

UX Principles for Websites

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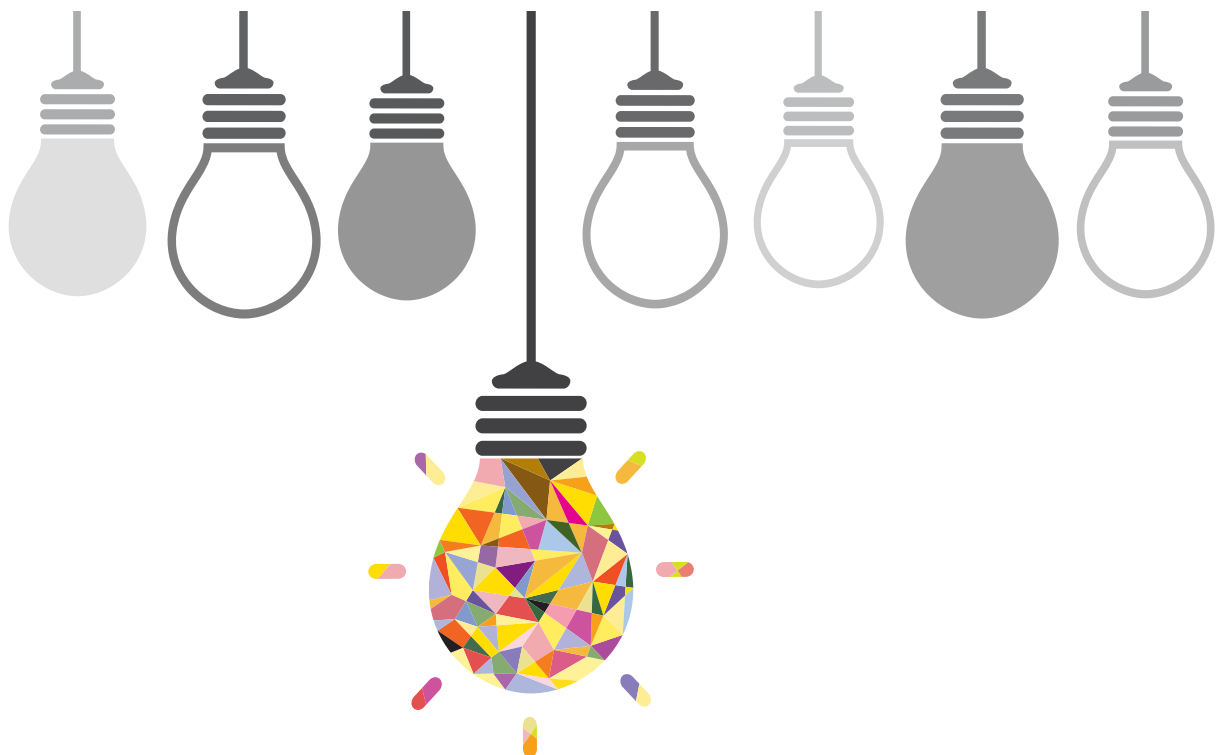
Intro:

Designing Website Experiences

Advertisers focus on selling to our hearts; why shouldn't you? People don't always remember the details of presented information, but they do remember what they feel. As Geoffrey James states in an [Inc.com article](#), "[It] is not the information itself that is important, but the emotional effect that the information has on your audience."

This is why User Experience Design, or UX design, has become such an integral part of web and application design work. UX design should effectively weave together a combination of text, graphics, media, layout, and functionality to create an overall experience for users, not just provide an informational view. This is why UX often accompanies UI in UI/UX.

Given the quantity and complexity of information we're swimming in, differentiation with meaning matters. If you scan through today's websites, they now incorporate and prioritize more visuals, more story, and more emotion to help convey what matters in the sea of competition. At the heart, consumers and customers are looking for something more to connect with.



Design & Layout

Chapter 1



Research for Inspiration

User research, testing, and analysis are ingredients to inform and validate great UX, but too often we forget about where else to get inspiration. Inspiration can easily come from researching competitors, industries, and other leading or award-winning experiences. After all, various forms of inspiration can lead to building your new, game-changing paradigm, not just incremental improvements.

Research Competitive Trends

Conducting research for inspiration on competitor websites or competitive design trends can generate new ideas. What is being done well? What is the flow? What could be improved?

Essentially, you're researching the UX of the competition.

An interesting example is the evolution of skeuomorphic design to flat design to material design.

[Skeuomorphic design](#) is hyper-realistic, but many have argued that there is too much depth. The overbearing glossiness makes the design of icons stand out too much, when they can be blended more naturally into the experience.

[Flat design](#) represents a shift in the opposite direction, drastically scaling back the hyper-realism to a more simple aesthetic. The trade-off, many users feel, is that flat design is too unrealistic and is thus less engaging.

[Material design](#) is a sort of happy medium between the two (shown below). Google focused on adding some depth to flat design, while avoiding being so hyper-realistic that the design broke the user experience.



Research Industry Trends

Consider looking at your industry as a larger piece of the puzzle. What are the trends? Who is on the cutting edge.

This research often reveals that UX patterns don't need to be reinvented. It can also generate new ideas..



In the digital space, the introduction of mobile payments is a relatively new paradigm. Your users might not immediately jump on the bandwagon, but it might be needed to make your website matter and be user-friendly in the long run. It's a small example of how researching industry trends can inspire you to make your website better.

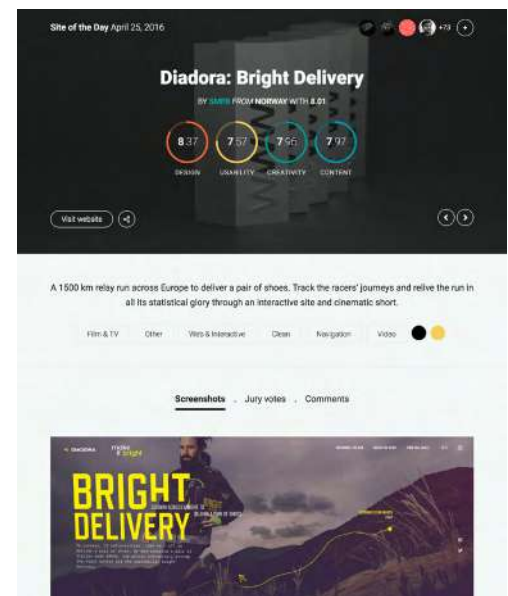
Research Award-Winning Trends

While you're researching what's happening in the competitive landscape, consider looking at the experiences that are winning awards. We know that user research is important. But, once you understand who your users are and what they need, what sources of inspiration could lead you to create a world-class experience that goes above and beyond meeting your users' needs at a basic level?

[Awwwards](#) is a great source for inspiration. The company selects websites that stand out in the crowded web design landscape. Then, a jury of industry-leading UX designers, art directors, and creative entrepreneurs judge websites in 4 categories: design, usability, creativity, and content.

A quick browse of award-winning websites could give you the inspiration you need to create a great experience of your own. One example is Awwwards' analysis of the "[Diadora Bright Delivery](#)" [website](#).

Awwwards analyzed Diadora's campaign website on a granular level across the four key categories, awarding it an 8.01 out of 10." While there is room for improvement – and there almost always is – it's a source of inspiration for introducing a dynamic product story and user journey. A quick look at the hundreds of other websites analyzed increases inspiration exponentially.





Color Has Meaning

Color is an essential design staple for influencing the hearts and minds of your users. It's important to understand the meaning and psychology of color and use its meaning to establish the look, feel, and order of your experience.

Color theory is a vast field and there are entire books written about it. Suffice it to say, it's an important discussion with implications for design that reach beyond the scope of one chapter. What's most important to remember is that color decisions should not be made arbitrarily. We recommend being purposeful as you leverage the meaning of different colors to enhance your design.

Color Captures Attention

In [The Smashing Book #1](#), the authors write, "Color can focus a user's attention and coax them into engaging with a website. [. . .] Your colors should pull them into the design and content. You can use color to draw their attention to the most important aspects of your website."

One example of how color captures attention is Amazon's use of orange to highlight products and important CTAs. Amazon's variations of orange focus the user's attention on key areas of the layout.

Orange implies fun, haste, impulse, and energy. It's loud. In regard to the screen included above, the visual clues draw the user's attention to the title, the value proposition, the positive reviews, and the ability to easily add the product to your cart with a single click.

Color Conveys Brand and Emotion

In [The Smashing Book #2](#), the authors write, "People are influenced by color in a variety of ways. Color affects us emotionally, psychologically, physically and socially."

A prime example of the emotional and psychological implications of color is our collaboration with [Thrift Books](#) on their brand redesign.

red energy, strength, power, courage	blue loyalty, trust, stability, confidence
orange excitement, fun, haste, action	purple luxury, creative, mystery, ambition
yellow cheerful, happiness, joy, optimism	pink caring, hope, sensitive, friendship
green harmony, safe, balance, growth	black strength, wealth, style, elegance

When conducting the redesign, one consideration was how “thrift” could be perceived. Many of the books Thrift Books sells are in “like new” condition. All pass a quality control test. Presenting the books with a cool, modern aesthetic emphasizes the high-quality of their product.

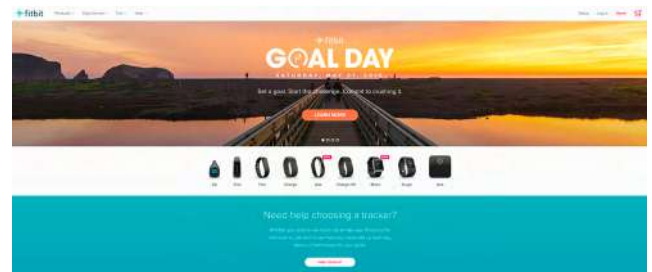
They are “nearly new” as opposed to “dusty and old.” The modern aspects of the Thrift Books brand was reinforced through the teal and white colors.



Color Creates Hierarchy

When coming to your website, users will have lots of questions that, if not answered quickly, may cause them to bounce. Where should they click? What should they look at first? How do they get from Point A to Point B and accomplish their goal?

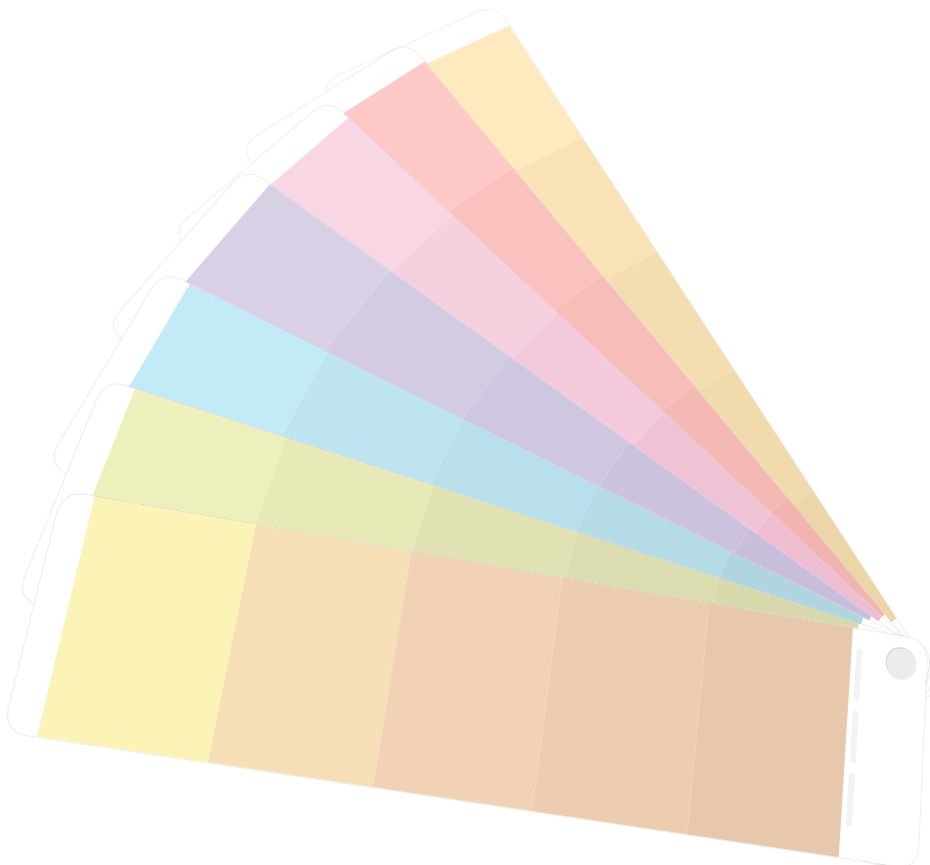
The designers at FitBit use color advantageously to establish hierarchy in sections and emphasize calls to action on their [website](#). Action orange lies over the deep brown color of the bridge as the primary CTA and is replicated throughout their site. The teal color is used to designate a new section that pulls interest further down the page.

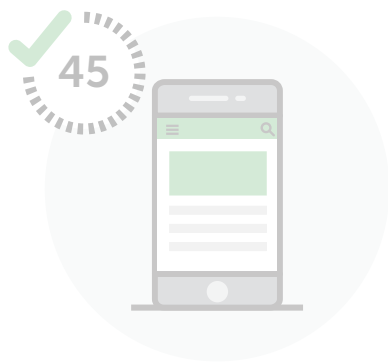


What Color Means, Matters

This perspective on color is by no means exhaustive. Rather, we hope it serves as a reminder of how color significantly affects your design.

It's easy to gloss over the meaning of different colors or assume that certain colors will always flow with a design. By understanding what different colors mean and how to use them strategically, you can enhance the brand, guide your users, and create more powerful digital experiences. What colors mean, matters.





Strive for Simplicity and Clarity Above All

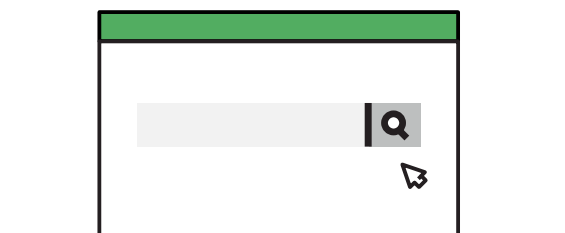
Why – Simplicity is at the Heart of Usability

Usability is often related to keeping things simple. But, making something highly usable requires sophistication, planning, and coordinating a variety of elements.

“Simple” is Actually Layered Complexity

[Robert Hoekman Jr.](#) writes, “When many [designers] say “simple,” they mean to describe something incredibly easy to use. When others say it, they’re referencing the relative complexity of a thing, whether it’s a problem, a solution, a piece of code, or something else. [. . .] To us, simplicity is a high goal of design.”

Regardless of your definition of simplicity, we recommend striving for this ideal in all aspects of design. It involves a product or website being easy to use, regardless of its complexity.



Simple Experiences Can Encourage Engagement and Catch Short Attention Spans

In creating an engaging experience, you’re faced with a few challenges: the importance of simplicity and clarity, the competition inherent to creating and launching websites in a saturated market, and the fact that people are busier than ever. What’s more, there are millions of high-quality web apps and dozens of competitor websites vying for your users’ attention.

In [Making Simple Ideas Simpler](#), Jenny Reeves writes, “As attention spans contract and peoples’ lives grow ever busier, users are raising their standards for intuitive usability. If an app even seems remotely difficult to use, many users won’t bother to install it. They’ve developed a set of expectations for speed, functionality, and design, and it’s up to designers to at least meet those expectations (if not exceed them).”

