside the scope of your database project. For instance, your scope could be limited temporally (e.g. violations from 2000 to 2019), geographically (e.g. violations occurring within specific geographic boundaries), or by violation type (e.g. only violations related to police violence). The scope of your database project will likely shift over time to reflect transformations and developments in the human rights environment. Nevertheless, establishing your scope at the time of building out your database can be useful to ensure the information you capture contributes to the goals of the project.

Thinking through these questions should help you to clearly define the goals of your database. Once you have your goals defined, the next step will be to prioritise them so that you and your team will know what to focus on first, and what to look at next. It is important to keep the agreed-upon prioritised list at hand so you can refer to them throughout this process.

 You can use [Exercise 1 and 2 in this worksheet](#) to brainstorm your database goals. We recommend that you discuss these questions with your team, or with those in your organisation who have a stake in your database project.

Example: Berkeley Copwatch

To demonstrate how all these steps come together, we want to share with you an example from the work of Berkeley Copwatch, a police monitoring group based in Berkeley, California, in the United States. For over thirty years, the organisation has monitored the police, filming police misconduct and offering information to local citizens on their rights. Over the last three decades, the volunteers leading this work have created a rich record of violations by police in the area. In recent years, however, maintaining records and organising them in a systematic way to support the work of the organisation began to pose a challenge. They decided to reach out for support from WITNESS and others to develop a database, with the goal of building a system to maintain, organise, preserve and find their videos. After several years of development and planning, they built the [People's Database for Police Accountability](#).

Their first step was to define the goals for this database. Through a series of brainstorming sessions, they decided on 3 specific goals.

Berkeley Copwatch Goals

Goal #1: To raise the standard of information gathered and the ability to use it in support of various policy campaigns.

Goal #2: To gather aggregated data on incidents in order to demonstrate patterns of abuse in an organised and comprehensive way.

Goal #3: To find footage and data on specific incidents quickly.

Determining your user personas

In this step, you will describe the type of person (also known as 'user persona') who will want to use the data from your project. The user personas will reflect or serve as proxies for the real people that will use the information and conclusions you will be disseminating. Creating personas can help you understand your users' needs, experiences, behaviours and goals.

Start by writing down a list of key user personas, including both fictional characters and the actual people or roles on your team for whom you are building your database. Once you have a list, write down some key information about them (e.g. occupation, resources, skills, needs, goals). Then, for each persona, you will determine their needs as a user of your platform/database (if applicable). This will include the questions the users will want to ask the database. This information is very important and will lay the groundwork for subsequent decisions about how to organise your data.

Some questions that you may consider when brainstorming on your user personas include:

- What is this person's job/role in their organisation?
- Why will this database be useful to them?
- What level of technical expertise do they have?
- What challenges could arise for them by using this database?

 You can use [Exercise 3 in this worksheet](#) to brainstorm your user personas. These can be imaginary personas, but you can also include real life examples from your current staff or database users.

Determining your database queries

Database queries are the questions that you are able to ask of your database. Not only will your database be able to store the information you collect, but it will also have the analytical power to answer questions about this data. Now that you have written down the goals of your database and have some understanding of your user personas' needs, the next step is to write down the list of database queries. In order to achieve your determined goals for the database, **which questions must the database be able to answer and which questions would be nice-to-have?**

For example, if you want users of your database to be able to develop strong advocacy campaigns against the death penalty in your country, there are a few possible database queries you might have in mind: *How many prisoners are on death row in my country? What are the criminal charges against those on death row? What ethnic, religious, or political identities are represented in the population of those on death row?*

For another example, if you keep a database on migrants held in detention, a user could wish to use your database to inform their report on the disproportionate detention of a particular ethnic group. To address this user's needs, some possible database queries you would have in mind could be: *What ethnicities are represented in the population of detained migrants in my country? How long are individuals detained? What legal status do detainees have?*

 You can use [Exercise 4 in this worksheet](#) to brainstorm your database queries. Think about what questions your users wish they could ask your data (even if *you* are the user!). Write them all down and highlight the ones that are most important to your users.

Example: Berkeley Copwatch

After brainstorming the goals for their People's Database for Police Accountability, the team at Berkeley Copwatch began to think about what questions they wanted to be able to ask their database. The table below indicates some of the user personas they brainstormed and the corresponding questions for their database.

User persona	Database queries
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Human rights researcher who is investigating human rights violations by police officers in Berkeley.	• Which officers most often use force? • What kind of force are officers using? • Are officers deliberately interfering with the right to watch? Which officers? • Do officers conduct searches based on people's race?
Human rights lawyer working on a case that involves an incident with a person of colour and an officer that used force.	• Is there video evidence or testimony taken from people witnessing this incident? • What are the histories of incidents for the officer involved in this incident? • Who else was present at an incident? What did they do?
Berkeley Copwatch volunteer writing a report on the geographic concentrations of police violence in Berkeley, CA.	• In which neighbourhoods do the most incidents of police violence occur? • How many incidents of police violence can be attributed to officers from specific police precincts?



Next resource section:



[Resource section] Designing your conceptual data model (living document)