

# How to Avoid a “Vibe-Coded” UI

Research-backed recommendations for building a premium look and feel

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Teams often describe a UI as “vibe coded” when it looks like effects were applied first and the product’s structure was solved later. The research literature doesn’t use that slang, but it repeatedly describes the same failure pattern: weak hierarchy, inconsistent standards, and visual noise that fights usability. Premium UI, by contrast, tends to feel calm and inevitable—because it is built on a coherent system of hierarchy, spacing, typography, and conventions. The recommendations below synthesize what usability and design-system guidance says about how to get that premium result (and why it works).

## 1) Start with hierarchy, not effects

Nielsen Norman Group defines visual hierarchy as guiding the eye to the most important elements on a page; it’s created through variations in scale, contrast, spacing, placement, and grouping. When hierarchy is strong, users can scan, understand, and act quickly. When it’s weak, teams often compensate with gradients, glow, blur, and motion—creating a design that feels like a template skin rather than an intentional product.

- **Make one thing dominant per screen.** Use size, weight, and placement to create a clear “primary” action or information block. (NN/g hierarchy guidance) ■cite■turn0search0■turn0search4■
- **Use grouping and proximity to tell users what belongs together.** Forms and settings pages look premium when fields are grouped with whitespace and aligned labels. ■cite■turn0search1■
- **Do a grayscale test.** If the screen’s meaning collapses when color/effects are removed, hierarchy is doing too little and decoration is doing too much. (Hierarchy relies on value/contrast and spacing, not just color.) ■cite■turn0search4■

## 2) Systematize spacing and density

“Premium” UIs usually feel calmer because density is deliberate. Whitespace isn’t empty decoration; it’s how you express grouping, priority, and breath. NN/g’s form guidance shows that grouping with whitespace improves comprehension, and Material Design recommends systematic spacing (e.g., an 8dp grid) to keep layouts visually balanced and consistent.

- **Adopt a spacing scale.** Pick a small scale (e.g., 4/8/12/16/24/32) and use it everywhere—cards, modals, tables, empty states. This eliminates the “random padding” smell. ■cite■turn1search4■turn1search12■
- **Control density by surface type.** Dense tables and long forms should live on solid/near-solid surfaces with clear row rhythm; reserve atmospheric treatments for chrome (headers, toolbars, overlays). (This is the same reason glassmorphism often fails on data-heavy screens.) ■cite■turn0search1■

- **Use whitespace to separate levels of meaning.** Major sections should have visibly larger spacing than minor groupings; otherwise everything feels like the same importance. ■cite■turn0search1■turn0search4■

### 3) Consistency is what makes UI feel ‘expensive’

A huge part of “vibe coded” is inconsistency: mixed radii, one-off shadows, buttons that behave differently from page to page. NN/g’s heuristic “Consistency and Standards” stresses that users shouldn’t have to wonder whether different words, situations, or actions mean the same thing, and it explicitly recommends following platform and industry conventions. Apple’s Human Interface Guidelines similarly emphasize adopting platform conventions to maintain a consistent design.

- **Match patterns to intent.** Use one button hierarchy (primary/secondary/tertiary) consistently. Do not introduce a new “special” CTA style every time you want something to stand out. ■cite■turn1search3■turn1search11■turn0search2■
- **Standardize component geometry.** Pick 1–2 radii (e.g., 12 for containers, 10 for inputs) and stick to them. Random radius changes are a common template tell. (Consistency principles.) ■cite■turn1search3■turn0search5■
- **Follow conventions unless you have a measurable reason not to.** Novel UI is rarely read as premium; it’s read as risky. ■cite■turn1search11■turn0search2■

### 4) Legibility is non-negotiable (contrast, states, and glass)

Trendy visuals become ‘vibe’ when they reduce legibility. WCAG’s understanding docs make the intent clear: text needs sufficient contrast to be readable (1.4.3), and UI components and graphical objects also need sufficient contrast (1.4.11). Glass effects are especially risky because the background is intentionally visible; if the background changes, your contrast changes. That’s why NN/g cautions that glass-like translucency can hurt readability, and why “Liquid Glass” done well behaves like a material system: consistent, controlled, and legibility-first.

- **Design for worst-case backgrounds.** Test your glass panels over the busiest plausible content state; if you need to squint, increase opacity, calm the background, or switch to solid. ■cite■turn0search1■turn1search2■turn1search6■
- **Make interactive states obvious.** Hover/focus/selected states must have non-text contrast that survives different backgrounds. ■cite■turn1search6■turn1search2■
- **Limit glass usage to chrome and overlays.** Premium UIs often use translucency to communicate layering (nav bars, toolbars, sheets), while dense content remains on solid surfaces. (Matches both NN/g caution and platform material guidance.) ■cite■turn0search2■turn0search1■

### 5) Motion should add meaning, not noise

Motion is one of the easiest ways to accidentally create a template look: too many bouncy transitions, inconsistent easing, and ambient effects that don’t clarify anything. Material Design’s motion guidance frames motion as a tool to describe spatial relationships,

functionality, and intention. Accessibility guidance adds a key constraint: interaction-triggered non-essential motion should be reducible or disableable (WCAG 2.3.3). If your motion doesn't clarify state or continuity, it's usually not worth the risk.

- **Use a motion budget.** Pick 2–4 recurring transitions (fade/slide for overlays, subtle hover lift, expand/collapse) and reuse them. (Meaningful motion principles.) ■cite■turn1search1■turn1search5■
- **Respect reduced-motion preferences.** If the user requests reduced motion, disable non-essential interaction-triggered animation. ■cite■turn0search3■turn0search14■
- **Prioritize responsiveness over spectacle.** Motion should feel immediate and supportive, not like a demo reel. ■cite■turn1search1■turn1search5■

## A practical checklist (the ‘premium pass’)

If you want a fast way to de-vibe a screen, do this in order. The ordering matters: you're rebuilding the system, not polishing the effect.

- 1) Remove decorative effects (glow/blur/noise) and verify the layout still reads.
- 2) Fix hierarchy: one primary focus, clear grouping, predictable section rhythm.
- 3) Normalize tokens: spacing scale, radii, borders, elevation, typography scale.
- 4) Restore restrained effects only where they clarify layering (chrome/overlays) or create a single hero focal point.
- 5) Validate accessibility: text contrast (1.4.3), component contrast (1.4.11), and reduced motion (2.3.3).

## References

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