



Chapter 6

Text Usability

When we discuss design and usability, we tend to focus on visual elements first—text often gets overlooked. This is unfortunate, because text is one of the main ways in which people interact with your application or website. In fact, in tests that track the movement of people’s eyes as they scan a screen, text is often the first thing people look for.¹

In his paper² on how to write for the Web, usability expert Jakob Nielsen says:

When asked for feedback on a web page, users will comment on the quality and relevance of the content to a much greater extent than they will comment on navigational issues or the page elements that we consider to be “user interface” (as opposed to simple information). Similarly, when a page comes up, users focus their attention on the center of the window where they read the body text before they bother looking over headerbars or other navigational elements.

The guys at 37signals concur. In *Getting Real* [FHL09], they write that “good writing is good design.” Words need to be considered as part of the interface design.

6.1 Why Words Matter

Have you ever tried buying a computer online, and instead of telling you in plain language what capabilities it has, the site lists a bunch

1. This article lists lessons gleaned from eye-tracking tests: <http://www.virtualhosting.com/blog/2007/scientific-web-design-23-actionable-lessons-from-eye-tracking-studies/>.
2. You can find the paper at <http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/writing.html>.

of marketing buzzwords? Hurm...do I want the one with “MagSafe” or the one with “OneKey Theater” or the one with “One-button ThinkVantage” or the one with “Multi-Convergence UltraTouch Enterprise Panel Extensibility”? OK, I made the last one up, but the other ones are real.³

Words are how people interact with your product. Design is communication; if people don't understand you, they can't use your product.

Since words are used everywhere in your product, on your website, in your manuals, in the things you say when people interact with you personally, and even in the class names and comments in your code, it's best to get them right early on.

But how do you know which words to use?

6.2 People Don't Want to Read

This might sound strange coming after a section about the importance of text, but the hard truth is this: most people avoid reading whenever possible.

Merely by reading this book, you have proven that you are quite unlike most of your users. In 1987 in “Paradox of the Active User,”⁴ John M. Carroll and Mary Beth Rosson pointed out that “learners at every level of experience try to avoid reading.” Not much has changed in the last two decades. In fact, it may be getting worse: a 2007 study by the National Endowment for the Arts⁵ concluded that Americans are not just reading less than they used to, but they are also reading less well.

You have probably been on the receiving end of a “my printer has stopped working” call:

Friend: *I really need to print this document, but my printer just doesn't work anymore.*

Me: *OK, what exactly happened?*

Friend: *I'm trying to print, but it doesn't work.*

Me: *Did you get an error message?*

3. Neven Mrgan mentions another example of a site that uses words that make sense to the company but not to its customers at <http://mrgan.tumblr.com/post/3241126895/what-does-the-user-see>.

4. You can read that paper at <http://dl.dropbox.com/u/16760174/Papers/Paradox.pdf>.

5. Find out more here: <http://www.nea.gov/news/news07/TRNR.html>.

Friend: *Oh, yes, an error popped up.*

Me: *What did it say?*

Friend: *How should I know? I just clicked it away, of course, but that didn't fix the problem.*

A paper from the psychology department of the North Carolina State University titled “Failure to Recognize Fake Internet Popup Warning Messages”⁶ analyzed how people deal with fake pop-up warnings. When discussing the results, the researchers note:

Data from the post task questionnaire indicated that 12% of those who clicked on the OK button indicated that they did so because the text told them to, while 23% said they always click on that button when they encounter error messages. Just under half (42%) responded that they just wanted to “get rid of it.”

Pop-up windows don't even consciously register with people before they click them away. They are just a nuisance that keeps people from doing their work, and making them go away usually seems to fix the problem.

But this doesn't just apply to text in pop-up messages. People skip text whenever they think they can get away with it.

6.3 Say Less

Since people don't read, it's best to avoid bothering them with text whenever possible.

For example, don't warn people when they are about to do something destructive. Instead, allow them to undo their change.

