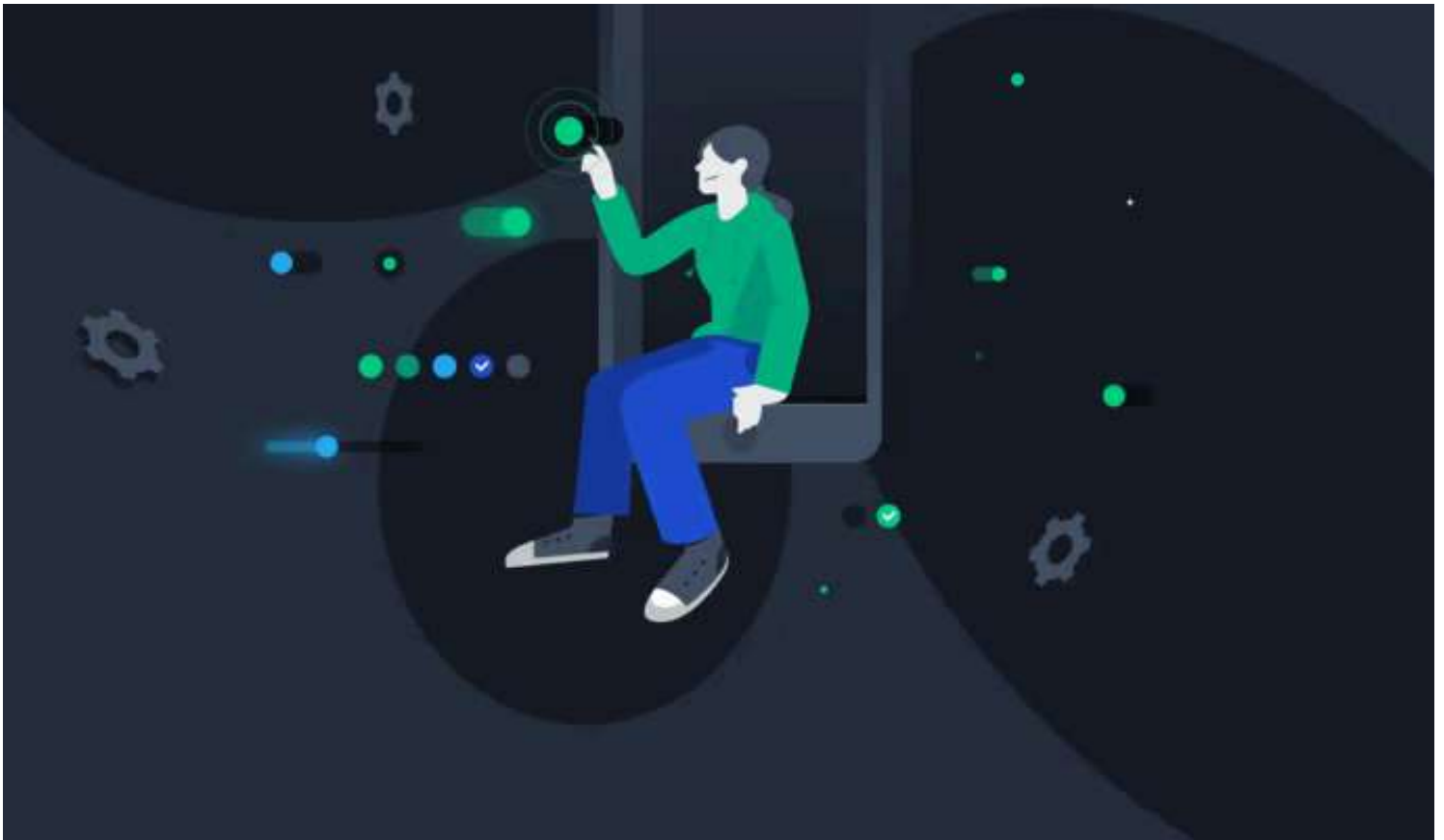UX DESIGN   5-MINUTE READ

How to Improve App Settings UX

Well-designed settings panels allow users to tailor apps to their needs and help companies lower customer-support costs. What techniques ensure effortless settings UX?

≷Toptal. authors are vetted experts in their fields and write on topics in which they have demonstrated experience. All of our content is peer reviewed and validated by Toptal experts in the same field.

Mayank specializes in creating user-centered designs and translating complex systems into beautiful web and mobile experiences.

