

WordPress User Interface Expert Review

Gabriel White

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Copies of this report can be downloaded at www.gabrielwhite.com/wordpress/

About This Report

This report documents the results of an 'expert review' of the WordPress blogging tool (version 1.5). An expert review identifies interaction design and usability problems in a user interface, and then presents design recommendations. While an expert review does not involve usability testing, the reviewer uses well-established heuristics for the evaluation of the user interfaces along with user profiles and activity scenarios to guide the assessment.

This report is not a technical assessment of any kind. Potential issues such as browser compatibility, accessibility and other technical considerations are not covered by this report.

About The Author

Gabriel White is an interaction designer and usability expert. Gabriel has extensive design experience, and has designed and usability tested several large software and web applications, including an enterprise content management application for one of the largest companies in Australia. He has worked at Primus Telecom (Australia), The Hiser Group (Australia) and Microsoft Research (China).

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Report Overview

WordPress is a high quality blogging system. The existing user interface and interaction design reflects the developers' commitment to creating a simple, effective and powerful blogging tool.

This review has identified several areas of the WordPress tool that can be improved in order make the user experience even better. No 'showstopper' usability issues were identified in this review, but implementing the recommendations provided here will ensure that both novice and advanced users have a better WordPress experience.

The main problem areas identified are:

- **Information architecture.** The current menu structure obscures some frequently-used functionality, and disperses configuration functions across several menu items. The menu structure should be modified to both increase user efficiency and make the grouping of options more intuitive.
- **Hyperlinks.** Hyperlinks, irrespective of their function or the kind of content they link to, are treated and behave in a uniform manner. This is likely to cause frequent confusion for users. Hyperlinks should be visually differentiated and behave differently when used for different purposes.

- **Help.** Contextual help is provided intermittently through the application. Availability of help should be improved to assist both novice and advanced users.
- **Administration.** Administration functions are dispersed through the application (as mentioned before), and some aspects of the administration settings could be improved to make them easier to understand.
- **Writing content.** The content writing page can be improved to make it easier for users to write and publish content (e.g. text formatting, saving drafts).
- **File editing.** The file editing function opens a file by default. This is likely to be confusing and surprising for users. Files should not be opened for editing by default.

Through the report, issues that should be addressed with a high priority are flagged with a red star (★).

What To Do Next

The recommendations of this report should be used to guide future development work on the WordPress system. While it will not be possible for the WordPress development team to implement all the changes recommended here at once, it is important to make sure that the recommendations selected for implementation first will have the largest positive impact, and that their implementation is carried out in an effective manner. The author of this report is available for further discussions about design details and implementation priorities.

Findings & Recommendations

Information Architecture ★

Issues

The high level information architecture of the WordPress application is not optimized for the importance and frequency of user tasks. The three most common tasks users will perform on the system are:

- Authoring new content (posts or pages)
- Revising content (posts or pages)
- Moderating comments

Administrative tasks such as system configuration, user configuration, presentation configuration, etc are important but infrequent tasks. The current information architecture gives significant prominence to configuration tasks, while making other tasks (such as comment moderation) less easily available.



Additionally, management of 'content' (posts, pages, categories, links and files) is dispersed through the application. This is likely to make it difficult for some users to find the functions.

Recommendations

- Change the information architecture so that it consists of the following categories (in order):
 - Dashboard
 - Write
 - Posts
 - Pages
 - Manage
 - Posts
 - Pages
 - Categories
 - Links
 - Files
 - Comments
 - Awaiting moderation
 - All
 - Configuration
 - Settings
 - General

- Writing
 - Reading
 - Comments
 - Permalinks
 - Miscellaneous
 - Presentation
 - Manage
 - Editor
 - Plugins
 - Manage
 - Editor
 - Users
 - Your profile
 - Authors & users
- This recommended information architecture is three-tiered structure in contrast to the current two-tier information architecture, so requires changes to the navigational design for the system. It is recommended, where needed, that a left-hand third tier navigation is used. The advantages in clarity and efficiency obtained by this change outweigh the disadvantages of making such design changes.

Hyperlinks ★

Issues

Links to different kinds of content are handled in a uniform way throughout WordPress. Links to external content or sites, online help and post / page content are all represented as underlined blue text, and all links open in the parent browser window. Sometimes, system actions are carried out using blue underlined text links (such as activation of a theme). This design both make it difficult for users to determine the purpose and effect of these links, and is likely to cause frustration when supporting content is displayed in place of the WordPress application itself. Most users would expect supporting content to be displayed in a window outside the application itself (much like help content is displayed in a separate window on desktop applications).



While the WordPress application is designed to be as semantically elegant as possible, the current hyperlink design implementation makes it difficult for users to successfully interact with some aspects of the application.