Similarly, if an error occurs and you have a way to make your product recover on its own without telling the user, do it. If the user has entered a website address that is truncated but your website receives enough information to identify the page he's looking for, simply forward him to that page. If your application tries to connect to a server but the connection times out, make the application try again before telling the user there's something wrong. Notify the user only if your product really can't fix the problem on its own.

6. Read it at http://media.haymarketmedia.com/Documents/1/SharekWogalterFakeWarning_publicationFinal_805.pdf.

If people don't understand some part of your user interface, don't add explanatory text. This just adds more clutter and makes the problem worse.

If it's impossible to avoid communicating, design your user interface under the assumption that people won't read what you write. For example, use verbs as button labels, and make sure that each button has a specific, mutually exclusive label. Instead of labeling two buttons "Yes" and "No," label them "Delete File" and "Cancel." That way, people don't have to read the text in the dialog box to figure out what each button does.

6.4 Make Text Scannable

Often you can't avoid text. To know how to write, first you need to know how people read.

Jakob Nielsen's research shows that people typically don't read text on the Web word by word. Instead, they "scan" the page, looking for sentence fragments that contain what they are looking for. To help people do that, Nielsen suggests⁷ the following rules:

- Use words that make sense to your audience.
- Convey one idea in each paragraph.
- Introduce the paragraph's idea in the first sentence so people can quickly decide whether to read the paragraph.
- Use meaningful headings.
- Highlight keywords.
- Use bullet lists.
- Keep text short, simple, and informal.
- Start text with conclusions, and include a summary of its content.

6.5 No Fluff

People are trying to achieve a goal and are reading your text because they think it might help them with their task. Write short, clear, obvious

7. You can find a collection of Nielsen's essays on this topic at this address: <http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/>.

sentences. Keep individual paragraphs short. Don't waste your readers' time. Keep their goal in mind.

As Patricia Wright puts it in the book *Quality of Technical Documentation* [SJ94], "Writers often believe that they should communicate more than readers want to know."

When you're writing, ask yourself, "Does this sentence help the user?" If it doesn't, get rid of it.

6.6 Sentences Should Have One Obvious Interpretation

Avoid sentences that can be interpreted in two different ways and sentences that lure your readers into an improper understanding when they have read only part of them.⁸

Readers try to make sense of sentences before they reach the period at the end. Some sentences can mislead the reader. Consider the first few words of this headline:⁹

"Burger King fries the holy grail..."

Now why would Burger King fry the holy grail? The sentence's meaning becomes clear when you finish reading it:

"Burger King fries the holy grail for potato farmers"

Ah, the fries *are* the holy grail. It's still not entirely unambiguous, but the meaning is reasonably obvious now.

Reading such a sentence requires more work on the part of your readers, since they're forced to backtrack if they start with a wrong interpretation. To avoid confusing them, ask yourself whether a sentence is unambiguous even if you've read only part of it. A simple change makes this sentence completely clear:

"Burger King fries are the holy grail for potato farmers"

Can you spot the problem with the following sentence?

8. These are often called garden-path sentences, from the saying "to be led up the garden path." The intuitive understanding of such a sentence is misleading; reaching the end of the sentence forces the reader to backtrack, looking for a different interpretation. Wikipedia has more on the topic: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garden_path_sentence.