Therein lies the importance of simplicity and clarity – users want speed, functionality, and intuitive usability. The nature of their attention spans demands it. By keeping designs simple and interfaces clear and straightforward, you increase your chances of satisfying the demand for speed, functionality, and usability.

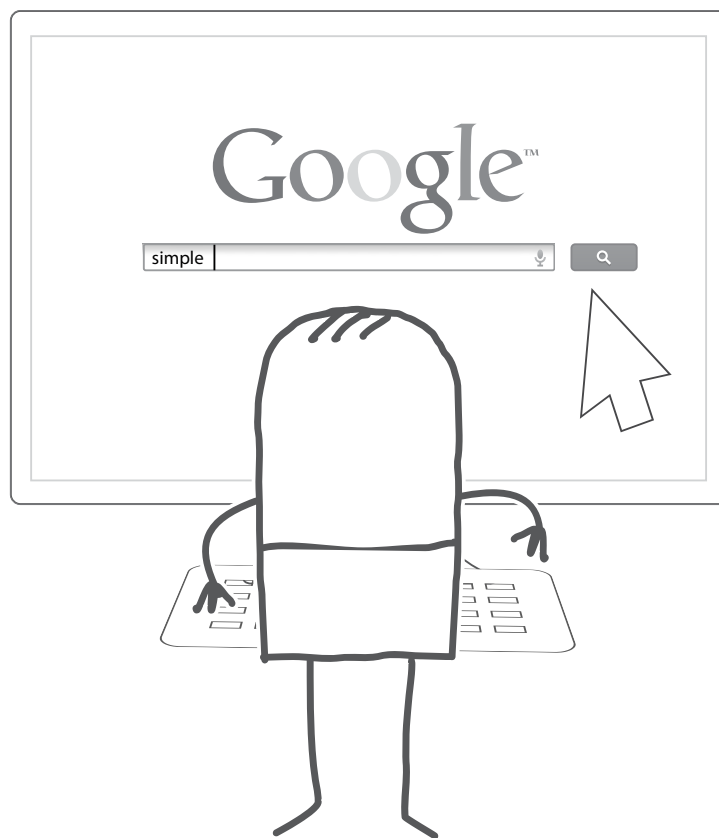
Lean Products Make Robust Experiences

As you create your website, think about how you can make it a more streamlined experience:

- How can you make interactions more straightforward?
- Can the layout of your page be reorganized to make navigation more intuitive?
- Could you choose colors and images that better fit with the overall design?
- Is the purpose of each interface exceedingly clear?

These are important questions to answer, and they play a strong part in making something simple and easy to use.

Something lean, simple, and lovable optimizes for speed, accounts for functionality, and incorporates design elements that enhance the overall experience. A product that is lean and lovable will capture people's attention and put you above the competition. Websites can be lean and functional – honing in on simplicity – as well.





White Space is an Essential Design Asset

White Space is an Active Element, Not a Passive Background

In design, white space (or negative space) isn't just an absence of something. It's an active composition element that directs our attention to what is most important on the page. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines white space as "the areas of a page without print or pictures." It's an important design tool that can be used strategically to foster focus, readability, and attention.

In a night sky full of overlapping stars, only the brightest planets and constellations stand out the most. Similarly, when a webpage is cluttered with text and visuals, it takes extra effort for important components to stand out.

When strong headlines, objective writing, and clear, scannable interface are balanced against a strategic use of white space, the formula is even stronger.

The famous typographer Jan Tschichold once argued that white space "is to be regarded as an active element, not a passive background."

The quote reveals a crucial point about white space: it is not just an absence of content. As with professional photography or film, all of what is captured in the frame – and in the case of professional web design, what is captured on the page – must be intentional.

Benefit #1: Creating content that is easier to read and scan

If understood as an "active element," white space can be employed strategically to accentuate certain sections in the layout of a web page, leading users to interact with the content in an intended way.

If you fail to intentionally provide space that promotes the ability to scan, their brain says "no," leading to a higher bounce rate, a lack of conversions, and a missed opportunity to articulate the value of your brand to the user.

*"Empty space makes it possible for the body copy to breathe and helps the reader absorb the information being conveyed [. . .] Just a couple of extra pixels of gutter, padding, margin, measure or leading can have a huge impact on the overall legibility of content" (76-77).
[The Smashing Book #2](#)*

Benefit #2: Easing comprehension of your message

The concept of balancing white space and page content is further explored by the authors of *The Smashing Book #2*. They argue that, "Without a good balance between the content and empty space surrounding it, text is more difficult to read and scan, leaving readers frustrated and unsure of your message. From the user's perspective, white space provides the cues and anchors that contribute to an intuitive, pleasurable reading experience." (78)

Frustration and uncertainty should not be in the vocabulary of a UI / UX Designer, except as aspects of an experience to be avoided at all cost.

Your message is valuable and essential. In order for users to understand its value and necessity, they need to be able to easily comprehend it. White space, being the active design element that it is, is the perfect tool to articulate your message in a user-friendly fashion.

Benefit #3: Directing User Experience

It's easy to fall into the trap of wanting to fill white space, but there is art in thinking about how and where to use it. The danger lies in falling into the misconception that leaving white space will look sloppy or unintentional – a wasted allocation of a limited commodity.

There is truth in the fact that space is a limited commodity, but in design, white space is the perfect tool to guide users through a positive, meaningful experience. For this reason, it needs to be conserved and implemented intentionally.

It is inherently difficult to direct a user's attention to what we want them to see; similarly, it's difficult, given contemporary attention spans, to get users to stick around for the entirety of a designed experience.

Paying attention requires active thought and engagement, but by presenting information hierarchically, you allow users to logically deduce which details or sections are most important. Without doing so, designers risk losing their target user base.

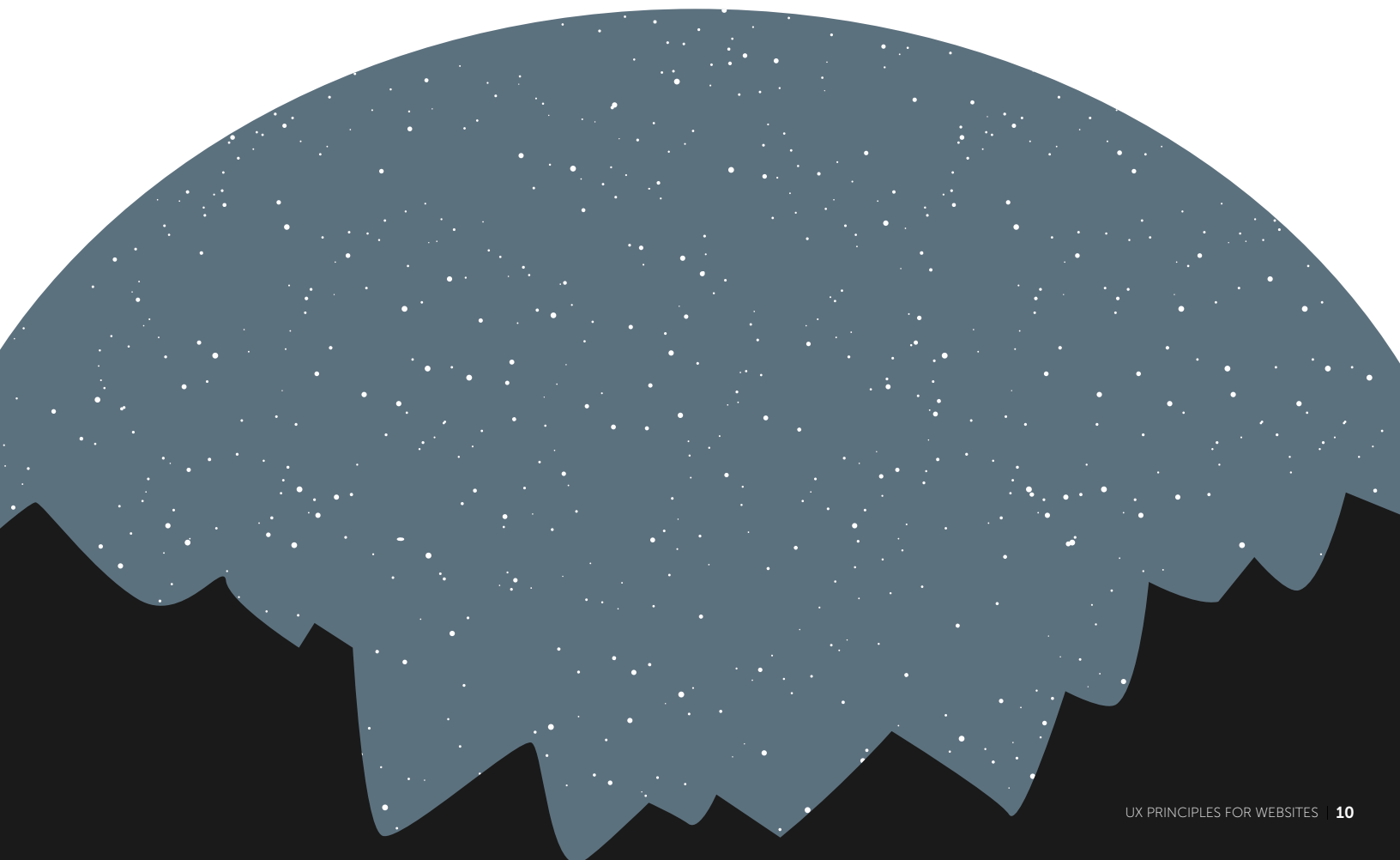
White Space is Like a Breath of Fresh Air

Just like humans need air to breathe, a design needs air to breathe. This sense of breathability provides a copacetic balance that prevents your brain from becoming overwhelmed.

White space enables visual and cognitive usability – in this instance, the ability of the eyes (and sequentially, the brain) to effortlessly focus on the most important content.

We're able to scan, comprehend, and experience the night sky due to the fact that there is a massive backdrop of open space that gives us perspective on the planets and stars. Space is an active element; without it, none of the aforementioned benefits would be possible.

The same is true for white space in design. If you want to create truly dynamic content, consider the fact that white space is an active element and can be used as a tool to present your content in an interesting and strategically valuable way.





Ensure Brand Consistency Across Your “Home Pages”

We spend a lot of time working on our website experiences but often forget where people are engaging with a company and getting information. Given the number of [devices and channels](#) that users access, it's an important consideration.

One easy way to start is to Google your company and see what turns up in the first 20 results. Many of these indexed properties could also be thought of as additional “home pages” for people who experience your website, company, and brand message.

Bottom line: brands now have many home pages. You likely have a website home page, a mobile home page, a tablet home page, a Facebook home page, and – depending on the business – probably another social related channel homepage such as YouTube, Twitter, Yelp, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Instagram.

Your Other Home Pages Matter

5 years ago, WSJ reported that Starbucks and Coca Cola, two of the world's largest consumer facing companies were getting [10x and 80X the traffic on their Facebook pages as they were their websites](#). Without focusing on social media, these massive companies would miss out on a key opportunity.

But there are caveats to this statistic. Social channels will rise and flatline – but they are not going away. Additionally, this is an older reference and it came when social media was all the rage.

The data could also be skewed because Coca-Cola and Starbucks have regional sites as well and campaign heavy sites. Their websites are one of many marketing and advertising channels.

Regardless, the key point is that each company's Facebook home page presence could still be as important as their website homepage presence. Thus, the necessity of ensuring brand consistency and integration across different access points.

In order to represent your brand in a positive light and drive customer experience (CX), consistency is key.

How Do You Plan For All Those Pages?

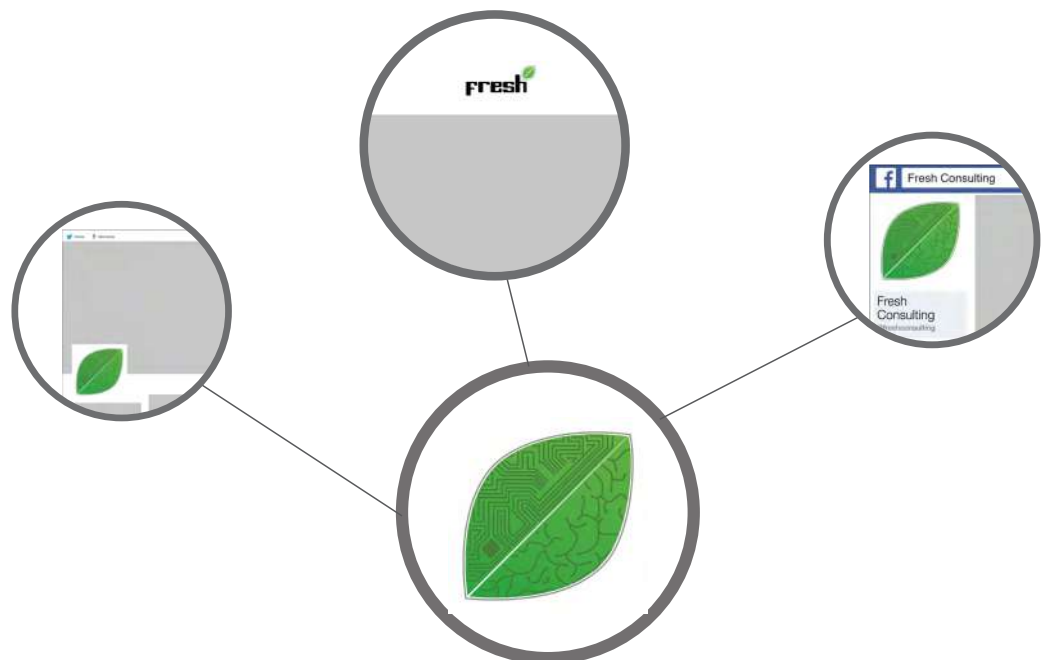
It might seem daunting – how do you plan for all of those pages? We use a couple of key strategies that not only make it easier, but also make each of those home pages a key piece of the UX/CX puzzle:

- Do an inventory of where people are experiencing your brand and measure it. Decide what matters and what to focus on.
- Integrate your other external social “home pages” – for example, link to your website and LinkedIn page – so that your channels are connected.
- Be consistent with your brand imagery and messaging. This might require investing in a more intentional social strategy and spending more time updating your social channels.

- If you have a mobile site – and not a responsive experience – assure that that experience is consistent with your main website. Sometimes, updating a mobile site isn’t prioritized, even though 30% of your traffic could be going there.

- Strategize how content flows so that your experience and brand story are consistent

As we stated previously, the bottom line is that brands now have many home pages. Whatever approach you take, ensuring that your customer experience is consistent and meaningful is key.





Focus on Consistency Across Screens

Why – Follow Design Patterns

Have you ever used an application where each interface looks drastically different than the next? They're a rare breed, and it's because the vast majority of web designers and application developers know the importance of visual and interactive consistency.

Consistent design is easy to follow. Due to simple layout, recognizable visuals, and familiar interactivity, users know what to expect. Predictability reduces the need for users to rethink as they navigate and explore, creating a positive user experience.

Users are generally familiar with the common conventions used throughout the web. Following conventions doesn't mean there isn't room for innovation as we argue [here](#) and [here](#). But regardless of innovation, the usability of your experience is paramount to allowing someone to actually absorb it.

Users Like Familiarity. It Requires Less Thinking.

You can go with familiar conventions or unfamiliar conventions, but keep in mind that design elements can compound in either a beneficial or detrimental way. Users need to quickly accomplish their goals. Familiar conventions make this happen faster. Taking time to learn an entirely new visual or interactive language isn't always worth the hassle.

