

How to Choose Between Great Ideas

Formats: Markdown (canonical) | Word (DOCX) | PDF **Updated:** 2026-09-03 **License:** CC BY 4.0 --
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A 4-step quick start guide for prioritizing features, initiatives, or ideas using a 2x2 matrix. Helps your team move from "everything is important" to a clear, defensible action sequence.

When to use this

You have more good ideas than capacity to build them. Your team needs to decide what to do first, what to defer, and what to kill. This guide walks you through a 2x2 prioritization exercise you can run in 30-45 minutes with sticky notes, a whiteboard, or any digital collaboration tool.

Process

Step 1: Collect items and pick your axes

Start by listing everything that needs prioritizing. Features, stories, initiatives, experiments -- whatever is competing for attention.

Write each item on a separate sticky note or card. One idea per card. Include just enough context to evaluate it (a short title and 1-2 sentence description).

Then pick your two axes. These define the 2x2 grid your items will land on.

Axis Pair	Best for	X-axis (horizontal)	Y-axis (vertical)
Impact / Feasibility	Feature prioritization, sprint planning	How easy is this to build?	How much does this move the needle for users?
Importance / Urgency	Competing demands, executive requests	How time-sensitive is it?	How critical is this to our goals?
Pain / Frequency	Bug triage, UX improvements	How often do users hit this problem?	How painful is it when they do?

The first-named consideration is always the vertical axis. Impact, Importance, and Pain each go on the Y axis; Feasibility, Urgency, and Frequency each go on the X axis. This

matters because Step 2 stack-ranks on the vertical axis alone, and the first consideration is the one you want your team arguing about first.

Pick the pair that matches your decision. If none of these fit, define your own two axes -- just make sure each one is something your team can evaluate with evidence, not just gut feel. Whichever you name first goes vertical.

Step 2: Vertical stack-rank

Place all items along the vertical axis first. Ignore the horizontal axis for now.

How to do it:

- Start with any two items. Which one scores higher on the vertical axis? Place the higher one above the lower one.
- Add the next item. Where does it fall relative to the ones already placed? Slide it into position.
- Keep going until every item is stacked vertically from highest to lowest.

Why vertical first? Evaluating one dimension at a time is easier than evaluating two simultaneously. It reduces arguments and speeds up the exercise.

Facilitation tip: If the team disagrees on placement, ask: "What evidence would change your mind?" If the answer is "none," someone is anchoring on opinion. Name it and move on.

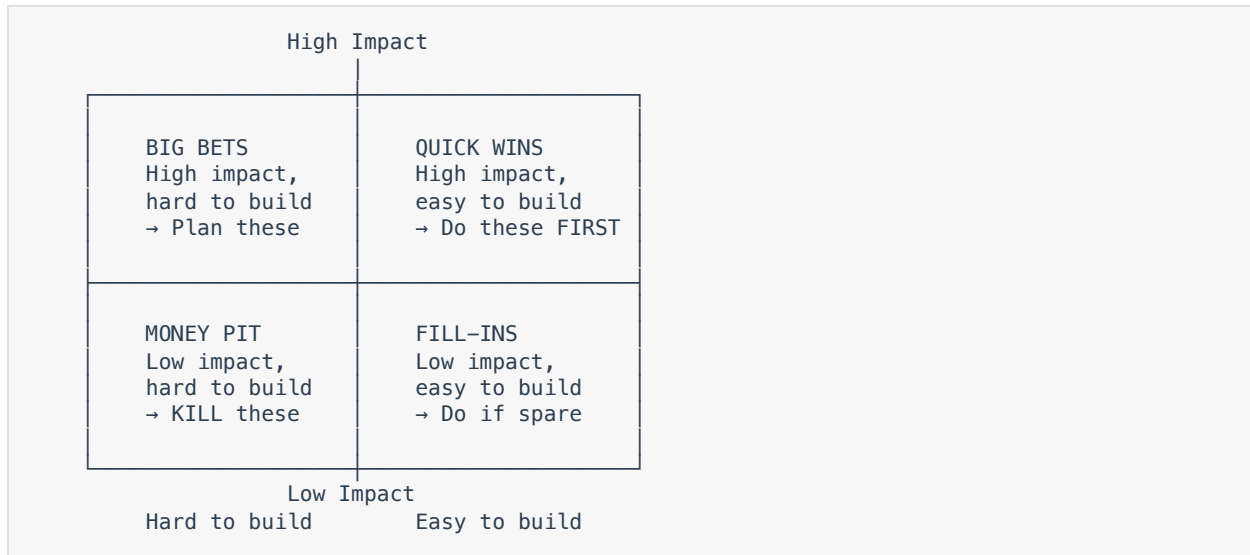
Step 3: Horizontal slide

Now evaluate each item on the horizontal axis. Slide items left or right based on their score.

How to do it:

- Work through the stack from top to bottom
- For each item, ask: "Where does this fall on the horizontal axis?"
- Slide it left (low) or right (high) without changing its vertical position
- Items will naturally cluster into four quadrants

What the quadrants mean (Impact/Feasibility example):



Step 4: Read the quadrants and build your action list

The matrix tells you what to do. Read it quadrant by quadrant.

Quick Wins (high impact, high feasibility): Do these first. They deliver the most value with the least effort. If you only have capacity for one thing, pick from here.

Big Bets (high impact, low feasibility): Plan these carefully. They're worth doing but need more time, research, or resources. Break them into smaller pieces if possible.