Show More ⌄

EXPERTISE

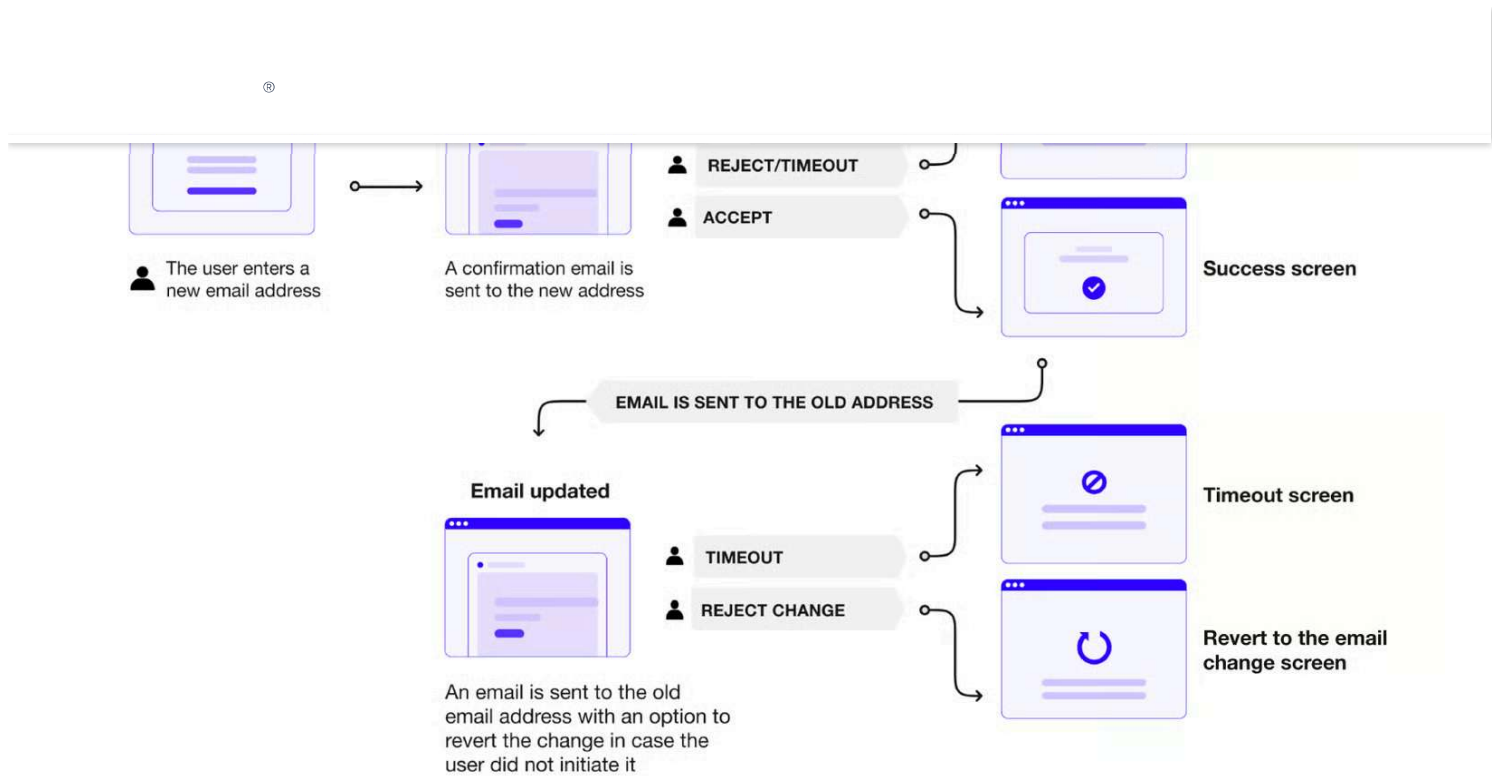(UX Design) (Mobile UX Design) (UI Design)

PREVIOUSLY AT

AUTO 1

Like other unsung UI patterns, settings panels make apps easier to use but only seem to garner interest when they're flawed. Users may take settings for granted but designers shouldn't. Well-designed settings panels allow users to tailor apps to their needs and help companies lower customer-support costs.

App settings help users manage items such as push notifications, time zones, and login credentials. Every app has settings, but users and designers routinely overlook the interface panels that control them. Users tend to ignore settings, and designers seem to neglect them until late in the app design process.

There's little reason for users to ponder app settings, but designers have ample incentive. Well-designed settings reduce customer-support costs and boost engagement by allowing users to customize their apps on demand. The goal is to make it easy for users to manage their preferences, but it's challenging to design settings that align with users' needs. Even something as simple as allowing users to update email addresses takes careful planning.