In [User Expertise Stagnates at Low Levels](#), Jakob Nielsen writes:

"Accept that users are reluctant to learn. You might think that your website or application is particularly important and useful. But to users, it's one of hundreds they have to deal with. You're unlikely to be the first user interface in 30 years for which all users become sophisticated experts and learn all the features."

It's important to think carefully about how to give users quick access to the most important parts of your site. Ease of navigation is key, and familiarity simplifies the process.

Users Need Consistency Across Your Multiple Entry Points

It's a fact: users will enter your site through different pages. This is one reason why it's important to ensure consistency in the look, feel, and layout. Otherwise, users will be confused and might bounce due to the fragmentation of the experience.

Another crucial point to keep in mind when striving for consistency is voiced by Steve Krug in [Don't Make Me Think Revisited](#): “The home page has lost its preeminence [as the only key entry point]. Now people are just as likely – or more likely – to enter your site by clicking on a link in an email, a blog, or something from a social network that takes them directly to a page deep in your site. [. . .] Every page of your site should do as much as it can to orient them properly: to give them the right idea about who you are, what you do, and what your site has to offer.”

The key takeaway? Your homepage isn't your only landing page. When users touch down for the first time, on whichever page it might be, they need to immediately recognize where they are.

Focus on Speed with Clarity and Consistency

The elements of clarity and consistency allow users to situate themselves, focusing in on your unique functionality and content.

Clarity and consistency are connected. The more users know what to expect from page to page, the clearer understanding they will have about who you are and why it is valuable for them to dive further into your website. In the interest of maximizing value, achieving this outcome quickly is essential.

Consistency across screens increases familiarity, ease of recognizing key entry points and landing pages, and the ability of users to quickly orient themselves to your experience. By doing so, you'll make the overall experience of using your site better, allowing you to achieve your business goals while making certain that users can accomplish their goals as well.





Put Related Information on a Single Page

Why?

The easier it is for users to find their way around your site and reach their goal, the more likely it is that they'll stay on the page

A crucial aspect of creating a high-quality digital application is Information Architecture (IA). It's why we place such an emphasis on nailing layout with research and wireframes – the “blueprint” of your experience. Deciding what information to put on what page, how to create a navigation structure that makes sense to your users, and how to organize content is key to drawing users into your experience.

There are a variety of things to consider when approaching IA. Creating a compelling experience that makes users want to continue exploring is important, and that involves all aspects of UX, including graphic design, content, motion, and interactivity.

One way to accomplish this goal is to put related information on one page. Reducing clicks not only makes navigation more streamlined, but it also minimizes the amount of time users will spend transitioning from one page to the next.

Considering Wait Time, Navigation Efficiency, and Attention Span is Key

Sometimes all it takes is a little bit of math to prove how important an aspect of UX is.

We argue that putting more information on one page – as opposed to creating multiple pages with related information – is important for a variety of reasons. Not only is [scrolling one page faster than clicking to another page](#), but additionally, [using horizontal and vertical real estate effectively and efficiently](#) can draw users into your experience.

It makes sense from a time perspective also. The average web page loads in 6 seconds and it could take 4-5 clicks to dig into a web application that is deep in its navigation. That means it could take users up to 30 seconds to get to the information they want, not to mention the additional time it takes to scan a page and find what they're looking for.

This is problematic given that [the average human attention span is less than 8 seconds](#).

Loading one page – which is enabled with [the more efficient alternative, flat navigation](#) – takes considerably less time. A user can scroll one page of material in 12-18 seconds without being hindered by wait time.



Useful Strategies to Consolidate Pages

Here's a list of strategies we've used to consolidate related information onto a single, engaging page:

- 1. Sections:** Create clearly demarcated sections of the page so users can find their way around with ease.
- 2. Longer pages:** [The fold is a concept, not a unit of measurement](#). Lengthen pages to add related content, since [users are willing to scroll longer pages to find the information they're looking for](#).
- 3. Wider pages:** [W3 Schools](#) reports that 97% of site visitors access digital experiences with screen resolution of 1024x768 pixels or higher. Make use of this space broadens the experience.
- 4. Tabs:** Though not always necessary, incorporate [clickable tabs](#) so users can quickly move from one page section to the next.
- 5. Modals:** *We recommend using modal boxes because, as [Greg Bates writes](#), they “swiftly show information to users on the same page they are working on, thus improving the usability of your site and decreasing unnecessary page reloads.”* We recommend using them.
- 6. Video:** Compress your message into an engaging video that quickly tells your story or describes a process, and reduces the need to click.

By using some of the strategies mentioned, we were able to focus on keeping users on a single page, reducing the number of clicks, decreasing wait time, and increasing usability.

Conclusion

While an important part of Information Architecture is storytelling, it also comes down to making it dead simple for users to accomplish their goal in using your site. Does creating multiple pages serve a purpose? [If user and stakeholder feedback shows that it does](#) it's worth exploring. On the other hand, are multiple pages, and the transitions required to get to each one, bogging down your UX? That's worth thinking through.

We recommend consolidating extra pages – whenever possible – to increase usability and engagement by streamlining the experience.



Use Horizontal and Vertical Real Estate Effectively

Design for Today's Devices and Viewing Behaviors

Responsive design focuses on creating one website that responds to various devices or screen sizes with a fitting interface, but using vertical real estate and horizontal real estate goes beyond responsive design.

Whereas responsive design focuses mostly on smaller screen sizes, using horizontal real estate focuses on large screen experiences. Horizontal real estate still caters to the grid systems that underpin how responsive design works, but focus on extending that grid system out appropriately for bigger monitors to maximize the use of the screen space you have.

Using vertical real estate relates to how we consume experiences on various devices, through scanning and scrolling and flicking motions. This also needs to be done in context of the device to appropriately maximize its use; however, it's about using more length to share your content or story effectively rather than breaking it up across pages.

By thinking about what real estate is freely available to you and getting creative with it, you can create more amazing experiences.

Horizontal Real Estate: Why and How to Make Your Experience Span Large Screens

There has been a steady shift away from medium-sized screens to larger screens and huge high-resolution monitors, and to smaller

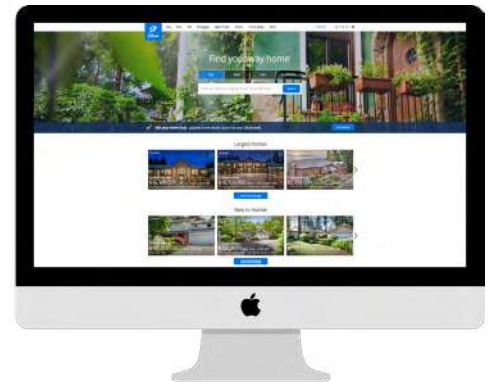
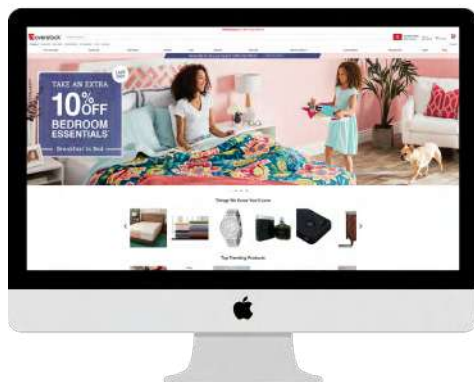
screens, phones, and smartwatches. Of those different screens and devices, W3 Schools reports that 30% of web users are on high screen resolutions, many or most of which will be on larger monitors. How do we use our horizontal real estate effectively for larger devices?

Too often, we focus solely on mobile devices. We've seen clients with 30% of traffic coming from mobile devices, so it's imperative to meet the users on their mobile devices with an appropriate experience, but what about the 30% with larger screens/resolutions? When moving to a smaller screen, we're forced to make trade-offs. A video that automatically plays on a larger screen or browser window might become a static image on a smaller screen. Decisions are made to change the experience via responsive or adaptive design. But when we have more space – a 27-inch iMac screen, 30-inch Dell monitor, or a large touch screen, for example – how can we make use of that horizontal real estate? We should think about what else we can add if it can effectively be consumed.

Visuals are the easiest things to expand naturally across the screen. On the other hand, text is typically read in shorter spans, and expanding your text length too much can make it harder to read (see [Fresh Consulting portfolio example](#) on the next page). However, when you keep text content in blocks, you can use more text spread throughout the screen in readable blocks.

Horizontal real estate offers you the opportunity to expand your experience drastically. On larger devices with higher resolution, it's important to use the horizontal real estate at your disposal to think about where and when your experience can span the entire screen.

If you have a big monitor, how are you making sure that your site makes use of all those beautiful pixels? Too often, we design with a cap in mind that's catered to smaller screens.



By taking advantage of the horizontal screen space available, and fitting your content appropriately to that real estate, you can draw more attention to your content and experience as a whole, and even add something new.

Vertical Real Estate: Free Space as Long as You Capture Interest

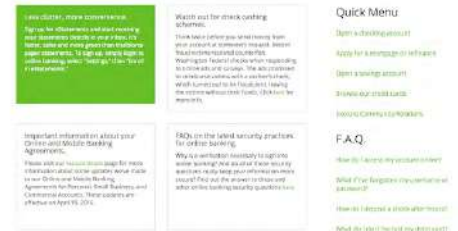
On smaller screen resolutions, scanning, scrolling, or flicking the device screen is a common user paradigm. This reinforces the importance of using vertical real estate. It also considers the well-known fact that [we scan information rather than read it](#).

"Imagine a newspaper squashed all of its quality content on the front page," Donnelly writes. "How disappointed would you be to open the paper to only find the leftovers? The same happens with your site. If everything of exceptional quality is pushed upon the reader at the beginning, once they start exploring and the rest of the site isn't of the same caliber, they're going to be let down."

The example below shows the different screen states from the Washington Federal site we recently redesigned. It illustrates how content organized vertically serves to advance the story. Users are invited to scroll and learn more about the company.

When we think about vertical real estate, we shouldn't be thinking about how our design choices encourage users to keep exploring? These are important considerations that relate to both horizontal and vertical real estate.

The examples throughout this post show how to make use of both horizontal and vertical real estate to invest in an awesome experience. Making use of all the pixels available to you can encourage users to see more content or get to the heart of the story you are telling without breaking it up across pages.





Think of the Fold as a Concept, Not as a Line

When we talk about “the fold”, we’re talking about the upper area of a website that is immediately visible to users when it loads on their screen. We recommend using this upper area of your web page to draw users into your experience, regardless of the screen size on which it is being viewed.

In the early days of web design, the comparison between the newspaper fold and a webpage fold made sense. The old concept was that the fold was a rigid unit of measurement. It dictated how designers organized webpage content for uniform screen sizes.

Today, the fold needs to be reimagined in response to the way people are consuming modern digital experiences. While you may have crafted an experience that responds well to a variety of device specifications and remains somewhat consistent, the physical location and appearance of compelling “front page” content will change.

Consider the Fold as a Concept Rather than a Unit of Measurement

The truth is, there’s not a common fold anymore. One user might browse from a 27-inch iMac with a Retina 5K display. Another user might be on a Samsung Galaxy S7 with a 6-inch screen. (See 2016 usage statistics about [browser displays](#), [resolutions](#) and [device types](#).) The upper portion of the same website will appear differently on each of these different screens.

Rewiring the way we think about this aspect of design is not that complicated. “Above the fold” – the upper area of the screen that is immediately visible to the user – can be designed in such a way that it draws users into the rest of your experience without limiting what you do below the fold.

Getting the User’s Attention is More Important than Front-Loading Information

Contrary to [popular belief](#), people actually scroll. It’s smart to design longer pages. But if you don’t include all of your information above the fold, how do you ensure that users will access it?

In [The Fold Manifesto](#), Amy Shade writes, “The fold is a concept. The fold matters because what appears at the top of your page matters. Users do scroll, but only if what’s above the fold is promising enough. What is visible on the page without requiring any action is what encourages us to scroll.”

It’s important to capture the user’s attention wherever the fold lies. With compelling primary content – engaging visuals, key branding elements, attention-grabbing headlines – and clean navigation, you can ensure that they’ll engage with the rest of the experience as it unfolds below.

Ensure that Users Immediately Understand What Your Site Is and Why It's Valuable

[Moz's Tim Allen](#) writes, "Above the fold content needs to contain a strong value proposition that explains to the user exactly what the page can offer."

What you place above the fold is important in your information hierarchy because it's the first thing people see. Make sure that you give users a clear understanding of what value you are offering in context of who you are and try to spark their curiosity to take a clear next step, whether that is to scroll for more understanding or click on your clear call to action.

Use the Horizontal and Vertical Real Estate at Your Disposal

It's crucial to use all of the space available to you to make your experience span the screen. Start with horizontal real estate. Make sure that compelling content spans across the entire screen.

Vertical real estate should unveil more of the story below the fold, which users are prompted to read based on their initial judgment of the experience.

Given that people actually do scroll, we have to think about giving them a reason. No longer are we required to pack everything on a uniformly sized screen. The number of devices, screen sizes, and resolutions being used today necessitates being creative with vertical space.

In "[Life Below 600px](#)," Paddy Donnelly brings up a crucial point about how content "above the fold" is really just the tip of the iceberg. His graphic represents the point:





The Effective Use of Slideshows

Real estate – it's valuable property. It's a finite space and an important commodity. In web design, real estate is one of your most important design assets.

To make use of it in a strategic way, consider using slideshows – also called carousels or rotating banners – to showcase your essential content, while also allowing people to continue exploring when the slideshow catches their interest.

Use Slideshows to Direct Attention

Interaction has to be a planned experience, and contrived interaction must be thought out to ensure targeted attention. Designing a meaningful user experience, in this regard, is the art of balancing a variety of interactive elements.

You want to direct attention to your content, but you don't want it to be distracting or overwhelming. Are you telling a story that reiterates your main message and invites people to explore – or are you forwarding too many messages that overwhelm users and dilute your brand?

Use Slideshows to Add Interactivity

Slideshows are tools used to tell a story that reiterates your main message, brings attention to your call to action, and strengthens your brand

by balancing movement and interactivity. It's possible – and valuable – to use common conventions in a creative way to accomplish key strategies such as storytelling

Slideshows present this exciting opportunity – that is, to synthesize convention and innovation in such a way that you can effectively articulate key messages, the value of your call to action, and the essence of your brand. It's a convention that bundles multiple interactive storytelling elements into a tight package that makes use of the finite amount of space available to you.

Use Slideshows to Highlight Rich Content

One danger of using slideshows – and a source of common criticism – is that they are too filled with loosely related content. If your slideshow is stuffed with non-related items, then it becomes disjointed, losing sight of the main story it's trying to tell. Going overboard with a slideshow throws the user in too many directions at once.

It's important to be comfortable with the idea that people might not see all of the content – after all, slideshows should be used as a tool that encourages users to continue exploring. Your content shouldn't be buried in the slideshow, but you can use it to add more interesting examples of the topic or theme you are bringing attention to.

Use Slideshows, but Don't Overdo Them

In the interest of maximizing real estate, it can be tempting to use a tool such as a slideshow or carousel to maximize the amount of information packed into the website location that users will spend the bulk of their time viewing. Also, “politics” (as in any collaborative effort) can overthrow good judgment about

what information is most important to include and what could be saved for another part of the website.

Despite these considerations, slideshows are useful and easy to follow. They are a great way of exposing rich content and rich offerings, but they have to be implemented thoughtfully to ensure that exposure is enhanced.

Rotating Banners and Slideshows are easy to follow





Use Icons Appropriately

The Demand for a Consistent Visual Language is Powerful

An icon is “a symbol or graphic representation on a screen of a program, option, or window.” Icons are ubiquitous – you see them on computer desktops, iPhones, Android and Windows phones, and web pages that span across the Internet. Icons constitute a visual language.