Recommendations

- Open links to help content and external content (e.g. other sites) in a new browser window.
- Differentiate links that provide access to help content. Instead of linking the text of field labels, place a hyperlinked question mark either after the label or after the field (e.g. "(?)"). This makes the purpose of the link clear.
- Use buttons, not text links, to carry out system actions (e.g. theme activation).

Help ★

Issues

Contextual help is very useful for both novice and advanced users. There are many screens on which no help is available.

Where contextual help is provided in the WordPress system, it is often provided at the data entry field level, and not at the screen level. Novice users will often be unsure of the purpose of an entire screen rather than a particular feature provided on that screen. This makes it more difficult for users to learn the system.

Additionally, access to system-wide help is provided by a link at the bottom of the page ('Support forums'). This placement is not very visible, so users are likely to overlook it. Also, no link to the WordPress Codex is provided.

Recommendations

- Provide contextual help on all important UI features.
- Provide contextual help for each screen, describing briefly the general purpose of the screen.
- Provide a link to the WordPress Codex prominently at the top of the page (i.e. right-justified on the same row as the first level navigation items). Make the link to the support forums more prominent.

Administration ★

Issues

Administration tasks are currently dispersed through different parts of the system. An earlier recommendation suggested that all the administrative tasks be grouped under the heading

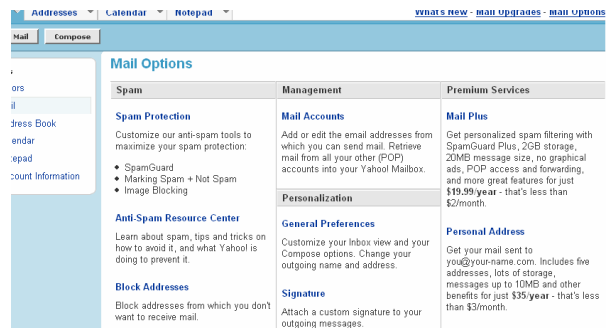
'Configuration'. For novice users, administration tasks may be overwhelming. Fortunately, most novice users will not need to alter many settings beyond the settings available on the 'General' page. For people who want to explore further, though, the administrative section of the system can be daunting because there are so many options. This is even more problematic, because much of the administration section of the system does not contain contextual help.

While most of the administrative tasks are well labeled and described, the 'level' attribute of user profiles is likely to be difficult for many users to understand.

Recommendations

- Make the default 'Configuration' page show an overview of all the administrative functions along with short text descriptions. This will make it easier for novice and advanced users to find the configuration option they are looking for (see example of Yahoo Mail below).
- Replace the numeric 'level' attribute with a set of descriptive user levels, such as:
 - Reader (may comment only)
 - Contributor Level 2 (posts require approval)
 - Contributor Level 1 (posts don't require approval)
 - Editing contributor Level 2 (can edit categories)
 - Editing contributor Level 1 (can edit categories & links)

- Manager Level 2 (can change options)
- Manager Level 1 (can change options, presentation & plugins)
- Alternatively, allow custom permissions to be set for each user with a set of check-boxes for each possible permission.



Writing Content ★

Issues

There are a set of small issues related to the 'Write' page that make it more difficult to use.

- Clicking “publish” gives blank post page. This is likely to be surprising to users, as they would expect a stronger confirmation that their post has been published. Also, it is unlikely that users will want to create multiple posts in sequence.
- Saving a draft gives a blank post page. This is an unexpected behavior: users would expect saving something as a draft to be analogous to saving in a desktop application such as Word (i.e. editing continues).
- The ‘Excerpt’ text input box is very small. Only one line of text can be displayed without scrolling.
- The purpose of the field labeled ‘Post slug’ is unclear.
- The purpose of the field labeled ‘Page order’ is unclear, and the mechanism for determining page order is difficult to use (users must memorize the numbers associated with other pages in order to effectively order the new page).
- Formatting buttons for posts use HTML codes rather than plain English names. This may be confusing for users who are not familiar with HTML.

Recommendations

- When publishing a post, show the entire post in read-only format as confirmation that the post has been published. Show buttons that allows users to re-edit the content or create a new post.
- When saving a draft of a post, return the user to editing the post they just saved as draft.
- Allow for three lines of text to be entered in the Excerpt box without scrolling.
- Rename the ‘Post slug’ box.
- Allow users to meaningfully see where in the order of pages their new page will be placed (e.g. use real page names in a drop down list and allow users to specify something like “This page should appear below…”).
- Consider redesigning the buttons so that they use names or iconography with which users are familiar (see example below).



File Editing ★

Issues

In a few places in the WordPress application, users can directly edit text files (e.g. templates). The default view for these pages is for the first file listed to be opened for editing in the text box displayed on the screen (see example below).



This approach is likely to be confusing and possibly concerning for users, as they would expect to choose the file they wished to edit before it was displayed for editing.