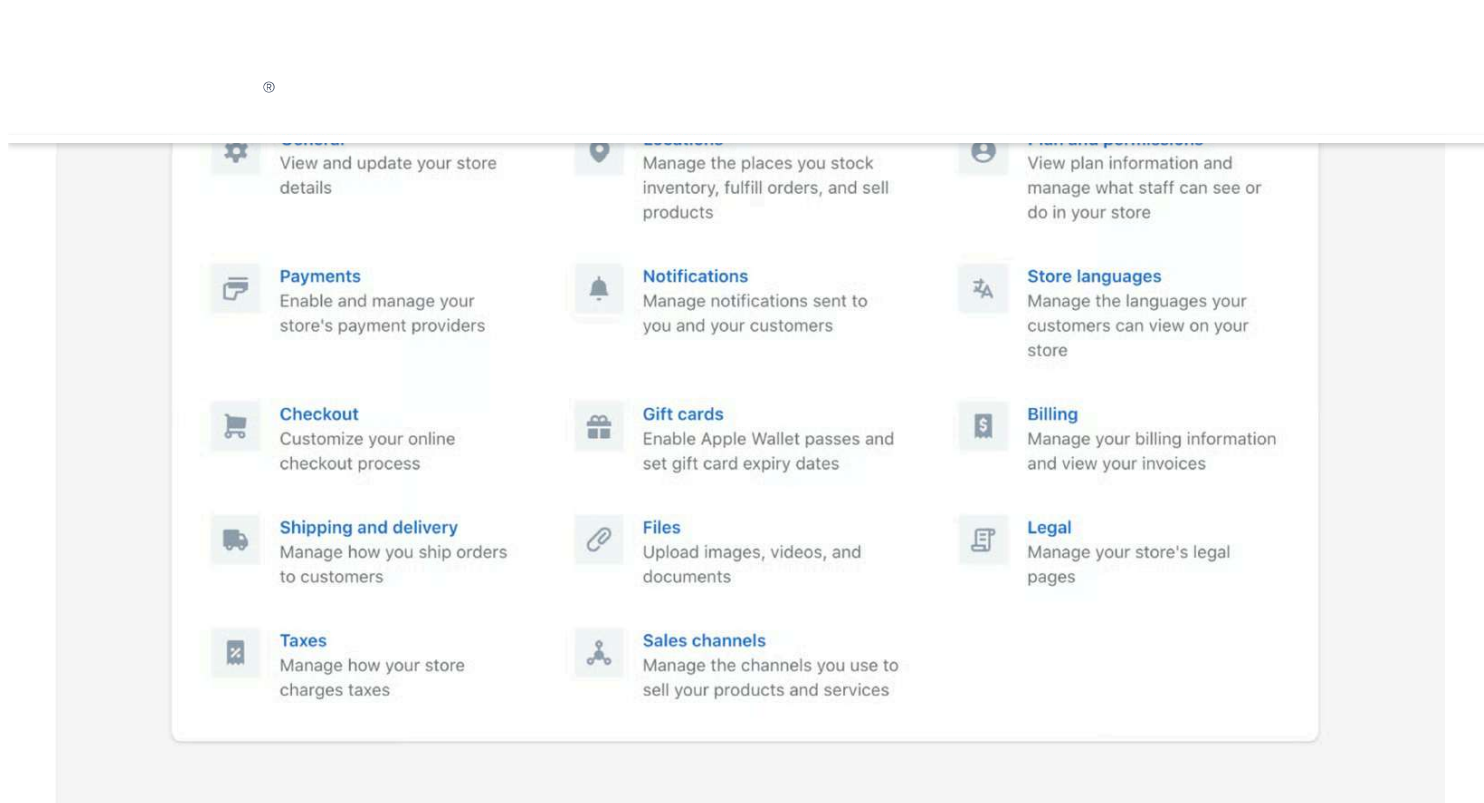What design practices ensure effortless settings UX?

This user flow represents the actions required to update an email address.