Without relying on words – although they are often accompanied by a label when necessary – icons communicate meaning about what users should click on, how they can efficiently navigate a page, and how they can engage in a digital experience.

The demand for a consistent visual language is readily apparent – in the millions applications and on the millions of product interfaces available to consumers, icons are everywhere.

But you can’t just pick any icon, put it on your interface of your application, and expect that users will understand what it means. Although icons are aesthetically pleasing from a graphic design standpoint, and efficient in the way that they make use of a limited amount of space to convey a more complex idea, they have to be used sparingly, be authentic, be scalable, enhance usability, and inspire interaction.

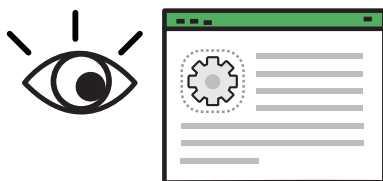
Use Icons Sparingly

It’s a very common mistake to walk into a web or mobile app project and have a client want to use an icon for everything. They are visually appealing. They make use of space in an efficient, economic way. They add flavor to a brand. But overloading with icons can detract from the overall experience in a variety of ways.

In an article titled [Use and Abuse of Icons in the Modern Age](#), Sven Lenaerts writes, “One of the most common mistakes we make is that we use too many icons in a given setting. Icons are most effective when they improve visual interest and grab the user’s attention. They help guide users while they’re navigating a page. Use too many icons and they’ll become nothing more than decoration. Their use for navigation on a webpage can often cause dilution.”

A key point is that, generally, icons don’t always lead to great usability. When they are used as “decoration” and cause “dilution”, then you’ve strayed from the very purpose of using icons in the first place: that is, using a carefully selected visual symbol to communicate an idea, concept, or function simply and clearly.

Icons can be confusing. They look pretty cool, but it takes time for people to figure out what they mean (unless they’re common or conventional) and the majority of people using applications don’t want to spend their time thinking about what the icons on the page mean.



Icons Need to Be Authentic

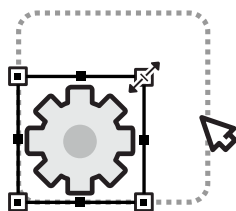
This is a simple point: icons are a part of your visual language and brand, so it goes without saying that they should fit. Sometimes key icons are almost as important to your brand identity as the logo itself.



Google's logo is the large word (or uppercase G in certain instances) that graces their search engine and other products. But in Drive, Google has [Material icons](#) that serve an incredibly important purpose: you can quickly locate and utilize Google Search, Gmail, Google Calendar, and Google Docs. All of the icons fit their brand and provide quick access to important applications.

You may want a simple icon or a more sophisticated icon based on how it fits your brand guidelines. But the important point is that icons compose a visual language that people can recognize universally – for this reason, they need to be authentic.

Icons should be Scalable and Adaptable



Many icons are in an SVG (Scalable Vector Graphics) format. They can easily be re-colored, reshaped, or change appearance via mouseover,

using code, or some simple formatting changes in Adobe Illustrator. For this reason, creating a new graphic isn't necessary as they can be modified page-to-page using the same basic assets.

There are great libraries to pull in icons as fonts, so they scale really well. Great libraries include [The Noun Project](#), [IcoMoon](#), and [Font Awesome](#). The libraries contain a variety of vector-based images that scale well with responsive experiences and are easily adaptable based on the look and feel you are trying to create.

Icons Can Inspire Interaction

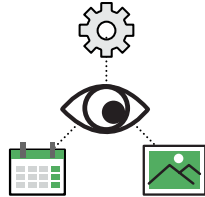
Icons can inspire a lot of engagement. If you want people to check out after shopping, a shopping cart is the visual clue that will inspire them to do so based on the fact that it's so conventional and universally understood.



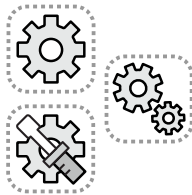
Icons can also be used to show the unique characteristics of a product. Making icons interactive, often with animated GIFs, is a common trend in modern user experiences. There is good motivation behind this. Icons, animation, and movement encourage interest and further exploration. When static objects come to life, curiosity is piqued.

An icon can carry meaning with a little motion. For example, a heart icon that starts beating will bring more meaning and interest than a static

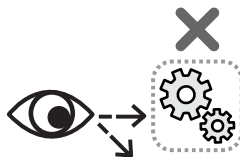
How to Increase Icon Usability



Convention – Common icons should be recognizable. The printer icon always means “print.” The bold B means “bold.” On eCommerce websites, the shopping cart usually leads to the screen where you can add items, delete items, or checkout. Icons need to be consistent if intended to be understood universally. It’s not always necessary to get innovative. Stick to what’s conventional unless the situation calls for innovation.



Consistency – Icons that serve the same function, across different websites or applications, should have a consistent look and feel, even if they look subtly different. Icons are intended to provide simple visual clues and consolidate screen space, rather than having a long sentence to explain each function and feature of a website or application.



Labels – If it takes longer to think through what an icon means than read through text that describes the same functionality, then you’ve failed in your purpose of using an icon. Include text if necessary, but make that count as well. If there’s a good reason for using an icon, there shouldn’t be as much text.

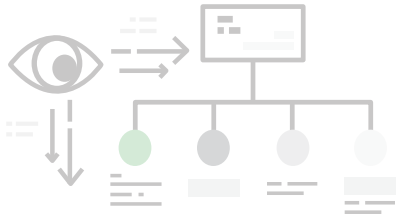
Often, however, pairing an icon with a label will increase usability. In [a piece written about the usability of Microsoft Outlook 98’s toolbar](#), Jensen Harris wrote, “Different fixes were tried: new icons, rearrangement of the icons, positioning icons under the menus from which the commands came from. In the end, one change caused a total turnaround: labeling the important toolbar buttons [. . .] It’s not really any big surprise if you think about it. It’s pretty rare in the real world that we rely on iconography alone to represent ideas. Bathroom doors generally have an icon of a man and the word “Men.” Stop signs have the word “Stop” on them.”

Windows, iPhone, and Android interfaces often still have labels next to the icons as part of their standard usability guidelines, and there’s a reason why. As we stated earlier, if it takes longer to think through an icon than read through text, you’ve failed in your purpose of using an icon. It’s important to strike the balance between text and labels.

Ultimately, it comes down to the little details that combine to set experiences apart and bring high-end experiences together. By taking icons seriously, you are taking your experience seriously as well.

Navigation & Guidance

Chapter 2



Flatter Navigation is Better than Deeper Navigation

Why – Flat Navigation is Faster and Easier to Use

Flat navigation and deep navigation are two primary classes of navigation. Flat navigation often has few layers in the information hierarchy (usually 1-3) and fewer navigation points overall.

On the other hand, deep navigation has more layers (4 or more) in the information hierarchy and subsequently more navigation points overall. Some information-heavy web applications are complex.

While deep navigation might be inevitable to organize a highly complex set of information, it has its downsides. We recommend flat navigation hierarchy because it's generally faster and easier to use.

Combining pages with related content helps in removing layers of navigational hierarchy. This often increases usability. As such, we suggest thinking about how to group related content in vertically longer pages versus simply dividing the content into multiple pages.

There's a benefit to creating one long page that is quick to scan, rich with related information. Bottom line, more related content on a page can decrease the amount of time a user spends navigating between pages.

Flatter Navigation Consolidates Pages by Making Use of Vertical Real Estate

As we've stated, web pages are scanned rather than read. Users want to quickly scan and find the information that is relevant to them. Flat navigation enables this.

While individual pages are often longer, this is beneficial because related content is divided up in different page sections that can be quickly scanned. It eliminates the need to navigate separately to different content sections, each of which has its own page.

Flat Navigation Decreases the Layers of Navigation and Often the Number of Pages

The benefit of decreasing layers of navigation and the number of pages is speed. By reducing the number of layers, users have a clearer path to the specific layers they're interested in. By reducing the number of steps necessary to find a specific page, users can quickly find the information they need.

The biggest downside of deep navigation hierarchy is the number of steps it takes to navigate to a new page.

These steps take time. Each time a user refreshes a page, it takes an average of 6 seconds to reload. It could take 4 to 5 clicks to find the specific content they need. You could be asking users to wait up to 30 seconds before finding the page they are looking for.

We're seeing a trend in web design toward creating strong first and second layers of navigation. Filter and search functions provide deeper access to more specific content.

The simple first layer of an application – the dashboard or homepage – enables easier entry to the larger second layer. The dashboard or homepage of a web application with flat navigation gives users a view of a small sitemap of the different categories of the site. By hovering over the different navigation elements, they can see all the key pages of the site without clicking through to find the content they're looking for.

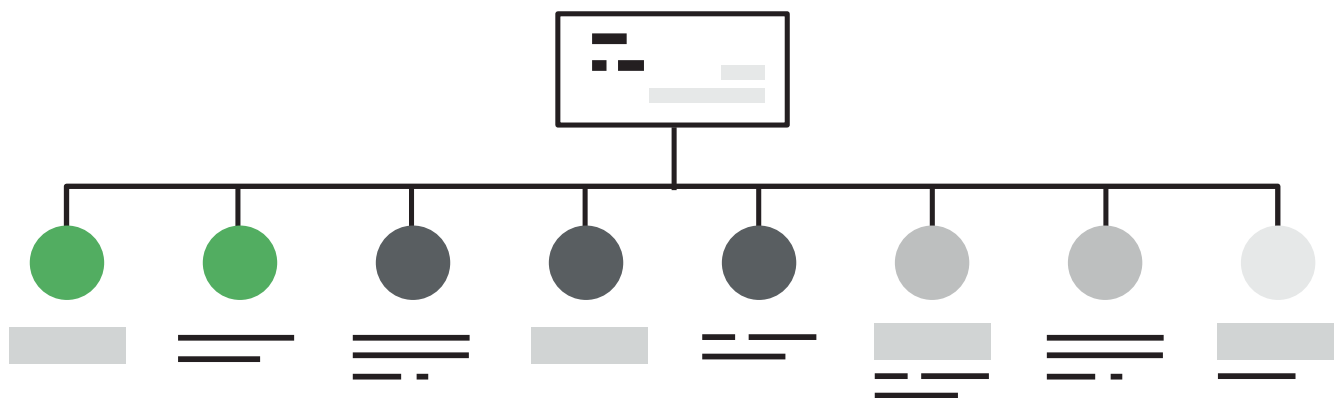
It's not that a website with flat navigation doesn't always have a lot of pages. For example, within mega menus, users can often choose from a dozen options organized in various categories, each with its own page. The key is that users can quickly navigate to the page of interest without refreshing the page multiple times.

Flat Navigation Caters More to the Variety of Ways People Find and Hone Information

The benefit of catering to the way people normally find information is that your navigation hierarchy will be easier to use.

Flat navigation recognizes that users utilize internal web page searches, search engines, and filtering to find the specific content they need.

There are a variety of entry points to a web page. The top level navigation and homepage isn't your only landing page. It's unsafe to assume that users will follow your deep hierarchy. By having less manual navigation, you'll enable people to access the mechanisms they already use or want to use.



Flat navigation still needs to make content easy to discover. Tools such as [mega menus](#), a drop down interface from which users can navigate to sub-pages, may reduce the cognitive load of finding a specific page. Without even clicking once, users can hover over a mega menu, choose from the drop down menu, and directly access the page they are looking for.

Flat Navigation Requires Less Inputs to Get Content

The key benefit of requiring less user input for users to navigate is that it makes your application faster and easier to use. However, you should still allow users to find what they want – via search, filtering, or scanning.

One form of inputs is clicks. Clicks are a part of navigating the web, but unnecessary clicks negatively impact usability. Clicks that require page refreshes are especially expensive in usability. By “expensive,” we mean that clicking takes a toll on users in terms of time and effort in navigating to information they are looking for.

Flat navigation can allow users to get where they need to go in a shorter amount of time. In designing the [homepage of the Fresh website](#), one goal was to make it easy for users to find specific services. Ease of use directly applies to web apps as well. Hovering over the Services tab in the main navigation drops down a mega menu. The second layer of navigation, available on hover, allows users to see all the site options in one large interface without clicking again.

Without navigating back to the homepage, a site visitor could hover over the Services tab at the top of the page and see the other fifteen services that we offer. Just because a web application has a flat navigation hierarchy doesn’t mean that you lose or minimize content. It’s simply a more efficient way of allowing users to access what matters to them.

Generally, most of us are looking for the quickest and easiest route to find what we need. Requiring less inputs expedites the process of seeing results, and flat navigation hierarchies play a huge role in turnaround time.

The Benefits of Flat Navigation

- 1. Consolidates pages and maximizes the user of vertical real estate*
- 2. Decreases layers and the number of pages*
- 3. Caters to the variety of ways people find and hone information*
- 4. Requires less input from users, which can be expensive in usability*

Depending on the purpose of your web application, you may have the option to choose between flat or deep navigation. With consideration of UX best practices and emerging trends in web design, we suggest flat navigation.



When and When Not to Use Tabs

It's Important to Use Tabs Wisely

Tabs are a navigation element used in web design that allow users to easily access different areas of a site or different parts of an individual page. They're sort of like tabbed dividers in a filing cabinet – by clicking a tab, users can easily locate a page containing related content.

However, just because tabs exist doesn't mean they should always be used. Tabs can be a great tool to ease navigation and group related content, but sometimes a page benefits from being tab-less.

When To Use Tabs

Tabs are intuitive due to being a commonly used convention. Use tabs to group content, connect related information, and as a tool to save space.

In [Chapter 4 of Safari Books Online](#), the author writes, "Tabs are commonly used for the main navigation, vertical mechanisms on the left for local navigation—but there are no set usage rules, and many variations exist. [. . .]"

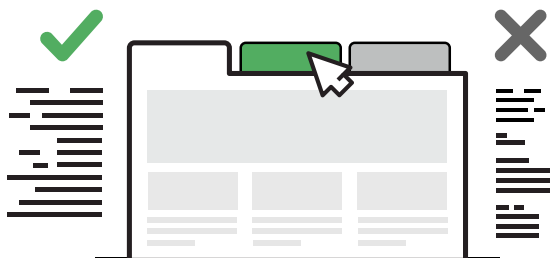
"To sort them out, try thinking like a visitor, not a designer. Take time to consider how visitors perceive the navigation mechanisms. Understanding the type of navigation a menu represents can help people predict links and reorient themselves on new pages."

Tabs are called for when

- You need information to be highly scannable and simple to navigate. [People often scan information rather than reading it](#). In these cases, including tabs can aid users in locating the specific information they need
- A page could benefit from having a more organized structure. Using tabs can be efficient and lead to strong UX because the navigation scheme aligns with users' expectations

A litmus test for whether or not you want to use tabs is to ask yourself, "If I printed out this page, would I want users to see all the information grouped together? Or would I want them to access each section separately?"

If you want users to access each section separately, then using tabs is a logical choice.



When Not to Use Tabs

Space – vertical and horizontal real estate on a web page – is a powerful yet limited commodity.

Consider how you can carefully control where your users click and where your users look in order to give them the best user experience relevant to their needs.

Ditch tabs whenever you need to create a unified experience. If it makes sense for information to be grouped on one long page that encourages scrolling, then going without tabs is best.

Skips Tabs When

- It's more powerful to see related content grouped together. Take [Amazon's product pages, which are designed to keep users on the page, reading more about the product in question](#). The way the page is designed encourages users to continue scrolling to explore, whereas tabbed navigation would break up the experience.
- Content is sequential. It's typically unwise to use tabs in customer support pages, when users need exact answers rather than topics to browse.
- Page real estate is limited. If you're short on space, a well-designed layout of vertical sections can make better design sense.