Recommendations

- Do not open the first file by default, but rather display some explanatory text in place of the text box when the page is first displayed. Users know that editing these files can have significant impact on the system, so would feel more comfortable if they were asked to select the file to edit before it is displayed for editing.

Navigation Design

Issues

The second level tabs (i.e. the menu options presented below the primary navigation options) are an efficient use of screen real estate, but can be hard to notice (see example below). Users may not realize there are multiple options available below a major menu item.



Recommendation

- Enlarge the font size on the second level tabs, and give the font more visual weight (e.g. use color and bolding).

Visual Presentation

Issues

While the visual design and presentation of WordPress is excellent, the use of color has not been maximized. Color cues help people differentiate the areas of the screen, draw attention to the most important sections of the screen, and help users identify similar elements across screens. At present, WordPress uses only different shades of grey to differentiate and prioritize screen elements.

Recommendations

- The screen would be considerably easier to read if some small color cues were used. See the example below of how Amazon uses a small color palette to both differentiate and 'weight' different screen components.
- The screen would be considerably easier to read if the menu bar used a different color to the highlighting colors used in the main body of the screen (e.g. blue coloring for the menu bar, and grey coloring for the screen body).



Prioritization of Dashboard Content

Issues

The prioritization of information on this page is probably the inverse to what is most important to WordPress users. Providing access to WordPress news in the Dashboard is an effective way of keeping people up to date with news about the software.

But it is likely that users are going to be most interested in recent activity on their blog when they log in (i.e. recent posts, recent comments). A relatively small proportion of the screen real estate is dedicated to displaying this information, and the information is placed such that it has secondary importance.

Dashboard

Below is the latest news from the official WordPress development blog, click on a link to read the full entry.

WordPress Development Blog

[Your Nightly Fix](#) — 3 days ago

Since WordPress is easy to upgrade, and support is efficient and easily available, most of users had been using nightly builds and betas prior to the release of version 1.5 just because they were impatient for the release. (We were too!) This stated a tricky problem for the support volunteers and for the users [...]

Latest Activity

Posts »

- [photo test](#)
- [Well Well Well...](#)
- [Post #3](#)
- [Prova](#)
- [Hello world!](#)

Comments »

- [Administrator on Well Well](#)

Recommendations

- Move 'Latest Activity' block to the left-hand side of the screen so that it is read first.
- Increase the size of the 'Latest Activity' block (use around 60% of screen real estate for this). Include snippets from posts and comments to help provide users with more contextual information about the content.
- Integrate 'Your drafts' block with 'Latest Activity' block so that users can access all the important content from one place.
- Move and reduce size of WordPress blog info (use around 40% of screen real estate for this). Show fewer blog postings, and provide an external link to the blog rather than showing a large number of headings.

Themes

Issues

For most WordPress users, giving their blog a personalized look and feel is very important. For intermediate and advanced users the existing theme system is simple, flexible and powerful. For novice users, though, the process of changing the look and feel of a blog is not so straightforward. New off-the-shelf themes have to be downloaded, unzipped, sent by FTP to the right directory and then activated through the WordPress UI.

Changing the theme is something that most novice users will want to do before spending time learning the details of the system and becoming more technically literate about blogging with WordPress.

Recommendations

- Implement a 'theme package' system, whereby users can upload a zipped WordPress theme package through the WordPress UI, which then unpacks and installs the new theme without any additional user intervention. This will make the most important novice user technical task much easier.

Photo Galleries

Issues

While most plugins will not be used by new users, many beginner WordPress users will want to publish digital photographs on their blogs. Out of the box, WordPress does not make it easy for users to publish digital photos. This may discourage novice users from installing the WordPress system.

Recommendations

- Include a photo gallery feature in the default installation to allow novice users to publish their photos easily.

Other Issues

While reviewing the WordPress system many other usability issues were identified. These issues and associated recommendations are listed here.

- The logout button is placed alongside navigational buttons, and looks exactly the same as the navigation. This could cause confusion for users. Move this function to the top-right of the screen and change it to a button. ★
- While a JavaScript pop-up is used to confirm delete actions, no further confirmation is provided. Users would feel more comfortable if an on-page confirmation was provided once the action has been completed (in a manner similar to the confirmation of post publishing). ★

- It is not possible to create a new category when writing a new post. While this kind of action will not be common, it's a block in the natural workflow when users can't do this. Provide access to the category editing function from the writing screen, and offer to save a draft of the post before leaving it behind.
- On the 'Manage' screen, post names are not hyperlinked, unlike on the Dashboard. This is inconsistent and may confuse users. Hyperlink the names of posts on this screen.
- The blog stats on the Dashboard is not easily scannable. Change from a prose to tabular layout for this information.
- The descriptive text under the Dashboard heading is not very informative. The heading 'WordPress development blog' is sufficient. Remove this descriptive text.
- When listing posts, the post ID is the first column in the table. This is not very useful information to help users scan the table. Show the name of the post in the first column of the table.