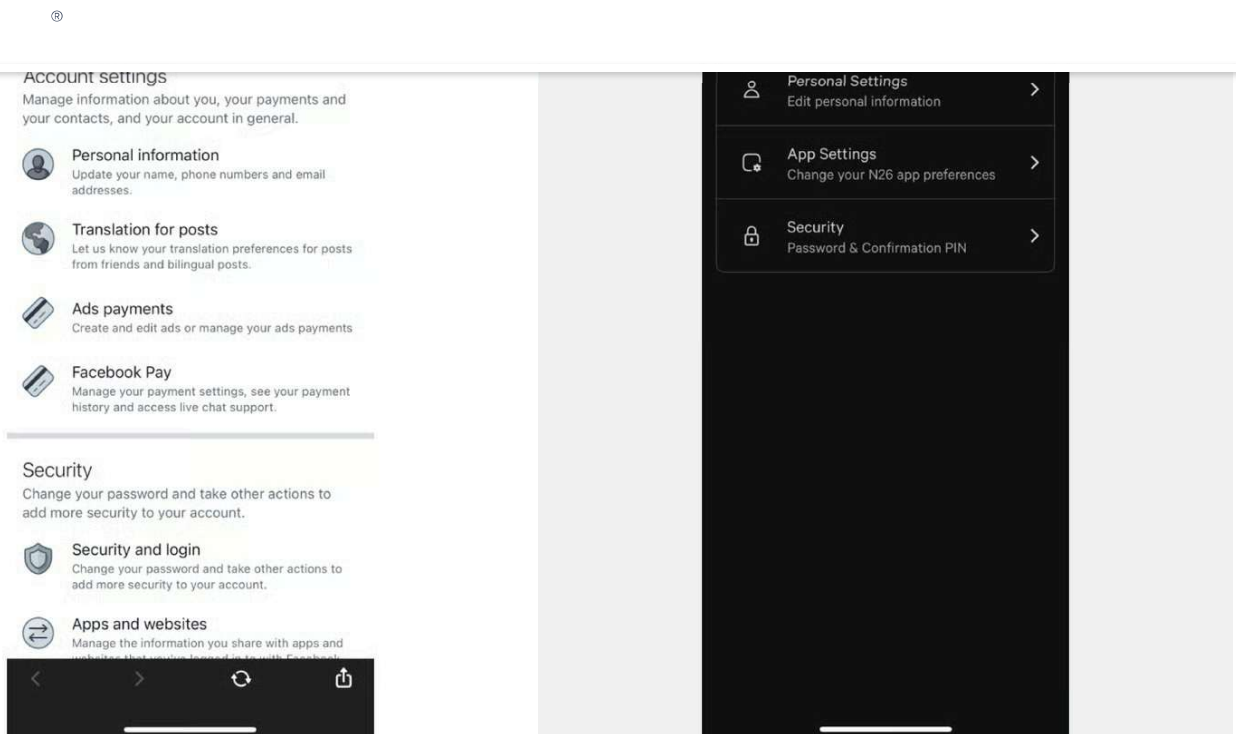# Guidelines for Better App Settings UX

Group Categories

When apps have multiple settings, it can be difficult for users to find what they need. The solution is to group settings into categories. For instance, [Shopify](#) has a long list of settings, but they're arranged in categories that are easy to browse.

General
View and update your store details

Locations
Manage the places you stock inventory, fulfill orders, and sell products

Plan and permissions
View plan information and manage what staff can see or do in your store

Payments
Enable and manage your store's payment providers

Notifications
Manage notifications sent to you and your customers

Store languages
Manage the languages your customers can view on your store

Checkout
Customize your online checkout process

Gift cards
Enable Apple Wallet passes and set gift card expiry dates

Billing
Manage your billing information and view your invoices

Shipping and delivery
Manage how you ship orders to customers

Files
Upload images, videos, and documents

Legal
Manage your store's legal pages

Taxes
Manage how your store charges taxes

Sales channels
Manage the channels you use to sell your products and services

Shopify's settings are carefully categorized.
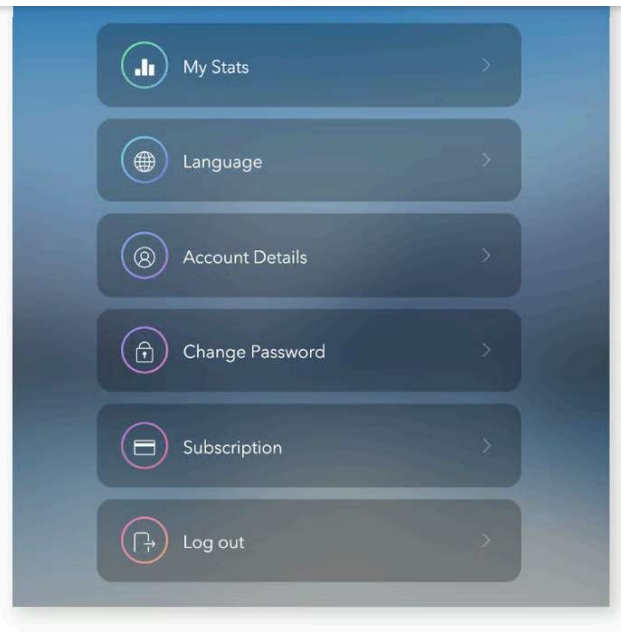
Establish Visual Hierarchy

Settings panels can't succeed without visual hierarchy. Bring frequently used settings to the forefront; if there are too many options, separate categories into subpages to reduce cognitive load.