If you're stuck on whether or not to use tabs, ask yourself questions such as:

- **Are the page sections easily scannable?**
- **Would it take more time for users to open a new tab than to scan the page?**

Back to tabs being like dividers in a filing cabinet – if you have only one piece of paper, you don't need a filing cabinet to keep it organized. It might make sense to include everything on a single web page. But it comes down to balancing usability and the overall design strategy.

When in Doubt, Test!

As with all aspects of UX design, it's vital to conduct usability testing. You can't just guess what works.

Creating basic clickable prototypes early in the design stage allows you to test. If you're deciding between the two options, you can test to:

- See how fast users can process a task with tabs vs. without tabs
- Ask them what they prefer
- Balance user responses against your overall design strategy, determining how to best proceed.

So You've Decided to Use Tabs. Now What?

Tabs can be incredibly effective depending on what your web application is, who your users are, and how they're expected to interact with your site. As with all aspects of web design, there are best practices that can increase usability and enhance the user experience. But ultimately, including tabs depends on asking yourself which option makes the most sense.

If you decide to use tabs, some general design guidelines include:

Making tabs symmetrical and interactive

- *Tab organization should be logical, in line with the information architecture of the rest of your website*
- *A user should be able to easily tell which tab they are on*
- *Effects should enhance interactivity so users know if they've clicked something*

Including concise copy

- *Labels should be short*
- *Use plain language*
- *Include consistent typography*

Providing clear visual feedback

- *Current tabs should be highlighted*
- *Unselected tabs should not be highlighted*
- *Each tab should be clearly tied to a different content area*



Home(pages) – Convincing Your Users to Come Inside

The Internet is a bustling neighborhood of websites vying for your attention. [According to estimates](#), this “neighborhood” has more than a billion websites, each with its own homepage.

In each individual market, certain websites stand out and others fade quickly into obscurity.

One of the differentiating factors that determines this is the holistic quality of the homepage – the starting point on a potential journey that users have through your website experience and along the path to conversion.

Take Your Homepage Seriously

[Jakob Nielsen](#) calls the homepage “the most valuable real estate in the world.” The homepage is “your company’s face,” and it’s essential that it inspires visitors to stick around and tour the rest of your site.

A balanced layout, simple navigation, reinforcing story-based copy, relevant and clean images, and well-defined calls to action help visitors make the decision to explore your site. The information architecture and story weaved throughout guides them, establishing trust, encouraging engagement, and inviting them to explore more. It’s the familiar starting point that can be revisited if they’re lost.



The catch? You only have a few seconds to capture their attention. Craig Tomlin, in a post titled “[5 Second Test](#),” argues that your website, in less than 5 seconds, needs to communicate who you are, what your product is, and why site visitors should care about it. Like the exterior facade of a home for sale, a website homepage needs to invite users to come inside for a tour.

Make Your Homepage Clear

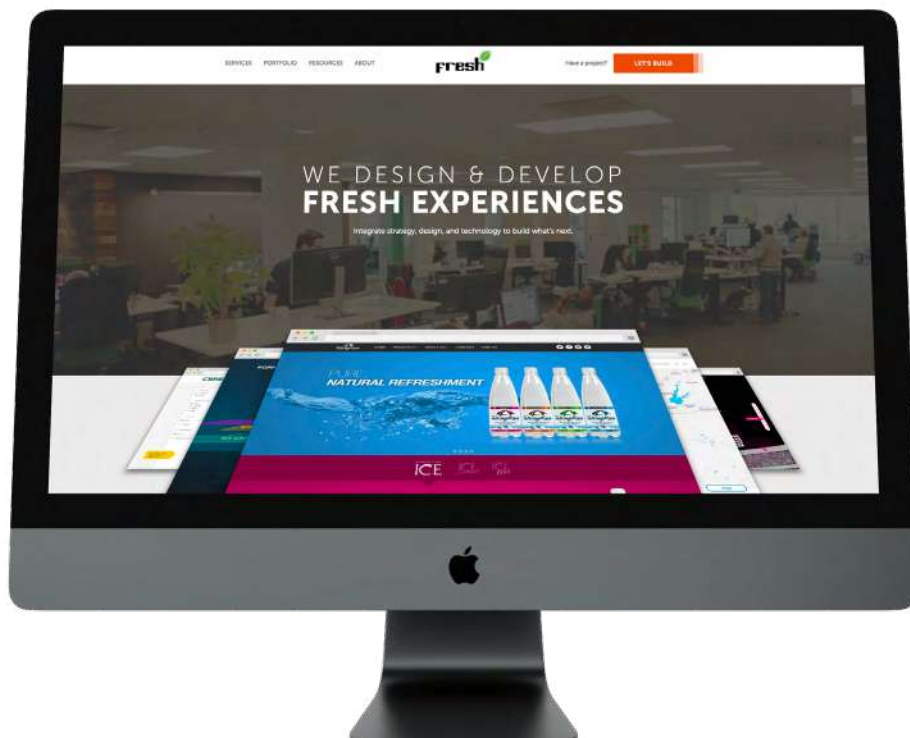
Usability expert Steve Krug explores the importance of using the homepage to establish, with absolute clarity, what the site is. In [Don't Make Me Think, Revisited](#) he states

"Whenever someone hands me a homepage design to look at, there's one thing I can almost always count on: They haven't made it clear enough what the site is. As quickly and clearly as possible, the homepage needs to answer the four questions I have in my head when I enter a new site for the first time: What is this? What can I do here? What do they have here? Why should I be here – and not somewhere else?"

Unless your brand is universally familiar, it is imperative to make clear what the site is and what benefits you have to offer.

What makes your "home" more appealing than the next home in the crowded neighborhood that is the Internet? How can you ensure that visitors stick around for the rest of the tour?

The central task is to design an experience that will help accomplish your user's objectives and your objectives.





Don't forget the UX of Navigation and URLs

Great UI/UX design requires attention to the macro visuals and micro details to build compelling experiences. One detail often forgotten is the role navigation and URL's can play in guiding a user, telling a story, and providing more meaning to reinforce everything else on the page.

Navigation Has Meaning and Can Start the Story

Good UX often starts with information hierarchy, and your navigation shapes the direction of usability, interaction, and story with an app or website. Rather than linking pages in arbitrary groupings or hierarchies as you go along, significant usability improvements can be made by simply including the most important pages and actions in the main navigation. Think of navigation as the beginning of a story you are telling.

To fine tune your navigation, take a step back and assess your target users, your top user stories, and your biggest call to actions. Understanding your biggest user stories can help create a blueprint for your navigation and ensure the most important pages are exactly where users expect to find them. Simple, clear navigation is the beginning of good UI.

URLs Can Also Give Direction, Location, and Meaning

URLs are another useful navigation tool for users and search engines, but this key usability detail is often forgotten in the planning stage.

Clean, easy-to-understand URLs help users clarify where they are and where they want to go. Experts, [including Google](#), agree that shorter URLs are better. Search engines are getting more sophisticated and closer to understanding natural language and thought processes; so, they should be considered a user too.

According to Dr. Pete, Marketing Scientist for Seattle-based [Moz](#), in his "[25-point Website Usability Checklist](#)," "This is a point of some debate, but meaningful keyword-based URLs are generally good for both visitors and search engines. You don't have to re-engineer an entire site just to get new URLs, but do what you can to make them descriptive and friendly."

Navigation and URLs are one of many areas to consider, but given their role in guiding a user and reinforcing story and objectives, it's important to not forget the UX of navigation and URLs as you take a serious approach to building your experiences.



Optimize URLs for Users and Search Engines

URLs are a navigation tool for both users and search engines. Google, Bing, and other search engines are becoming more sophisticated, and it's important to consider the "user experience" for them as well.

Consider the UX of Domain Names and URLs

URLs rarely change. They shouldn't change if you want users to return to your site repeatedly. [Nielsen Norman](#) research shows that people often guess domain names rather than searching for them.

Similarly, they might use a bookmark or history list if they've already visited the site. Even though they might seem inconsequential in the grand scheme of the experience, URLs are seen and they matter. Thought should be put into choosing domain names and URL structure.

A URL starts with a domain name, and it should ideally be:

- Easy to remember
- Easy to spell and type
- Clear as possible
- Authentic to the service

After you establish a good domain name, it's best to create URLs that are:

- Descriptive. Relevant keywords can be used to strategically link navigation to content on the page. This is also good for SEO.
- Consistent with your site organization and structure
- "Hackable," meaning that users can move to higher levels of your site by hacking off the end of the URL

These elements create clean and meaningful [URLs that give direction to users](#) and search engines.

Other Do's and Don'ts for Optimized URLs

In "[URL Optimization: Best practices to increase usability & organize traffic](#)," the author suggests that URL optimization is akin to good copywriting. It necessitates paying attention to certain rules and best practices that maximize your ability to organize and direct page traffic. The author offers a few Do's and Don'ts of URL writing:

Do's

- Avoid words such as a, for, the
- Place important keywords at the beginning of the URL
- Use hyphens instead of underscores, as this is the way that Google and other search engines prefer to crawl and index URLs.

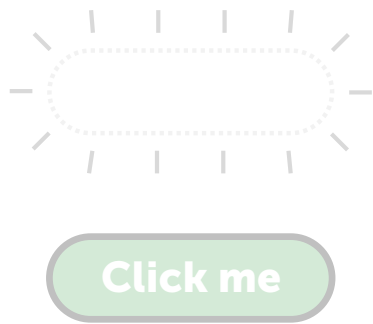
Don'ts

- Don't repeat words: Try not to repeat keywords between category and product (page) name
- Don't CAPITALIZE keywords
Avoid dynamically generated URLs, because this can lead to duplicates due to session ids, sorting options, etc.

URLs can be improved and optimized, just like any other aspect of UX, as Rand Fishkin suggests in "[15 SEO Best Practices for Structuring URLs](#)." He offers a list of best practices that govern the creation of good URLs. Three are particularly important to this conversation:

1. *The more readable by human beings, the better*
2. *Keywords in URLs are still a good thing*
3. *Shorter > longer*





Buttons Should Look Like Buttons, Links Should Look Like Links

Take the Clickability Factor Seriously

In some cases, thinking and designing outside the box is a good idea. If you're painting something abstract, try splashing an interesting color to spice up the canvas. If you're cooking a family recipe that needs some kick, throw in a pinch of a spice you've never tried before.

In other cases, thinking and designing outside the box is a bad idea. Putting the windshield wiper button by the radio would frustrate car owners. Keeping the channel and volume controls just like all of the other remote buttons could make for a slick design but would ding usability. Changing the placement of keys on a keyboard could be interesting but would be a Mount Everest usability challenge.

The point is, it's important to balance convention and innovation depending on context. In many cases, it's vital to just stick with what people are used to in the interest of helping users easily accomplish their goals. That doesn't mean you can't be creative. It just means that conventions can be used to guide your creativity.

The same principle holds true for web design. The world of the web is centered around clicks – mostly, clicking buttons, links, and other key features like tabs and navigation. And that's why we have to take these micro UI features very seriously in the interest of creating a usable macro UI.

Buttons Should Look Like Buttons

If one outcome of using your website requires the culminating action of clicking a button, then the user has to know what it is they are supposed to click. For this reason, a button should look like a button.

A little usability testing could show you that a red button looks more like something that a user could interact with than a gray button. This is why a lot of users have complained about the trend of completely flat design.

It's the same reason why Google's material design still allows for shadows and depth – that is, to help ensure things like buttons are known to be buttons.

In an article titled "[Flat Design vs. Realism: Which Side Are You On?](#)" the author writes "Last year, flat design took over the world of digital design. The hallmarks of skeuomorphic design – embossed and bevel effects, 3D artificial textures, drop shadows and reflective shimmers – all but disappeared and were replaced with minimalist design, bold colours sharp edges and lines, simple typography and very little, if any at all, shadowing."

Flat design was a response to skeuomorphism, a design trend focused on making sure every aspect of your interfaces looks highly realistic. Although flat design has excellent qualities (color, aesthetics, innovative approaches to typography), it raises some usability concerns of its own. Often, users don't know where to click. That's a significant area where flat design comes up short.

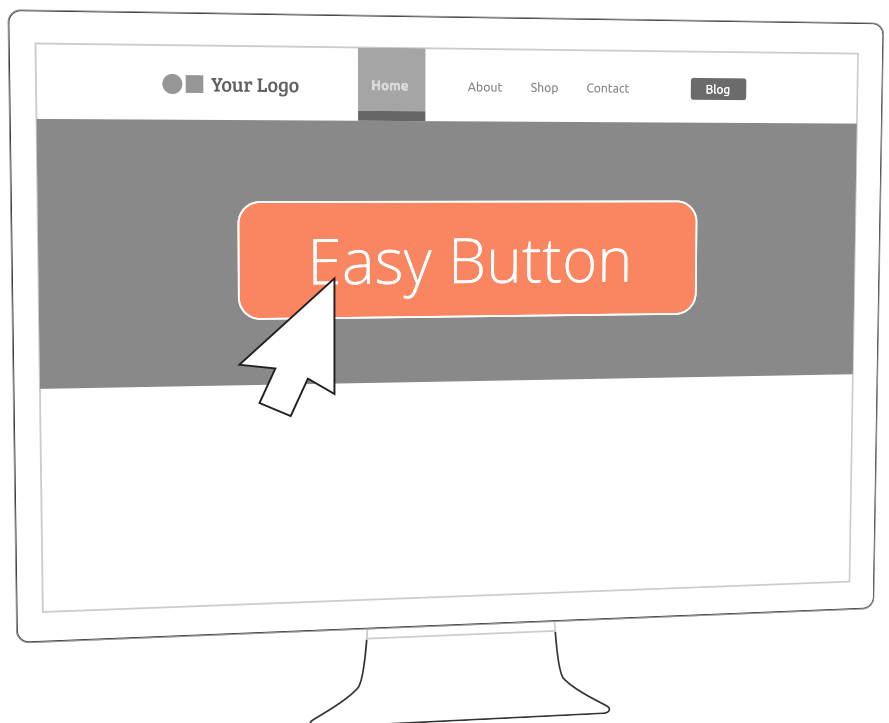
Google's material design strikes a happy medium – it borrows strong elements from both skeuomorphism and flat design. Buttons still look like buttons, and designers are afforded the opportunity to maintain a minimalist aesthetic. But the important point is that users know where to click, and the world of the web is centered around clicks.

Which one of these is a button?



While the first option is clearly a button that takes you to gluten free recipes.

The second option, although aesthetically interesting, could be misinterpreted as a tag or extraneous design element. In order to increase the clickability factor, it's important to give your users clear indication about what they should be clicking.



Similarly, Links Should Look Like Links

In his classic book on usability, *Don't Make Me Think*, Steve Krug writes, "Since a large part of what people are doing on the web is looking for the next thing to click, it's important to make it obvious what's clickable and what's not."

People want to know what they can click to get from Point A to Point B. Straying from convention when links may present aesthetic benefits, but it doesn't support usability. If someone wants to find a related article in your blog post, they'll scour the page for something that looks like a link.

Underlining or giving a distinct color to link text enables the user to quickly understand where to go next. The common convention is to have blue, underlined links that change color when clicked so that users can keep track of what they've seen.

Other colors can work as well, but they should be consistent. Conversely, black underlined text may not clearly indicate that there is a link. An underline and a strong color are emphatic, ensuring that links look actionable and consistent.

