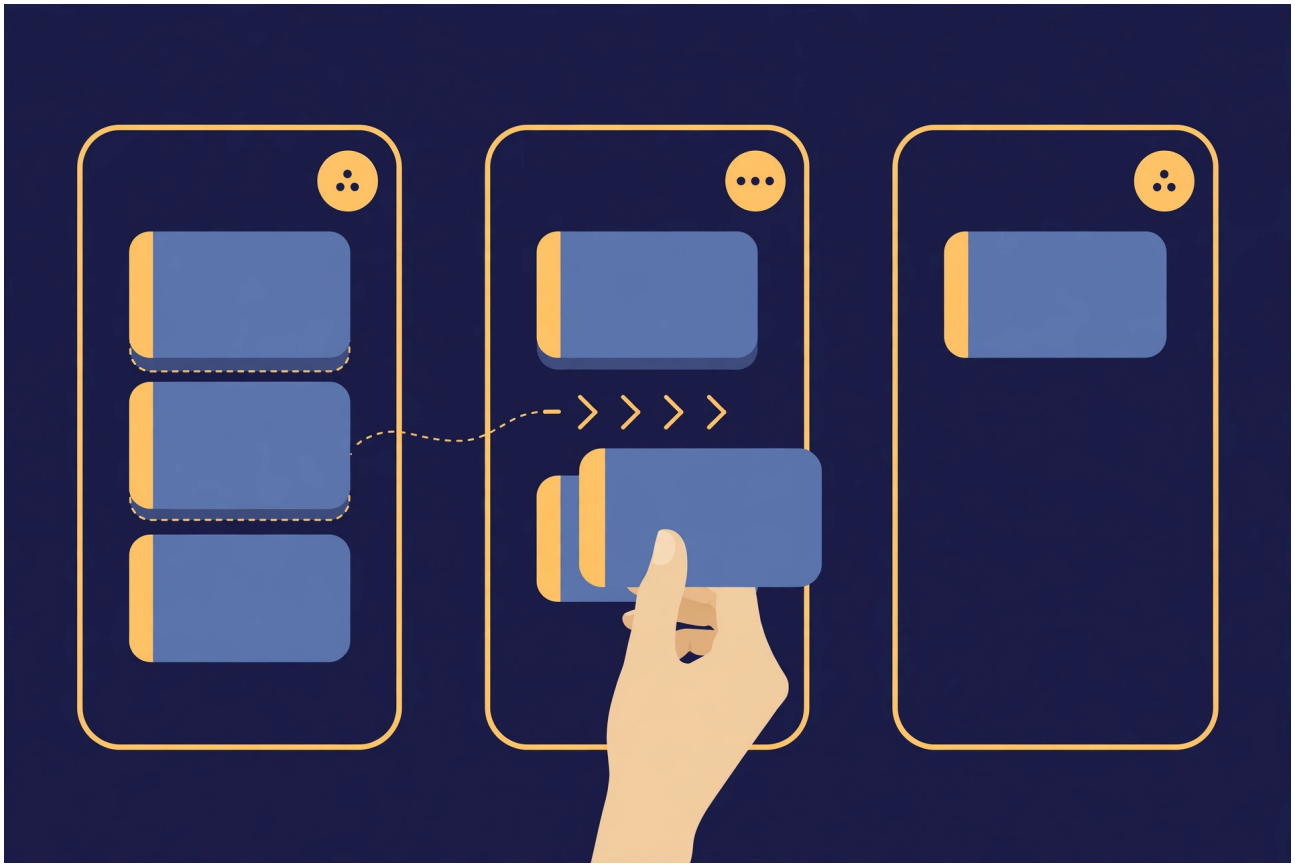
By Bright Quill Team



Want a kanban board explained in plain terms? Picture a whiteboard with columns and sticky notes moving left to right. A kanban board is a visual tool showing every piece of work, where it sits and who's doing it, all at a glance. It comes from lean manufacturing, where Toyota used cards to signal what to produce next, and software teams adapted it for knowledge work. The board looks almost too simple. That simplicity hides a disciplined system underneath: visualise the work, limit how much is in progress, and keep work flowing. This article explains each piece, and you'll see how to set up a board your team will actually use.