Facebook displays frequently used settings at a high level. N26 separates categories into subpages.
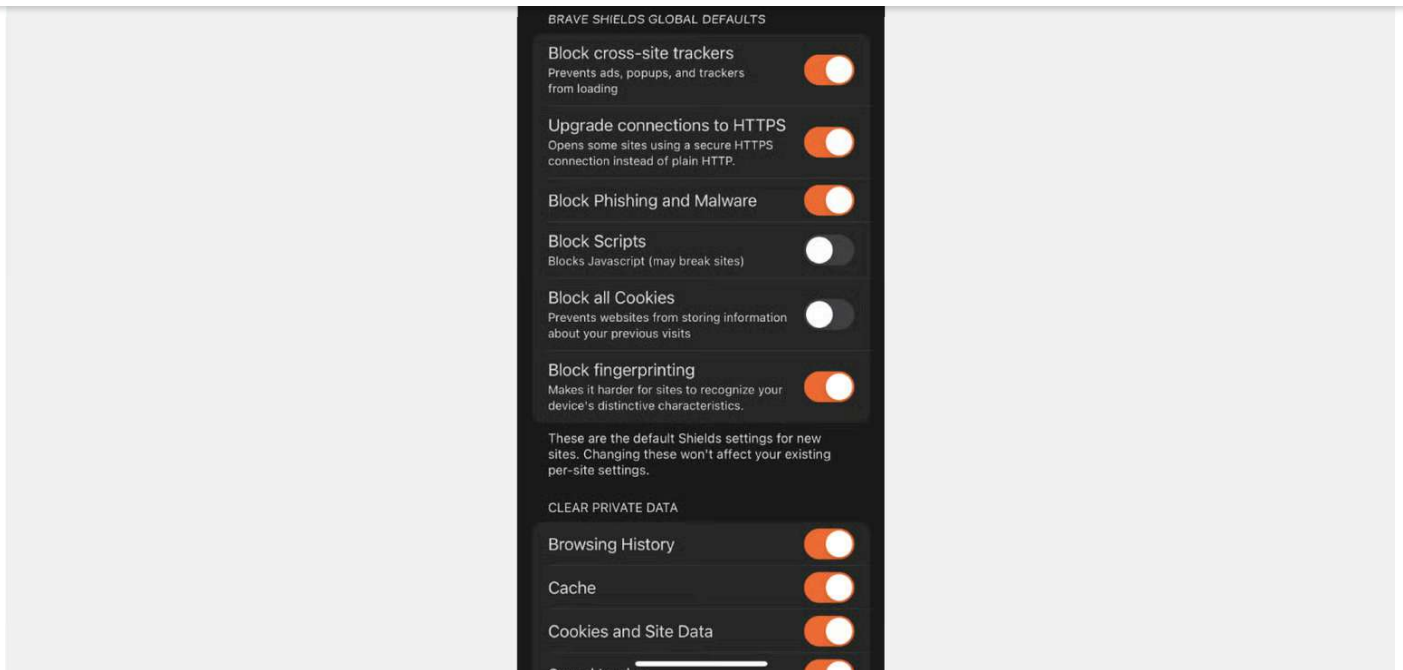
Avoid Names With Jargon

Jargon leads users to look for context outside of settings panels. Settings are best described in plain language that indicates functionality. Avoid technical or clever names that appease product and marketing teams but confuse users.

Calm's settings categories are easy to understand.
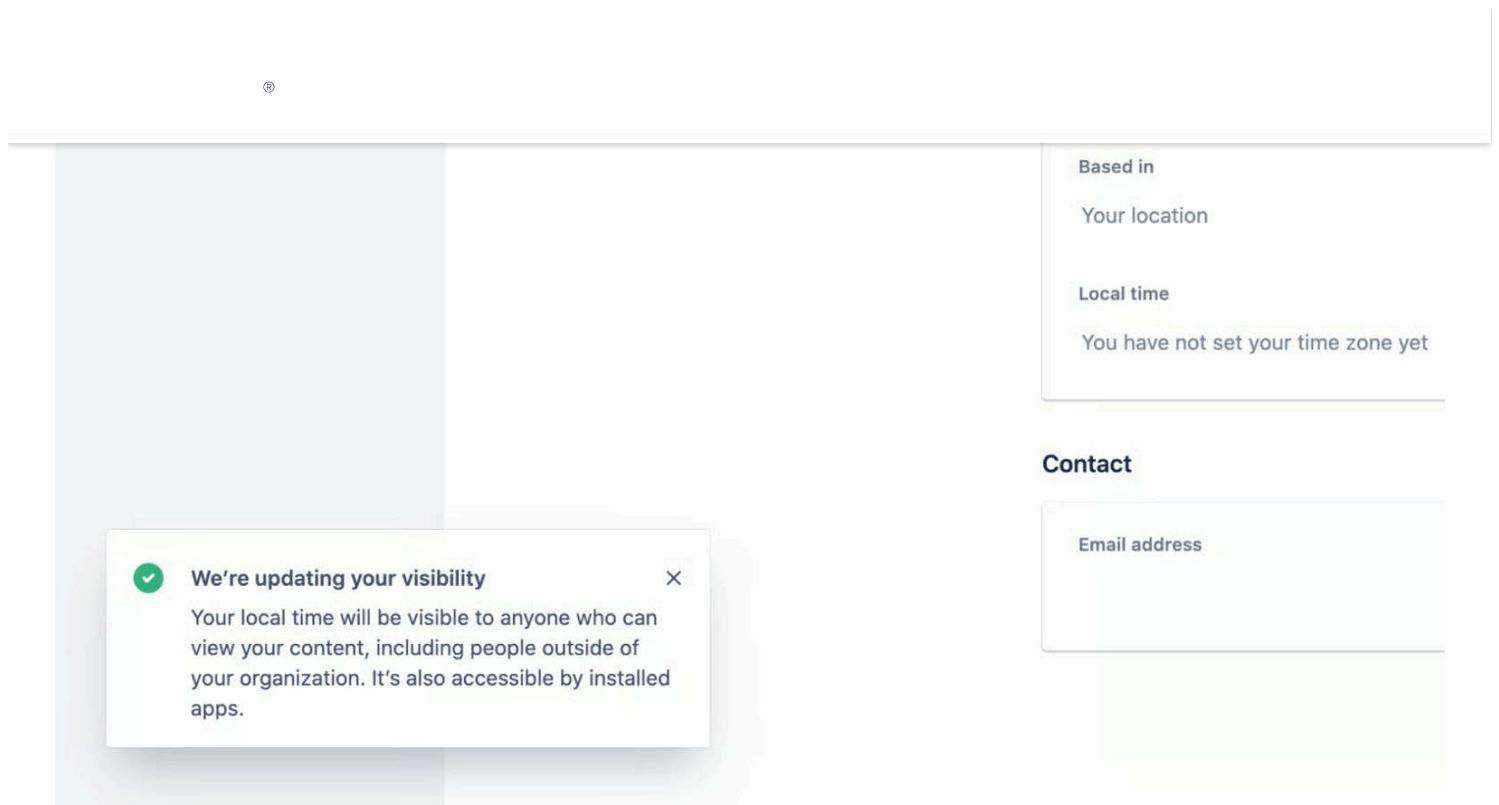
Provide Clear Descriptions