Which one of these is a link?

This could be a link

This could be emphasis

This is clearly a link

Guiding users to Accomplish Their Goals

It all comes down to making it easy for users to accomplish their goals in using your site.

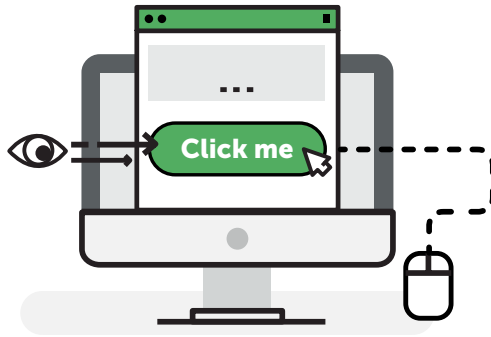
Both aesthetics and usability are important. Aesthetics should even be considered an aspect of usability. But unless your application has a non-interactive advertising spread – which isn't likely – there's a good chance that a user will have some goal in visiting it.

Users need to be able to easily accomplish this goal, and for that reason, using clear visual clues – that is, well defined buttons and links – is of paramount importance.



Guide Users to Important CTA's

It's important for businesses to have a clear objective when a visitor uses their web application. A CTA, or Call-to-Action, prompts site visitors to respond to that objective upon arrival.



The users could be taking the next step of engagement or converting to an end objective. For example, their action could be buying a product, downloading an ebook, signing up for a newsletter, or entering contact information in a form. CTAs are often in the form of buttons or prominent links, and they enable users and businesses to easily accomplish their respective goals.

Direct users to CTAs by focusing on three key design strategies:

1. *Providing clear visual guidance*
2. *Conveying a simple, clear, value proposition*
3. *Using action-inspiring copy*

Visual Guidance Directs the User's Attention

It's essential for your CTAs to be eye-catching. One way to do this is through color.

While red is often a default color choice given that it's commonly associated with action or emotion, your CTA doesn't have to be a big red button. A red button might work well in many cases, but it's important to think about how your CTA matches your brand or design aesthetic.

If your page already has a lot of red, you might capture more attention with a yellow button. Orange might fit better with your brand aesthetic.

Regardless of the color you choose, it should be integrated into the user experience in a seamless way that still manages to draw the user's attention.

Dropbox is a great example. The design of the page is simple in general. It contains a lot of white space, leaving plenty of room for visual guidance. In particular, the eye is drawn to the two “Sign up for free” CTA buttons as well as the “Try Dropbox Business” button.

This is due in part to the buttons being the prominent color on the page and sharing the same recognizable color as Dropbox’s logo. Color and white space are important pieces in making Dropbox’s CTAs effective.



By making these effective design choices, Dropbox increases the chance of getting users to respond in an intended way.

The 400 million subscribers worldwide is at least partial evidence that Dropbox’s approach is effective.



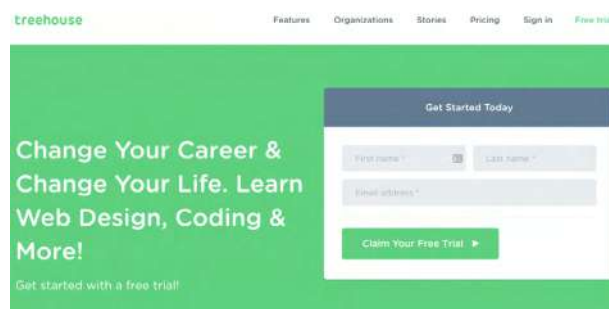
Usability is an effective way to decide if your design decisions are working. Interested in testing to see if your CTA is eye-catching? Try using a Blur Test. The Zappos Blur Test showed that attention was quickly drawn to the search function, the checkout icon, and a promotional advert. Zappos’ use of bright contrast colors paid off when it came to drawing attention to important functional areas, such as their CTA.

The Value of Clicking a CTA Should Be Simple, Clear, and Meaningful

A CTA might look visually appealing, but why should users click it? The CTA's value should be clearly communicated to the user. This is ensured by having strong visual hierarchy and simple, easy to understand messaging.

Take Treehouse as an example. A user might wonder why they should click Treehouse's CTAs. Surrounding the CTA – in clear language, large type, and meaningful tone – the designers tell users why: by signing up with Treehouse, you can change your life.

Visual hierarchy comes into play as well. It's not enough to dish out important information haphazardly. Treehouse's designers skillfully break up information into logical chunks that are easy on the eyes. A dark grey box, separate from the value proposition, informs users that they can "Get Started Today." Color contrasted text fields are grouped in the same area. But they look distinct, indicating that they should also receive attention. Treehouse's designers cap it off with a green CTA button that says users can claim a free trial.



Users aren't forced to guess why they should sign up. They aren't forced to figure out how to do so either. The value proposition and information hierarchy ensure that there is no hidden agenda. Treehouse makes this important information very clear up front.



Well-Written Copy Inspires Action

Visual design is essential in attracting the eye to important CTAs, but words matter as well. Your CTA needs copy that makes people want to act. A perfect example of this is Pinterest. Pinterest wants you to sign up for their services. But what is Pinterest? What do they do? Why should you sign up? Pinterest uses a design that offers visual guidance, simplicity, and clarity. But they add to the compelling case of why users should take action with words that invite further exploration.

With the combination of a headline and a subheadline, the designers tell you that parents decided to use Pinterest “to give their kids a head start,” and that you can join Pinterest to “discover and save creative ideas” as well. The designers tell the user exactly how Pinterest can be used and communicate the purpose of the application with two short sentences.

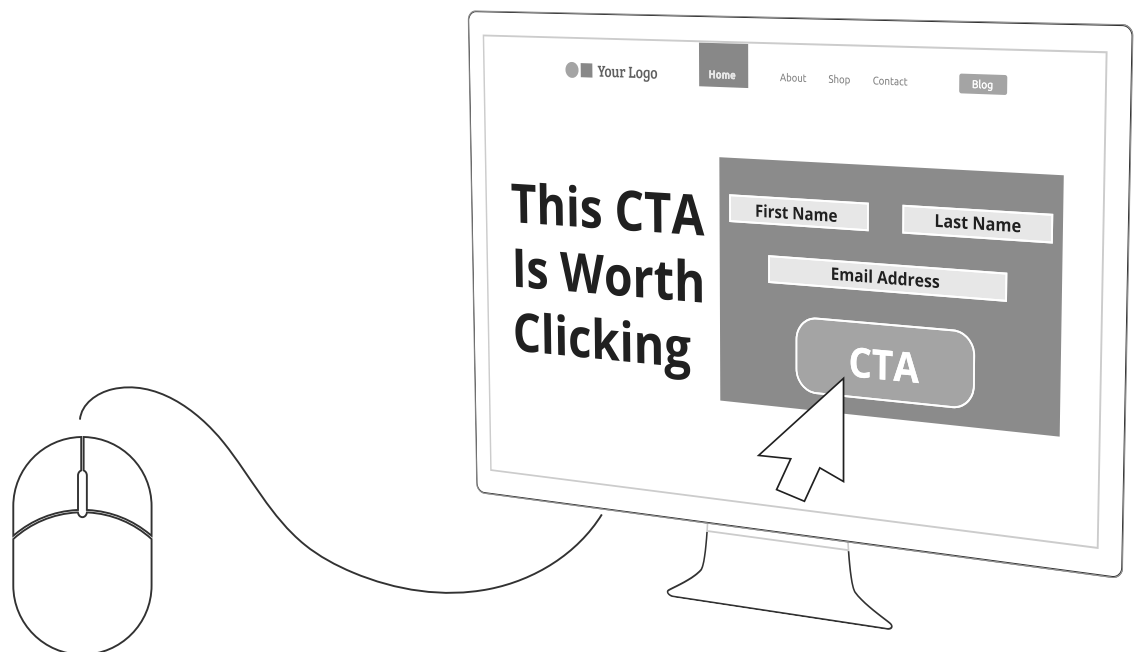
In addition, Pinterest’s designers provide more important information using the power of well-written copy: there are more than 50 billion pins, in case you were interested, and it only takes 15 seconds to sign up. Best of all, it’s free! A CTA should be short, sweet, and to the point. Well-written copy can accomplish this while

also inspiring users to act. Pinterest’s CTA copy is prime example.

Use Effective CTAs to Convert Leads and Produce Results

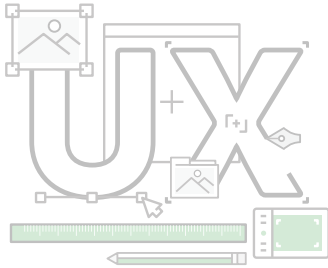
CTAs lie at the top of the conversion funnel that turns your site visitors into business leads. The art of creating effective CTAs is not overly complicated, although there are definitely concrete guidelines.

If your desired outcome is to increase conversions and produce results, then making CTAs eye-catching, clear, and compelling is imperative. We recommend the approach outlined in this post as a great starting point!



Content & Usability

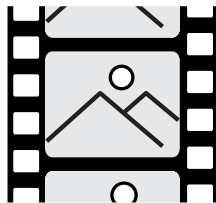
Chapter 3



Powerful Imagery Drives User Experience

Imagery plays a large role in determining the perceived quality and memorability of a website's user experience. When users come to your page, they'll have some kind of reaction. Whether it's positive or negative, in large part, is determined by what users see.

Ethos: Foster Trust and Credibility with High-Quality Imagery



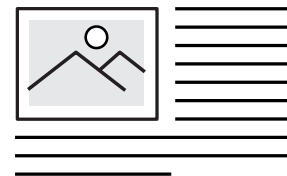
Ethos is used to build trust and credibility. High-level messaging affects how users perceive your brand. Images must be high quality because they are a part of that key messaging framework. They need to shed positive light on your brand and your experience.

Do stock images look like stock images? Are you using cartoony clip art? Are you settling for mediocre graphics? Do your illustrations, diagrams, and infographics look clean and crisp? It's important to know that the images you use can undermine your brand credibility and company trust rather than reinforce them.

In [Vivid Imagery in Modern Web Design](#), Steven Snell writes, "Branding is a priority for most websites, and images are capable of helping to

establish the brand of the company by creating a particular vision of the company/website in the minds of visitors. Many images that are used for the purpose of branding will lead the visitor to quickly see the company in a particular light."

Branding isn't just a name and a logo. It's the collection of imagery connected to your [name, messaging, typography, and patterns](#). As such, your imagery plays a part in building trust and brand credibility. It's vital to make sure that a user's first impression is positive. Include high-quality images to make sure this happens.



Logos: Drive Conversion with Relevant Imagery that Fits Your Message

Logos relates to logic. As designers, it's important to choose pictures that fit the theme, purpose, or campaign of the experiences we create.

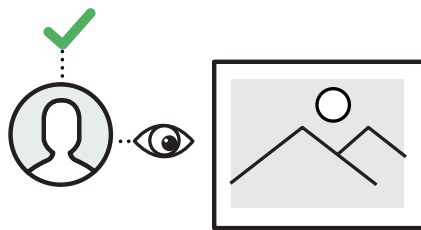
If you have an eCommerce website, it goes without saying that you need hi-fi product shots that fit with the technical description in order to provide clarity that will influence a customer's purchasing decision. But your most important pictures could be the lifestyle or

background shots that draw out an emotional response in conjunction with your brand and your products.

Your conversion metric might be clicks, purchases, or signups. But are the images a logical extension of your brand? Do they fit and are they relevant to the message? The images you choose are an important tool that can lead your users down the path to conversion.

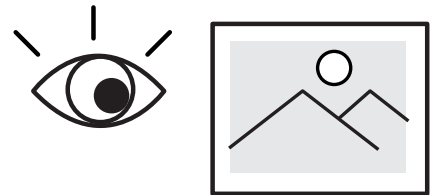
Pathos: Influence Decisions with Persuasive, Meaningful Imagery

Are your images emotionally persuasive? That's what pathos is all about.



Your images should have an emotional impact, create inspiration, and reinforce the feelings you are trying to shape. After all, emotion often overrides logic when it comes to making important decisions.

Emotionally powerful imagery is a factor in ensuring that users continue to delve into your experience. When imagery becomes meaningful, it's the root of action and engagement.



Ethos (credibility) and logos (logic) play important roles in choosing imagery. Pathos is where you go further and tie into strategy. In website UX design, all the combined ingredients of the experience should drive emotion and action. Emotionally powerful imagery is a central part of this equation.



People Scan Information, They Don't Read It

Why – Users Scan Quickly to Find Relevant Information

Users don't read copy on an interface the way they read other material; they scan to quickly find the information that's most pertinent to them. Research shows that "users switch from scanning to actually reading the copy when web content helps [them] focus on sections of interest." A [study](#) by Jacob Nielsen indicated that less than 20% of content is actually read.

Why We Scan

Numerous studies correlate with this finding, but it also makes common sense. Your brain seems to want to efficiently process web pages first via the scan, because they consist of text, color, imagery, and interactivity... before you spend brain energy to actually read.

For example, say you pull up 10 pages from a search result — reading just isn't efficient when we're doing a lot of searching and research for relevant results. Scanning can help find relevant information 10x faster than reading every word... and our brains aren't interested in reading the [nearly 100 pages](#) we visit in a day. It would take a day to do so, but we think you can scan all 100 in 20 minutes.

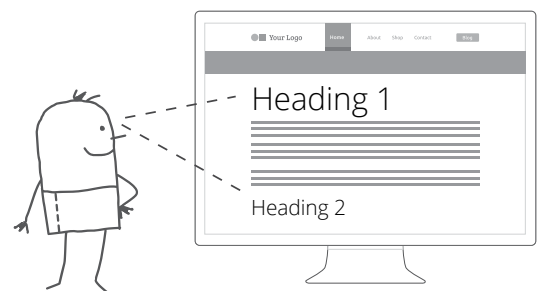
As a result, it's important to make your interface scannable to help users skip to sections or content they want to explore further. For copy, this means taking lengthy text and making it more scannable via bullets, and more organized with more summarized titles (for scanning), or more concise with highlighted keywords or call outs to pull people in.

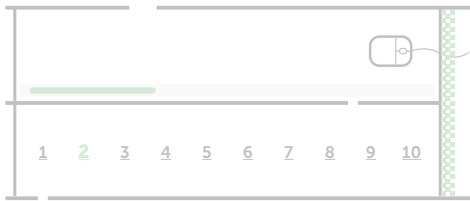
How It Pays Off

To understand this in terms of ROI on effort, another [study](#) on improving the web scannability and readability of text led to a 124% improvement in content capture.

This explains the trend of longer scannable web pages with more scrolling, especially when combined with the understanding that lots of clicks to get information are now "expensive" for usability, another topic we'll explore in a future principle.

Case in point, you probably are not going to read our entire chapter, or even read this entire collection of principles. Thus, it's crucial to allow users to scan and dive in where they want to read more.





Scrolling is Faster than Paging

Today's websites are using much [more vertical real estate](#). Pages are much longer now; whereas, in the past, sites were developed with everything "above the fold." We argue that the [fold should be imagined as a concept, not a line](#).

Scrolling Beats Paging – It's Faster and Easier

In 1997, Jakob Nielsen retracted the then standard guideline of avoiding the creation of webpages that required users to scroll.

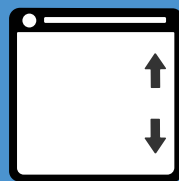
He declared that "scrolling beats paging" because it's faster to scroll down than to click and wait for pages to load. It boils down to the fact that one long page is often better than multiple shorter pages, each of which requires a click – and subsequent wait time – in order to access it.