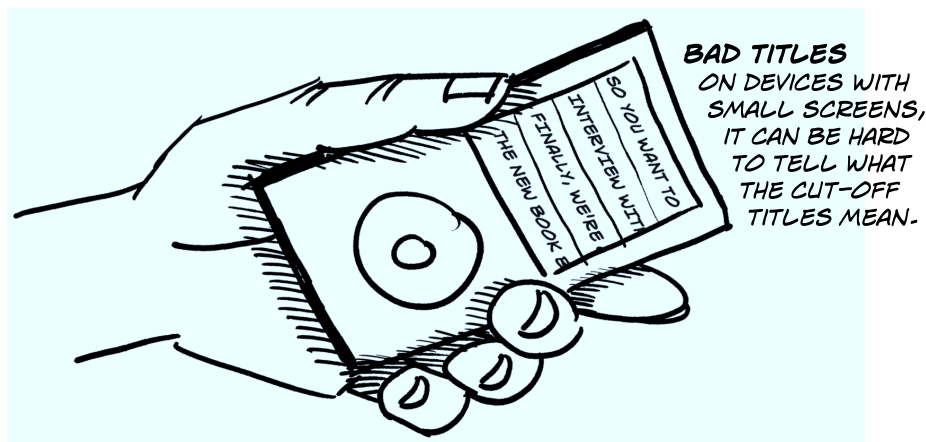
9. I found this example via the excellent Language Log blog at <http://languagelog.idc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=1762>. Language Log is definitely worth reading if you're interested in writing.

“Lukas told his editor that he would write a project plan to finish the book by the end of the month.”

Will I write the *plan* by the end of the month, or is the plan to *finish the book* by the end of the month?

If your text requires less thinking on the readers’ behalf, they are more likely to read it and get something out of it.

Clarity is especially important for titles. Start titles with relevant words so people still get the meaning of the title, even if they view it on a device with a small screen that cuts off words at the end of the title.



6.7 Talk Like a Human, Not Like a Company

Companies often use style guides to enforce a consistent tone throughout all of the company’s content. Writers are encouraged to use the third person and a neutral tone. As a result, they are discouraged from letting their personalities show through in their writing.

Unfortunately, such guides encourage text that is boring and bland. People don’t want to read that, and it can be a soul-crushing experience for the people who have to *write* the text.

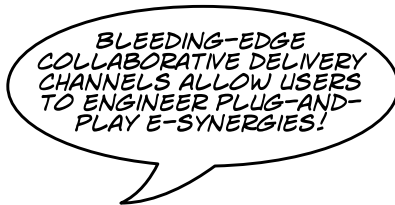
If you focus on consistency, you’ll bring everybody down to the level of your worst writer. It’s better to focus on engaging your readers. Address them directly. Write sentences that would sound natural when used in a conversation. Be informal. Talk to the reader. Avoid marketing buzzwords. Say “you” and “we” when it works (although avoid that overly patronizing “we” you sometimes hear when adults talk to children).

The Passive Voice

When people give writing advice, they often claim you should “avoid the passive voice.” Although there is some truth to that (“click Backup to create a copy” is better than “a copy is created by clicking Backup”), the case against the passive voice is often overstated. There is nothing wrong with writing something like “Don’t worry about the Backup button—your documents will be backed up automatically,” even though “your documents will be backed up automatically” uses the passive voice. In fact, changing this to active voice would simply add useless words to the sentence, making the end result worse: “the application will back up your documents automatically.”

I suspect that people don’t really mean you should avoid the passive voice. After all, passive voice merely means that the subject of the sentence doesn’t initiate the sentence’s action but is its *recipient*.

Instead, what people mean is that you should avoid writing in a way that makes it unclear who a sentence’s active party is. People often use the passive voice to shift responsibility away from themselves (“Mistakes were made”). Avoiding that kind of writing is generally good advice.

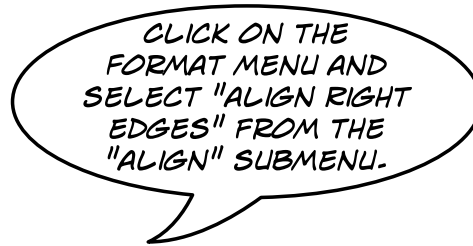


Read the text out loud. Ask yourself whether this is something you would want to read. Ask yourself whether the text contains information anyone not working in your marketing department would find useful.