Settings need descriptions that explain their impact. Clearly define what settings do, but don't provide so much information that users gloss over important details. Once again, use everyday language, and enable the option to restore default settings.

Brave's descriptions clearly explain each setting's impact.

Give Status Indicators and Feedback on Saved States

In many apps, updated settings save automatically, but users still need feedback that confirms their changes. If users must click a "Save" button, make sure that it's prominent. Forcing users to scroll is bound to result in unsaved settings.
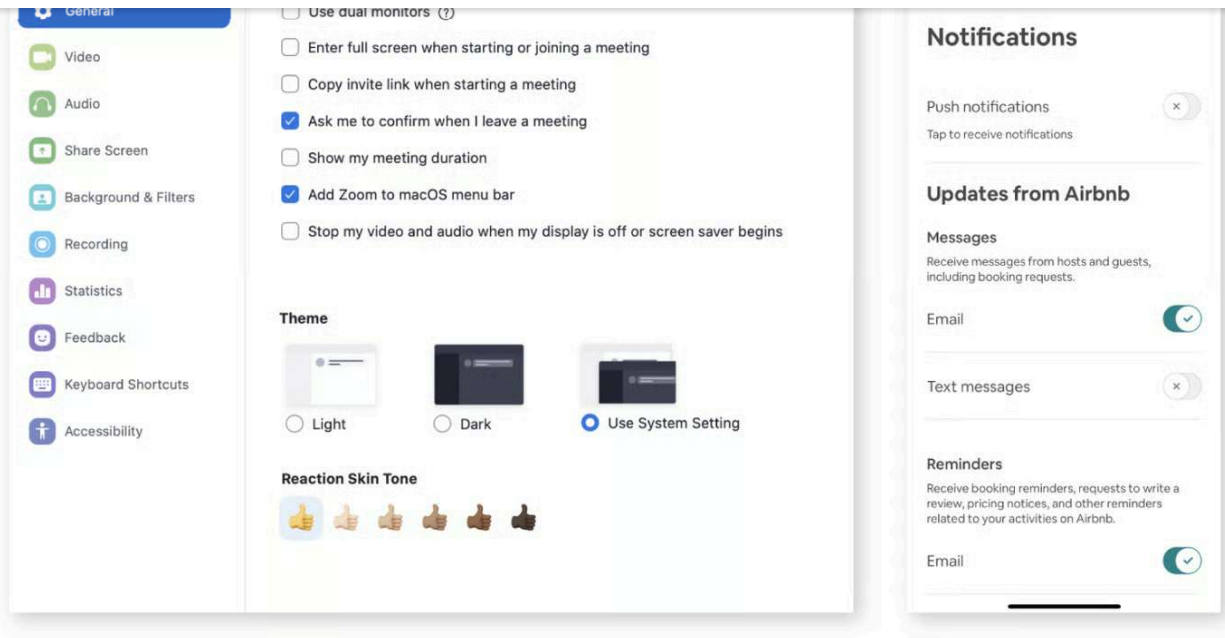
Based in

Your location

Local time

You have not set your time zone yet

Contact

Email address

We're updating your visibility ✕

Your local time will be visible to anyone who can view your content, including people outside of your organization. It's also accessible by installed apps.