Fill-Ins (low impact, high feasibility): Do these when you have spare capacity. They're easy but don't move the needle much. Over a week, clear them; they cost attention while they sit open. Over a quarter, don't let them crowd out Quick Wins or Big Bets.

Money Pit (low impact, low feasibility): Kill these. They cost a lot and deliver little. This is the hardest decision for most teams -- but saying no here is what makes everything else possible.

The KILL decision matters most. Teams that can't say no to Money Pit items end up with bloated roadmaps and scattered focus. If an item lands in the Money Pit, remove it from the backlog entirely. Don't defer it. Don't revisit it next quarter. Kill it.

A note on the quadrant names. These four names are this guide's own. The source deck names the same corners **do first**, **do next**, **explore/plan**, and **on ice**, and the [2x2 tool](#) uses the deck's names, because those still read correctly on an Importance/Urgency or Pain/Frequency board where calling something a "Quick Win" or a "Money Pit" would be nonsense. This guide keeps the value names because it is built around a single Impact/Feasibility example, and those are the names a team already recognizes. The two vocabularies describe the same four corners:

This guide	The deck and the tool	Where it sits
Quick Wins	do first	High on the vertical axis, high on the horizontal
Big Bets	explore / plan	High on the vertical axis, low on the horizontal
Fill-Ins	do next	Low on the vertical axis, high on the horizontal
Money Pit	on ice	Low on the vertical axis, low on the horizontal

Two orders, two horizons. The 2x2 tool and the source deck read the board out as do first, do next, explore/plan, on ice, clearing everything in the "we can start today" column before anyone is tied up in a spike. That is the right order for a working list: a cheap ready item costs you attention every day it stays open, and most of them are days of work, not weeks.

The sequence below is a different instrument. It is a roadmap for a sprint or a quarter, capped at 3-5 items, and on that horizon Big Bets have to be named as commitments or they never start, because there is always more cheap ready work.

Use the tool's order to decide what you pick up on Monday. Use this sequence to decide what the quarter is actually for.

Build your action sequence:

Priority	Item	Quadrant	Next Step
1	(Quick Win item)	Quick Win	Start this sprint
2	(Quick Win item)	Quick Win	Start this sprint
3	(Big Bet item)	Big Bet	Spike/discovery next sprint
--	(Money Pit item)	Money Pit	KILLED -- removed from backlog

Worked example

Context: A health-tech product team needs to prioritize 6 features for the next quarter.

Axes: Impact (on patient outcomes) vs. Feasibility (engineering effort + data availability)

Items:

Feature	Impact	Feasibility	Quadrant
Medication reminder notifications	High -- reduces missed doses	High -- push notification infra exists	Quick Win

Feature	Impact	Feasibility	Quadrant
AI-powered symptom checker	High -- could catch issues early	Low -- needs ML model, regulatory review	Big Bet
Dark mode for mobile app	Low -- cosmetic, no health outcome	High -- standard UI work	Fill-In
Real-time vitals dashboard for clinicians	High -- faster clinical decisions	Medium -- requires device integrations	Big Bet
Custom avatar for patient profiles	Low -- engagement only	Low -- needs design system overhaul	Money Pit
Care plan PDF export	Medium -- requested by 3 clinic partners	High -- existing PDF library	Quick Win

Action sequence:

1. **Medication reminders** -- Quick Win. Ship in Sprint 1.
2. **Care plan PDF export** -- Quick Win. Ship in Sprint 2.
3. **Real-time vitals dashboard** -- Big Bet. Run a 2-week spike to scope device integrations.
4. **AI symptom checker** -- Big Bet. Defer to Q3 pending regulatory guidance.
5. **Dark mode** -- Fill-In. Add to backlog, pick up if capacity allows.
6. **Custom avatar** -- KILLED. Removed from backlog.

Facilitator tips

- **Run this exercise with the whole squad.** PM, design, engineering, QA. Different perspectives change where items land on the grid. That's the point.
- **Timebox the debates.** If the team can't agree on placement after 2 minutes, note the disagreement and move on. You can revisit contentious items after all items are placed -- context from the full picture often resolves the argument.
- **Use physical movement.** Sticky notes on a whiteboard (or draggable cards in Miro) beat spreadsheets for this exercise. Moving things with your hands makes the prioritization feel real.
- **The KILL conversation is the most valuable part.** If you skip it, you haven't actually prioritized -- you've just sorted. Make space for the team to say "we are choosing not to do this" out loud.
- **Revisit quarterly, not weekly.** A 2x2 is a strategic tool. If you're re-running it every sprint, you're using it to avoid commitment, not to build it.

- **Don't over-index on precision.** The goal is directional clarity, not pixel-perfect placement. If an item is "somewhere between Quick Win and Big Bet," that's useful information -- it means feasibility is the open question.
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How did it go?

After running your 2x2 exercise, check:

- ☐ Every item on the board has a clear quadrant placement, not a "somewhere in the middle"
 - ☐ The team explicitly discussed and agreed on the KILL decisions
 - ☐ Quick Wins have owners and sprint assignments
 - ☐ Big Bets have a next step (spike, research, or scoping) -- not just "we'll get to it"
 - ☐ The action sequence is short enough to actually execute (3-5 items, not 15)
 - ☐ Fill-Ins are clearly labeled as "if capacity allows" -- not quietly treated as priorities
 - ☐ The team walked away with fewer things to do, not more
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