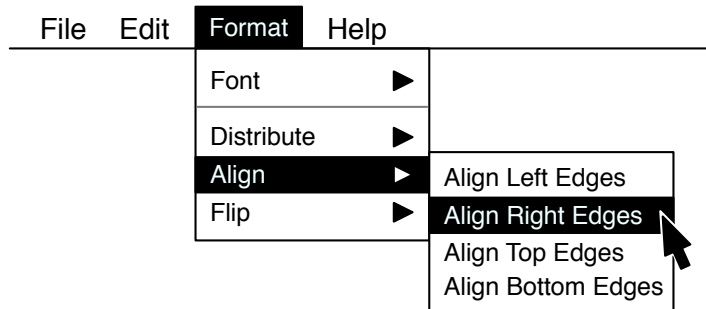
6.8 Illustrate Your Points

Maintaining images and screenshots can be a lot of work. With each product update, you have to go through all of the pictures and fix the ones that are out-of-date. It’s tempting to just avoid pictures altogether. But pictures can make your text more understandable and readable.

Pictures help illustrate points. A good screenshot can replace several paragraphs of text and may be easier to understand. Depending on your audience, even simple explanations can benefit from an illustration.



Although the preceding text is reasonably clear, an image makes it even more obvious.



Images can also give your text a more inviting look. Facing a wall of text is discouraging, but add a few images, and the text looks more enjoyable to read. In their paper “What’s Psychology Worth? A Field Experiment in the Consumer Credit Market,”¹⁰ Marianne Bertrand et al. show that that merely adding a picture of a woman to a loan offer caused a statistically significant increase in loan interest. However, Jakob Nielsen also revealed that users ignore photos if they look like generic stock photography or pure filler.¹¹

6.9 Use Words People Understand

Don’t let your pet peeves guide your writing. Some people don’t like to use the word *podcast*. Some people don’t like *blog*. Some people don’t like to use *Lite* for free versions of iPhone apps. But pretty much every-

10. Read it at http://karlan.yale.edu/fieldexperiments/pdf/Bertrand%20et%20al_2006.pdf.

11. Read more about his results at <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/photo-content.html>. You can find links to other research on this topic at <http://uxmyths.com/post/705397950/myth-ornamental-graphics-improves-the-users-experience>.

body else uses and understands these words. People know what a podcast is, what a blog is, and what to expect if an iPhone app has the word *Lite* after its name. Just use the words people understand, even if you don't like these words. As former *Guardian* science editor Tim Radford puts it,¹² “No one will ever complain because you have made something too easy to understand.”

Keep in mind that the people who read your text probably use different words than you do. If you know your audience, write for it. Your audience may have an age range, skill level, or domain knowledge that is different from the average person. Taking these things into account when writing text will make it easier for your audience to read and understand your text.

But above all, just keep it simple. In *On Writing* [Kin00], Stephen King explains that “one of the really bad things you can do to your writing is to dress up the vocabulary, looking for long words because you're maybe a little bit ashamed of your short ones.” His rule of thumb: “Use the first word that comes to your mind, if it is appropriate and colorful. If you hesitate and cogitate, you will come up with another word—of course you will, there's always another word—but it probably won't be as good as your first one or as close to what you really mean.”

Now, King is talking about writing novels. But then, why shouldn't your writing be just as engaging and interesting as a Stephen King novel?

6.10 Test Your Text

Since text is part of your user interface, you can test text as part of a regular usability test. But that's not all you can do. Usability expert Angela Colter encourages also testing your text using a Cloze test.¹³

In a Cloze test, you remove some of the words of your text and then ask test participants to find the missing words. A sample is shown in Figure 6.1, on the next page.

Colter suggests picking sample text from your product that is between 125 and 250 words and then removing every fifth word. Ask participants to fill in the missing words. Calculate the test score by dividing the number of correct answers by the total number of removed words.

12. Find Tim Radford's “manifesto for the simple scribe” at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2011/jan/19/manifesto-simple-scribe-commandments-journalists>.