Atlassian Jira gives users instant feedback when settings are updated.

Use the Appropriate UI Controls

Radio buttons and checkboxes are standard UI controls in settings panels, but they aren't interchangeable:

- Radio buttons require users to make one (and only one) selection from a list of options.

- Checkboxes allow users to make multiple selections (or none at all) from a list of options.
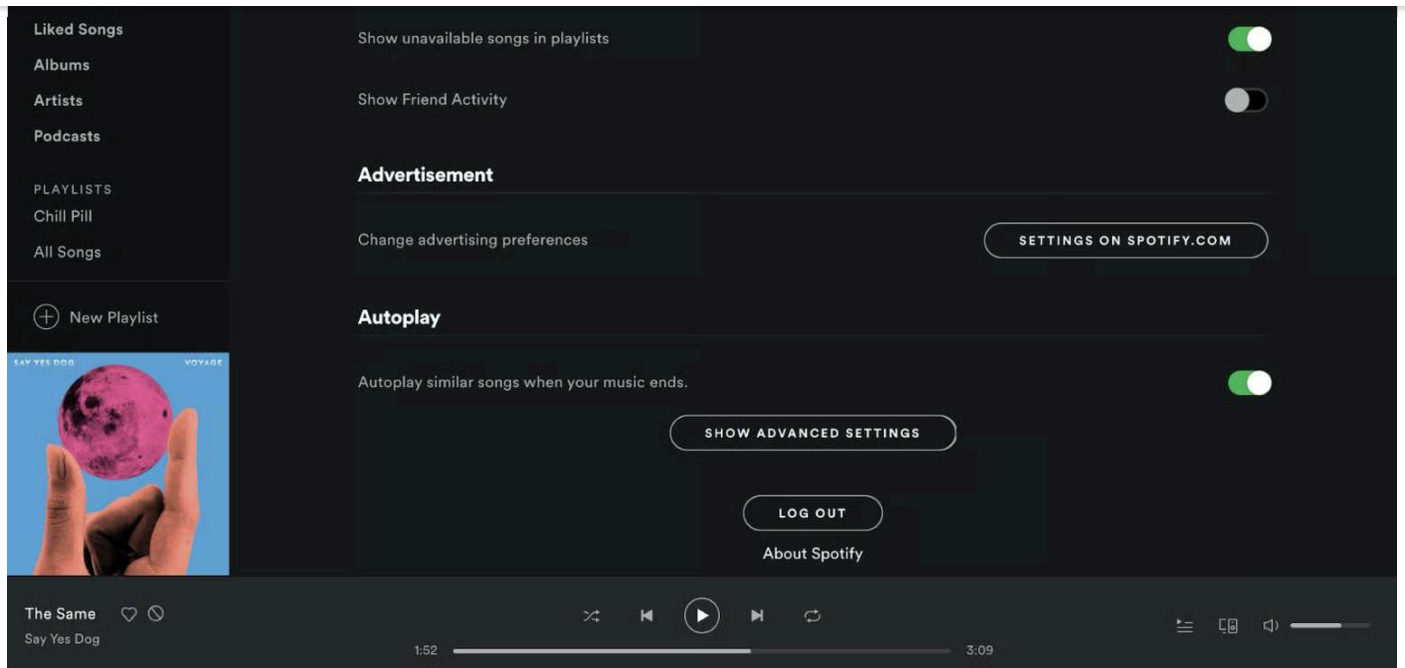
When actions don't require review or confirmation, use toggle switches and consider adding "On/Off" labels for more clarity.

Radio buttons, checkboxes, and toggle switches are common UI components in app settings panels.
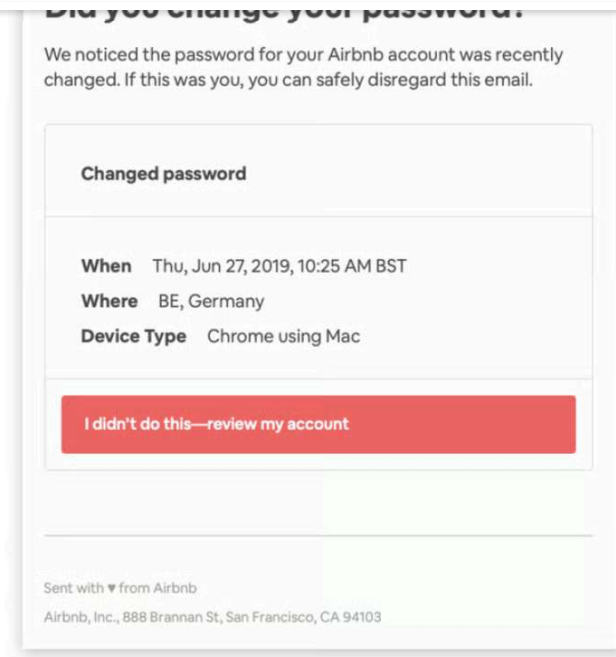
Provide Basic and Advanced Settings

A clever way to handle apps with numerous settings is to provide two levels of input. Basic settings populate settings panels by default and satisfy the needs of average users, while advanced settings appeal to users who want more granular control.