This coincides with research showing that people scan websites rather than reading them.

We're very fast at scanning pages, but web page refreshes slow us down, taking an average of 6.5 seconds.

Ask yourself – "What would the users of our site rather do? Navigate to 4 different pages in 26 seconds or quickly scan a longer homepage without having to wait for a series of page refreshes?"

6.5 Seconds



**4 screen lengths.
One screen.**

VS.

27 Seconds



**4 pages.
6.5 seconds per click.**

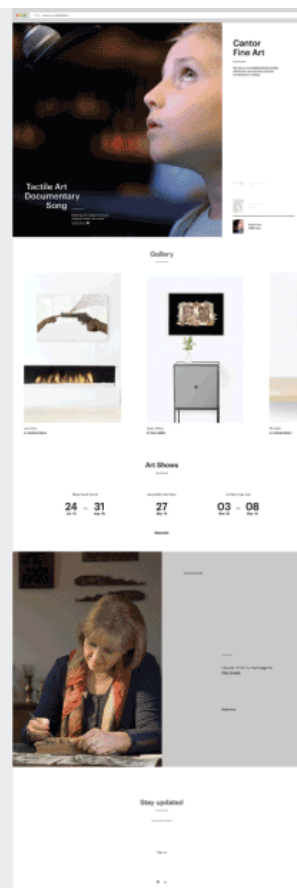
As a Result, Long Web Pages are Now Common

Award-winning websites often take advantage of vertical real estate to tell a story. But it's not just award-winning sites that are doing this.

Here are 3 examples from the [Awwwards](#), a group that recognizes and awards great websites.



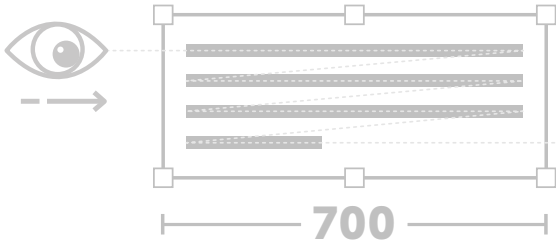
TON Manufacturing
4 pages



Cantor Fine Art
6 pages



Ebullition
8 pages



Textbox Width Should Help Users Read

In web design, one element is often forgotten: the width of your page's text area. Text boxes that are too large – which affects readability – could mean a higher bounce rate or content that gets missed. This has an effect on UX.

On a Large Screen, Text Should Not Fill All Your Horizontal Real Estate

Fluid and responsive design factor into the layout of text areas. This is especially true when it comes to [responsive design and how it impacts the vertical and horizontal real estate on your page](#). Text box width (controlled by an invisible or contained box limiting width) directly impacts the readability and usability of an experience.

Experiences are being consumed on a variety of screen sizes and devices. As we get deeper into responsive design, we should design text boxes with the varying screen sizes of monitors and devices in mind. Text that spans across a large desktop monitor lacks readability.

700 Pixels Wide is a Good Benchmark for Text Boxes

We often mistakenly expand text boxes to very large sizes. A text box as wide as a 30-inch screen is less efficient for reading and site design

than one that is 700 pixels (2.33 inches) in width. No matter how wide you stretch your browser, the text box should max out somewhere near 700 pixels.

Medium – [an online publishing platform with over 30 million site visitors per month – has blog posts with a width of 700 pixels maximum](#). If you shrink your browser, the text box width is 350

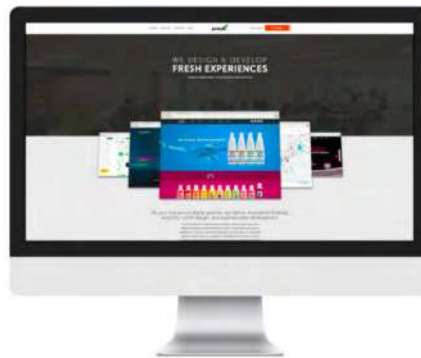
pixels minimum.

Typically, blog text rarely spans past 700 pixels in length because of how users were trained to read books with shorter line lengths.

In the End, Analyze for What's Most Readable

Here's a rule of thumb from a [thread on typography on StackExchange](#):

"If you find yourself having to move your neck/head to read the text in a single column, then it's probably too wide. Ideally, the reader should be able to scan each line just by moving their eyes. Of course, different media/devices are read at different distances, and different people may prefer different reading distances as well, so it's not a precise science."





Addition by Subtraction

Why – Come to the Table with Creative Solutions that Are Simple and Elegant

Simplicity can actually be incredibly sophisticated (technically or functionally complex), but in [the digital space, making our designs simple, usable, and clear is an art](#). It takes time to make value-add experiences simple – or simpler.

As we focus on the art of simplicity, it's important to:

1. Understand your users, their [mental model](#), and their specific use cases.
2. Understand the [technical constraints](#)
3. Understand what features and functionality truly matter.

Adding value by subtracting complexity comes down to understanding who your users are and what they need. Albert Einstein said it best:

If you can't [design] it simply, you don't understand it well enough.

What Do We Really Mean by “Addition by Subtraction?”

To understand what term means, consider the following examples:

Credit card type – Instead of requiring users to manually select Visa, Mastercard, or American Express, an ordering system automatically predicts the card type by reading the numbers entered by the user. By adding this recognition, we've removed a step in credit card forms.

Button morph – Morphing a button into a loading state, showing that the request is processing, further masking page latency.

Amazon Echo – Alexa, the AI that powers Amazon's voice-enabled wireless speaker, does a million operations by responding to the user's voice. By adding elements to a speaker, Amazon has removed nearly all buttons.

Server Based Geolocation – A browser reads your location via server IP address and conveys local information automatically. By adding this geo detection, we've removed a step to ask for location and given better information automatically.

CSV import – Importing a CSV (comma separated value) of customer data to a system versus uploading the information manually. This requires more development and is an additional button but saves a ton of manual entry for a 100-person user base.

Consider one of today's biggest companies that focuses on the art of technical design – Apple.

Apple has a history of “addition by subtraction,” adding something more sophisticated to remove other things, making something simpler in the process.

They often create a new standard in the market or create a new paradigm of usability while doing so:

- Removing the floppy disk by adding a CD drive
- iPod – Adding a new simple scroll wheel to handle all operations to remove other buttons that aren't necessary
- iPhone – Adding a new highly intuitive touch screen
- iPad – Adding an easy-to-use keyboard on the interface so a laptop keyboard isn't necessary
- MacBook – Adding a new aluminum molding process that created a sophisticated aluminum enclosure that removed dozens of parts, making the laptops more durable
- MacBook Pro – Taking out the CD drive, which saves space and eliminates another breakable feature
- iPhone 7 – Most recently, removing the headphone jack on iPhone 7 to [make room for the addition of more useful features](#).

OK – But How Do You Do It?

So how do you make something better by taking things away? Seems easy, but it's actually not. It often takes more technical sophistication and more usability sophistication to remove features or reduce cognitive load for users.

Examples of How to Add More Technical Sophistication to Reduce Inputs

1. Using APIs to fetch data and reduce input: Knowing your location or pre-fill details about your home based on address.

2. Using logic, computation, and processing power: Provide recommendations that don't require input with IBM Watson, a “technology platform that uses natural language processing and machine learning to reveal insights from large amounts of unstructured data.”

3. Adding technical capability, subtracting usability roadblocks: Adding in gyrometers and accelerometers to phones to increase the usability of applications. Adding cloud technology to maintain high performance when demand spikes.

Examples of How to Add More UI Sophistication

1. Showing only the most important items to help users focus



In an application, key CTAs (calls to action) can route a user to their specific goal without needing to see every bit of information contained on the site. Prioritizing the most common actions and user stories comes from researching what matters most, allowing for fewer buttons and more focus.

2. Layering complexity



Consider examples such as breaking down a complex form into bite sized steps, or how iPhones have a simple “Share” button that triggers 10 other options – although complex, these examples give features to users only as needed.

3. Focusing on what drives value; removing what doesn't

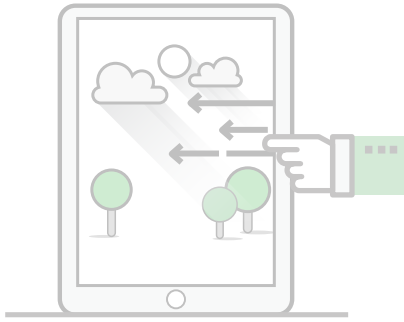


One way to determine what is most important is to ask your customers, during user testing to “buy features” you’re thinking of including with a limited amount of fake money. If you gave users \$100 dollars and told them to buy the most important features, what would they spend their money on?

4. Trimming unnecessary features and functionality



Great experiences are mindful of the details, and simplifying an experience requires scrutiny of every detail. Instagram stays close to its core feature set by focusing on what makes the experience special, refraining from adding unnecessary features.



Animate for Usability, Not Just Flair

Why – Motion and Animation Can Add to Your Usability

“Flair” (stylishness and originality) is exciting. But it doesn’t always make for good usability. As Steve Jobs put it, “It’s not just about what [a design] looks and feels like. Design is how it works.”

If you’re looking to add both usability and flair, animate your experience with motion to make a seamless experience for your users.

As we’ve written in a separate white paper, we expect that [motion will play a role in the future of digital experiences](#). Traditionally, motion and animation were a “nice to have” add on. Flash was decorative. But it didn’t add much in the way of usability.

As technology increases in complexity and innovation, focusing on usability becomes even more important. Motion and animation can add to your usability, but we recommend using it strategically.

Are Motion and Video the Same?

Motion, like video, makes an interface more alive. But there’s a tendency to lump motion and video into the same category. This diminishes motion’s unique and valuable role.

The key differences are:

Video is fixed	Motion is dynamic
Video stays in one place.	Motion can span the entire page, capitalizing on horizontal and vertical real estate.
Video is in a box.	Motion is scalable. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• It could be as small as a hover interaction.• It could be as large as a massive page morph that takes you to a new screen state.
Video asks for less interaction from the user.	Motion is inherently engaging and interactive.
Video is almost always linear, having a clear start and finish.	Motion is fluid and non-linear.

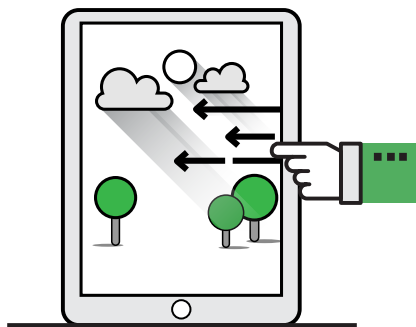
How Does Motion Impact Usability?

Motion's dynamic nature is engaging. It's not just decorative. Rather than looking at it with a passive glance, it will immerse your users in the experience. This leads to fluidity, continuity, and comprehension.

Motion is a design tool. It's not just about the look and feel. Motion can actually make the experience of using your website better and more intuitive.

How Does Motion Impact Usability?

Motion looks good. It feels good. But what does it actually do? Why should you incorporate into the digital experiences you create?



Motion eases navigation. It allows users to navigate an application without friction.

[Animated grid layouts](#) are one example. When the user hovers over a tile, they are given visual feedback. A subtle hint of motion creates communication between the design and the user. This impacts cognitive usability.

A [morphing search](#) is another example. When the user clicks the search field, they're provided with helpful filters to customize their search. If the user still wants to type in a query, that traditional method is still available.

Motion highlights key interactions.

[Microinteractions](#) are a key example. They're another means of providing two-way communication and feedback to the user.

Microinteractions often happens in the blink of an eye. A heart changes color in Twitter to let the user know it was clicked. A modal pops up to give a Facebook user the option to "like" a post. These split-second moments let the user know they are interacting with the interface.

Contextual Transitions Help Users Transition with Clarity

[Smashing Magazine has an informative article](#) illustrating a variety of examples of contextual transitions. Essentially, you want to avoid your users "losing context." Scrolling, toggling, and collapsing can work, so long as the user doesn't lose awareness of context. If they do, it can "break" the experience – a major detriment to usability.

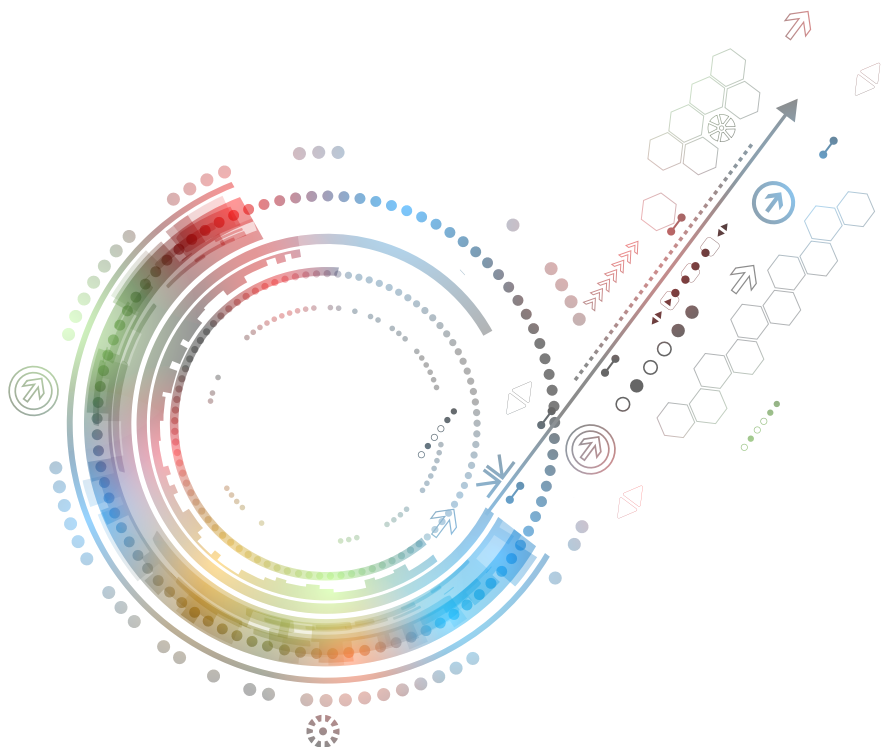
That's where contextual transitions come in. With a bit of animation, the user can maintain their cognitive continuity. They remain immersed in the experience.

Design is “How It Works”

Look and feel are important – after all, [powerful imagery drives the user experience](#) and [color matters](#). In his article [In Defense of Eye Candy](#), Stephen Anderson references a study illustrating the importance of aesthetics:

“Researchers in Japan set up two ATMs, ‘identical in function, the number of buttons, and how they worked.’ The only difference was that one machine’s buttons and screens were arranged more attractively than the other. In both Japan and Israel (where this study was repeated) researchers observed that subjects encountered fewer difficulties with the more attractive machine. The attractive machine actually worked better.”

If you expand your understanding of motion to encompass both form and function, you will have a competitive advantage.





Progressive Disclosure

Da Vinci said, “Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication,” and today, successful digital applications are no exception. In UX design, presenting features, navigation, and information in layers progressively allows designers to keep it simple.

Great user experiences encourage discovery while hiding the complexity that can otherwise overwhelm a user. After all, not every use case requires offering users access to everything at once.

However, there’s often a tendency to present all information and functionality to users at the same time. It’s easy to do when you design experiences in a static form.

The idea of progressive disclosure is providing only what is required for a given task. That’s why designing interactions – which have layers built into them – matters so much.

Mega Menus: Reveal More Navigation When Needed

One of the more complex structures on websites is the navigation structure. So, how do you go about simplifying it for the majority of users while exposing deeper layers as needed?