Columns and Cards: The Visible Basics

A kanban board has columns for workflow stages and cards for work items. The simplest board has three columns: to do, doing, done. Real teams add the stages they actually use: backlog, ready, in progress, in review, testing, done. Each card is one piece of work, small enough to finish in days, with a short title, the owner's name, and maybe a due date or priority colour. Cards move left to right as work advances. They don't move backwards unless something fails review. The rule that keeps the board honest: it must mirror reality. If work happens off the board, the board lies, and a lying board is worse than no board at all. Update it as you go. Don't save it up as admin for later. Stand near any good agile team and you'll see the board first. It answers every status question without a meeting.

WIP Limits: The Rule That Changes Everything

WIP means work in progress, and limiting it is kanban's most powerful idea. A WIP limit caps how many cards can sit in a column at once. When the doing column allows three cards and already holds three, nobody starts a fourth. They finish something first, or they help a stuck colleague. This feels slow, but it's

faster. Every half finished task carries mental overhead, and switching between five tasks wastes more time than most teams admit. WIP limits expose bottlenecks instead of hiding them. When cards pile up in review, the whole team sees that reviews are the constraint. Fixing the real constraint beats starting more work every time. Start with a limit near the team size for the doing column, often two per person at most, then adjust. The right number feels slightly uncomfortable. Comfortable limits don't change anything.

The Pull System: Work Gets Taken, Not Pushed

In a push system, managers assign tasks and piles grow. Kanban uses a pull system: team members take the next card only when they've got capacity. When there's a free slot in doing, a developer pulls the top card from ready. Nobody gets handed work they can't start. This needs one discipline to function: the ready column must always hold well prepared cards, with clear requirements and acceptance criteria. An empty ready column starves the team. A vague one produces rework. The product owner keeps it stocked during regular refinement. Pull also respects skill differences. A tester pulls testing work, a designer pulls design work, and anyone free pulls whatever is stuck. Our business plans service runs client work on pull principles, which is why nothing we commit to sits waiting in a queue.

Setting Up Your First Board

Start physical or digital, whichever the team will actually look at. A wall board beats a forgotten tool tab for teams sharing one office. Remote teams do well with simple digital boards. Step one: map your real workflow into four to six columns. Ask the team where work actually waits, and make those waits visible as columns. Step two: write one card per work item, each completable within days. Big items get split first. Step three: set WIP limits. Cap doing near team size, and cap review and testing tighter, since those columns hide delays. Step four: agree the rules on the board itself: when a card moves, who moves it, what done means per column. Step five: hold a short daily stand up at the board, walking right to left from done backwards, so you'll spot stuck cards first. Review the board's flow monthly: where do cards wait longest, and what one change would unblock it.

Kanban vs Scrum: When Each Fits

Students often ask whether to pick kanban or scrum, and the honest answer is they solve different problems. Scrum suits product development: a stable team building toward releases in fixed sprints. Its roles and events give structure to creative work. Kanban suits continuous flow work: support desks, maintenance teams, marketing pipelines. Any team where requests arrive unpredictably and priorities shift daily. Kanban has no sprints, no required roles and no estimation rituals, which makes it lighter to start. Many teams blend the two, running sprints for development while a kanban board tracks the support work alongside. For your assignment, match the method to the work type. If the work arrives unpredictably, that's kanban. If it's planned product increments, that's scrum. Our workflow planning help starts from this exact question before recommending anything.

Five Kanban Mistakes Beginners Make

Skipping WIP limits is the first mistake. A board without limits is just a to do list with extra steps. Second, too many columns. Twelve stages look thorough, but they'll confuse everyone. Start with a few, and don't split until a real wait appears. Third, cards the size of projects. If a card sits in doing for three weeks, it's time to split the work. Fourth, don't update the board in batches. A board updated on Fridays describes last week, not today. Move cards as work moves. Fifth, ignoring what the board reveals. A pileup in testing is the team telling you where help is needed. Starting new cards instead is how bottlenecks become permanent.

A kanban board explained properly is three ideas: make all work visible on columns and cards, limit work in progress so flow stays healthy, and pull work only when there's capacity. Set that up honestly and the board starts managing the work for you. If your assignment needs a kanban setup with WIP limits justified, reach us through the contact page .

Key visual, in brief:

Board columns: To Do, Doing (WIP limit 2), Done. Cards are pulled left to right, never pushed.