Spotify's advanced settings allow users to fine-tune their listening experiences.

Send Email Confirmations

Many apps contain sensitive data, including financial information. Email confirmations exist outside settings panels, but they're critical because users need to be alerted when their account details change. Depending on the app or settings involved, it may not be necessary to send confirmations for every update.

Email confirmations should be sent whenever users update login credentials.

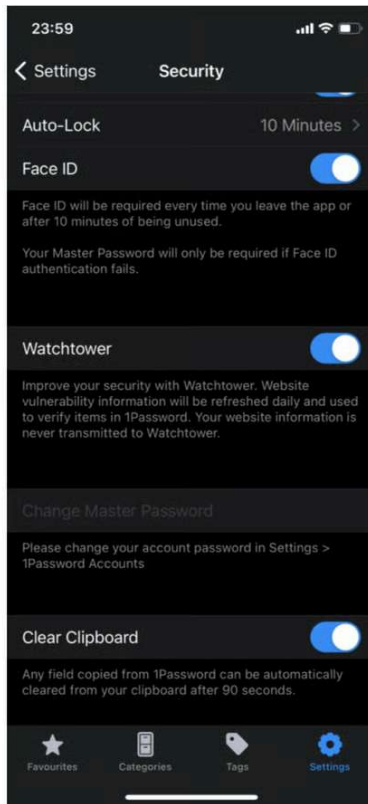# Tips for the App Settings Design Process

Start With Information Architecture and User Flow

[Information architecture](#) is the best place to start the settings design process. Use [card sorting](#) exercises to understand how users would group settings, then establish hierarchy among the categories that emerge. [Design user flows](#) for each setting, generate settings labels that align with users' expectations, and strive to keep the number of top-level categories to four or five.
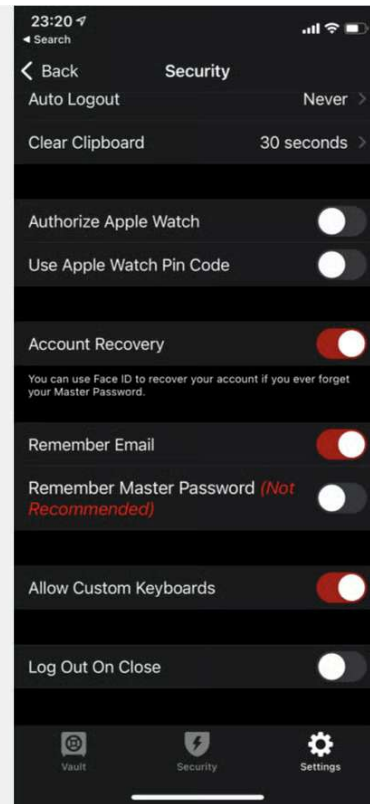
Define Default Modes

Default settings present users with theoretically optimal experiences from their first interactions. The aim is to make onboarding effortless and equip users with settings that support their goals (another reason why user research is so essential). For instance,

1Password and LastPass have default settings that protect users' sensitive data.

Contact Stakeholders Early in the Design Process

Start collaboration right away, and talk to stakeholders about their settings-related needs. Meet with product managers, security experts, designers, engineers, and anyone else interested in settings—waiting until late in the settings design process could lead to expensive redesigns.

Talk to Customer Support

Design refinement begins with identifying users' pain points, and customer support teams deal with users' problems every day. They know which aspects of an app confuse and what settings are difficult to manage. If possible, regularly attend customer support meetings to gain insight for future iterations of settings panels.

Build and test prototypes to see how settings function alongside core product features. [High-fidelity prototypes](#) are an excellent way to test the effectiveness of UI controls in usability sessions. Here again, waiting until the last minute could prove costly.

Thoughtful App Settings Improve UX

[Designers](#) strive to make apps easy to use. Prominent features receive the most attention, but often, it's the less visible design details that improve usability. A good settings experience is organized, intuitive, and allows users to fine-tune their daily interactions. It provides relevant feedback, employs well-known UI components that align with users' mental models, and enables users to make updates without contacting customer support.

Further Reading on the Toptal Blog:

- [Mobile UX Design Principles](#)

- [Heuristic Principles for Mobile Interfaces](#)

- [The Fundamental Guide to Mobile Usability](#)

- [Mobile E-commerce Best Practices for UX (With Infographic)](#)

- [Mobile UX Design Constraints, Best Practices, and Working With Developers](#)

- [6 Ways to Make Authentication Systems More User-friendly](#)

UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS

︿ Why is good UX important?