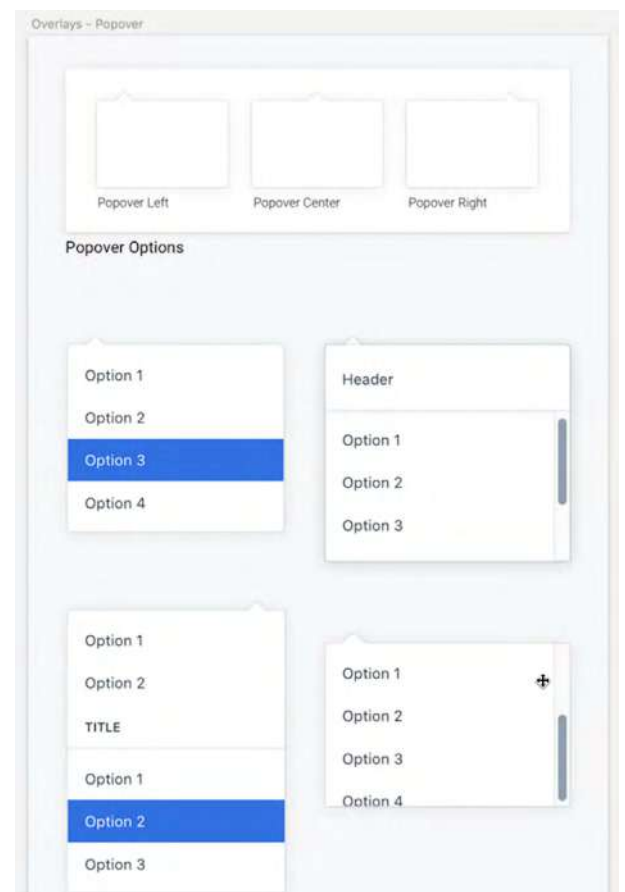
Mega menus – large menus that allow designers to hide navigation, related information, and functionality until users need it – are the design element to do just that.

Mega menus surface navigation options according to importance or hierarchy. This is an alternative to providing a large list of links that users have to scroll through.

Overlays/Popovers: Present More Features When Needed

[Bootstrap defines popovers](#) as “overlay content [added] to any element for housing secondary information.”

Popovers are used to reveal more information to users as needed, hiding it from view otherwise.

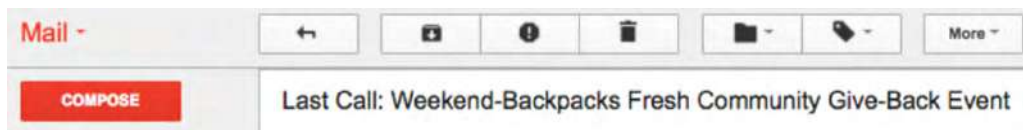


Consider the basic functionality of Gmail in how it uses progressive disclosure in the few examples below...

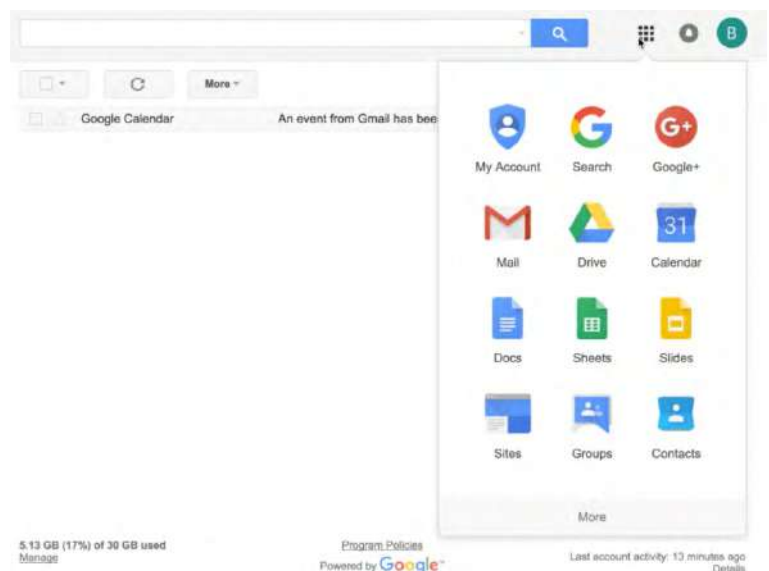
1. When you look at your Gmail inbox, it presents you with some basic buttons and has one "More" button to hide additional functionality that isn't needed as often.

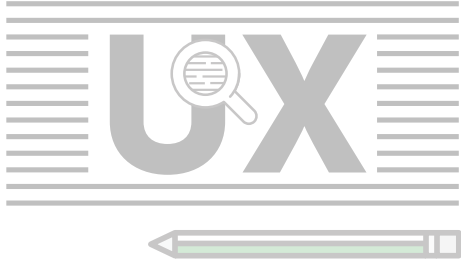


2. When you open an email, you get access to buttons and functionality that are used fairly often, and there's still a button to hide functionality that isn't needed as often.



3. Then there's the grid icon on the right. It opens up an overlay/popover (that is otherwise hidden from view) with more features included in the Gmail suite. By scrolling down, additional features are progressively disclosed.





Writing is a Key Ingredient in UX

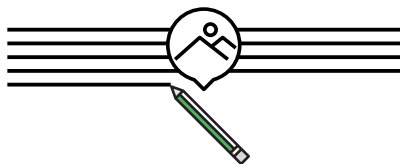
Written content isn't just a semblance of words tacked onto a web page. Content is a key component that shapes UX. The UX design process takes place in a variety of stages. It follows a trajectory of ideation and iteration that leads to a high-quality end product. Writing is a central part of that process.

Good writing can take your website beyond being just another pretty page. It's a key component in creating a holistic easy-to-use user experience. Make sure that it falls in line with the rest of the user experience by taking it as seriously as the rest of your design.

Storytelling in Design Often Stems from Great Writing

Great writing reinforces the story you are telling and the experience you are creating.

Business Insider's Ariel Schwartz writes about how Airbnb builds trust through words. Trust is an important concept to Airbnb. After all, the viability of their business model rests upon strangers trusting one another enough to share a living space.



[Schwartz interviewed Alex Schleifer, Airbnb's head of design](#). He writes "Phrasing is a big part of how Airbnb gets customers to trust its interface. 'The voice and tone is relatively curious, and it asks questions that feel a little more human than filling in a field. This generates empathy and trust between parties.'"

Designers establish voice and tone through a combination of means. Writing is one of a designer's most valuable tools. The words included in a form influence a user's emotional response to filling it out. The written instructions in an onboarding process establish the credibility of your brand. Within seconds, users decide whether you are trustworthy and whether they want to enlist your services.

Design is Impacted by Writing

Interactions in UX design should be simple, clear, and accessible. Users want speed, functionality, and intuitive usability. The nature of their attention spans demands it.

This same principle holds true for writing. Modern attention spans are short. Your content must have quick delivery, while maintaining functionality and usability. Strive to achieve this with the copy you write. Users should have easy access to key points and important messages through clear writing.

Write with Personas and User Stories in Mind to Better Connect with Your Audience

A design should account for personas and user stories. Writing should do the same.

Who is your user? What is his or her goal in visiting your website? What would they expect to get out of reading your written content?

Personas act as the central protagonists in user stories. Make sure to keep the focus on the people who matter most in the UX equation: the users. Remember, you are not writing for yourself. The content you write needs to make sense to the people who are reading it.

Writing is Key to Usability. It Needs Testing Too.

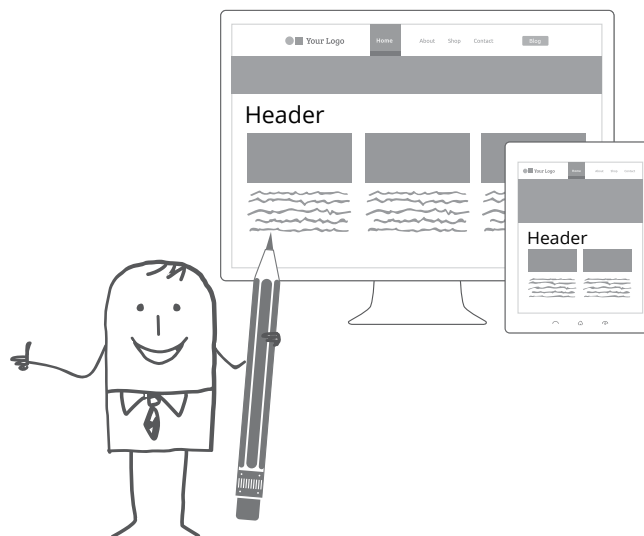
Not sure if your writing will make sense or allow the end user to accomplish their goal? Usability

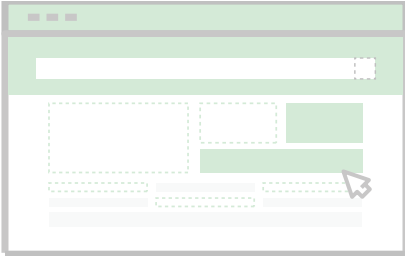
testing can be the tool that allows you to find out. The way someone moves a mouse or traces their finger across the screen is indicative of usability. You can test the cognitive usability of your writing as well by analyzing how easy it is to read.

There's a maxim in writing that it's helpful to have "a fresh pair of eyes" to look over your content. Written words will, as a general rule, make sense to the person who wrote them. But we have to think about what will make sense to the end user.

Don't have enough time or manpower to engage in multiple rounds of proofreading? Try using a tool like [Sharethrough](#) to analyze how engaging your headlines are. Use the [Hemingway Editor](#) to make sure your writing is bold and clear.

Even if you conduct just a little usability testing, you're doing yourself and your website a huge favor. It's one of the many tools you can use to make sure the writing on your website is high-end.





Chunk Information to Make It Digestible

Why – Chunking Leads to More Focus, Faster Progression, and More Comprehension End-to-End.

Whether you have a website, presentation, mobile app, web application, or another user interface, the principle of chunking information is relevant. [The Nielsen-Norman group supports this when they write](#) that “Chunking is a concept that originates from the field of cognitive psychology. UX professionals can break their text and multimedia content into smaller chunks to help users process, understand, and remember it better.”

Today, many web pages are longer due to the fact that designers followed the principle of chunking – creating sections of digestible information, rather than overwhelming the user’s brain with everything at once.

Examples of Chunking

Talking about the technique articulates some of its value. Seeing it in action drives the point home.

Take this website we created for the [Market Leader Journey](#). In the example at right, we chunked information into a single page, pulling data from 100+ pages of research into an easy to understand, one page resource. The same principle applies to web apps.



Type Form – their entire UI and product was built on this principle. The product? Fast, simple surveys requiring the user to answer one question at a time.

SlideShare – SlideShare makes it easy for the user to get through a 100+ page deck. Instead of reading dozens of bullet points on a single page, the user can spend 2-3 minutes scanning a presentation that is chunked into easily comprehensible slides.

It Seems Counterintuitive to Break Up Information...

Doesn't breaking things up create more length? Isn't more length a bad idea?

If you break up some information on PowerPoint slides, you might have a lot more slides. If you break up a page of text in clean chunks with visuals, it could be three times as long.

But Chunking Leads to More Focus and Faster Progression

We argue that one of the benefits of chunking is that it can be faster to comprehend things in digestible chunks, as opposed to stuffing the user with everything at once.

Think of it like eating a meal in bites versus trying to fit it all in your mouth or force it down your throat. Which would you ask your users to do?

Which Leads to More Comprehension, End-to-End

One of the things we've learned is that as long as a web page's navigation, layout, or content is easy to digest and comprehend, then it's faster to build out your ideas.

That's where chunking comes in. Starting with something small and accessible allows users to progress to other important information or parts of the site with ease.

Chunking Provides More Focus

A smaller number of items, concepts, and messages to absorb means more focus for users, and more absorption and comprehension. Focus is something hard to capture these days – [research shows that human attention spans have dropped to 8 seconds](#), shorter than those of goldfish.

The good news is that breaking up information allows the brain to focus. Combine that with [white space to help the brain breathe](#) and [succinct copy that captures your users' attention](#), and it creates a nice combination for focus.



Use Succinct Copy to Focus Attention

Well-designed copy is incredibly valuable in the digital space. It sells. It conveys complex ideas. And, it can make or break the user experience.

What's more, human beings are developing increasingly short attention spans. Research indicates that they have [dropped to 8 seconds](#) – shorter than that of goldfish, creatures which are “notoriously ill-focused.”

Users visit multiple websites per day. Their attention is split between a variety of screens on a multitude of devices. The question is, how do you sell, educate, inform, and persuade effectively with copy?

Without intentionally designing your copy – like the rest of your experience – you risk users losing attention and bouncing from your site.

Highlight Your Main Message Up Front

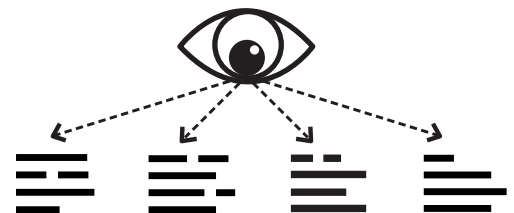
Put your main message front and center. If you bury it in the supporting details, you run the risk of obscuring it and confusing your users. Using copy to articulate your purpose lets users know why visiting your website is of value to them.



The Minto Pyramid Principle, which applies naturally to writing for the web, suggests that your thinking will be easier to grasp if you start out with the answer first.

“As visitors arrive at a website, they should be able to quickly and accurately understand why the website exists and what is offered, and from this they should be able to determine if it is something that interests them.” – Steven Snell

As We've State Previously, Chunk Information, Making it Easier to Absorb



One strategy for designing the layout of your copy is “chunking.” We recommend it.

Kate Meyer writes, “In the field of user-experience design, ‘chunking’ usually refers to breaking up content into small, distinct units of information (or ‘chunks’), as opposed to presenting an undifferentiated mess of atomic information items.”

Chunked information is easier to take in. Too much information can overwhelm a user's ability to engage in a meaningful way.

Chunking information [makes it easier for users to scan](#). Longer pages that are divided into related pieces have a better chance of catching those short, 8-second attention spans of your users.

Write Simple and Succinct Copy to Focus Attention

How can you say things with fewer words? It's important to consider because concise copy frees a user's memory and focuses their attention on the central message you are conveying.

[Jakob Nielsen advocates for brevity](#): "Be brief. If you say less, people are more likely to make the effort to understand what you do say."

Copy can make or break the user experience. If our objective is to make an experience both usable and delightful, what better way than to write in language that users can easily access?

Use Visual to Support Fewer Words

Consider the following example of questionable design:



Is a multi-paragraph explanation needed about why the setup could yield a negative user experience?

Sometimes you don't need any copy. If you can make a point with a simple image or diagram – which is inherently attention grabbing – consider doing so. The goldfish of the world will appreciate you.

Additional Resources

Designing dynamic digital experiences is a complex process, but following tested principles and best practices can make it more simple. Following these principles doesn't mean sacrificing innovation. True innovation is a combination of something that is simultaneously fresh – new, original, and improved – and valuable, while paying close attention to what works best for your users.

Each website or product, like the company that creates it, is unique. We recommend applying these principles in so far as they are relevant to your project. In working with clients over the last 10+ years, we've found that the principles outlined in this paper are useful guides in the website design and development process.

Interested in reading more about websites and UX? Check out the following resources:

[A Holistic Approach to Websites](#)

[Your Guide to Website Accessibility](#)

[The 7 Ingredients of a High-End Experience](#)

And drop us a line – we'd love to collaborate.

Have a project?

LET'S BUILD