13. You can read more of her suggestions for testing content at <http://www.alistapart.com/articles/testing-content/>.

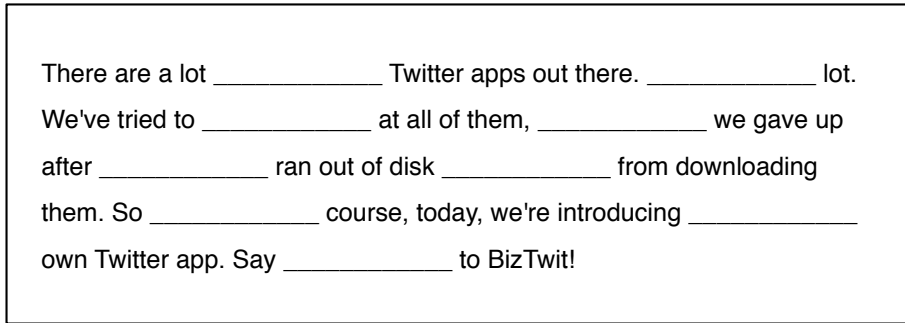


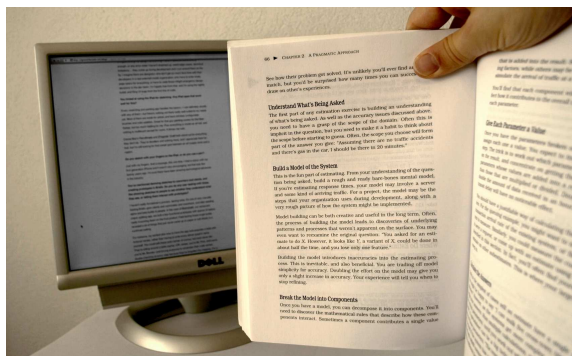
Figure 6.1: A sample Cloze test

If the score ends up being below 0.4, your audience likely won't be able to understand your text, and you should rewrite it. If it's below 0.6, they might have a bit of difficulty, and some changes may be required. Scores above that indicate audience-appropriate text.

6.11 Display Legible Text

Making the content itself usable is important, but the way you present it also matters.

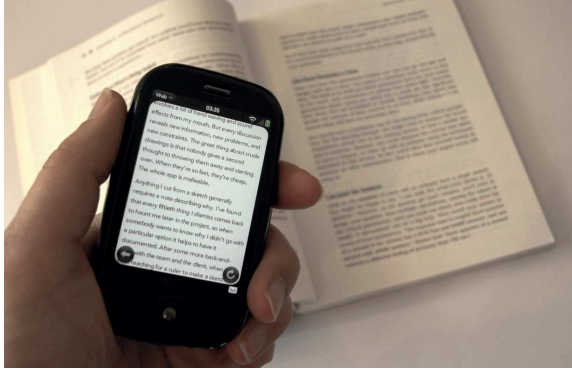
Pick a large font size. Although most people hold books quite close to their faces, computer screens tend to be further away. While sitting in front of your computer and looking at your site or application, hold up a book at typical reading distance, and compare the font sizes.¹⁴



14. I first saw this idea mentioned in an essay by Oliver Reichenstein, which you can read here: <http://informationarchitects.jp/100e2r/>.

If you notice that the text on your PC looks significantly smaller than the text in the book, make the screen text larger. Keep in mind, though, that the same font size can appear to be larger or smaller on screens with lower or higher resolutions.

Of course, if you're creating content for a cell phone, the situation reverses. People typically hold their phones reasonably close to their eyes, so you can get away with smaller font sizes.



Pick a readable typeface. There is a great difference in legibility between different typefaces and even between different members of the same type family. Choosing a good typeface matters.¹⁵

Takeaway Points

- Avoid text if you can.
- If you can't avoid text, keep it succinct, clear, and scannable.
- Keep paragraphs short, and convey one idea per paragraph.
- Be engaging and personal, rather than boring and professional.
- Use pictures to illustrate your points and make your text look more approachable.
- Use large font sizes and readable typefaces.

15. Note that studies show that whether a typeface has serifs or not probably doesn't make a difference in terms of legibility. If you are interested in reading studies on this topic, you can find out more at <http://www.alexpoole.info/academic/literaturereview.html>.