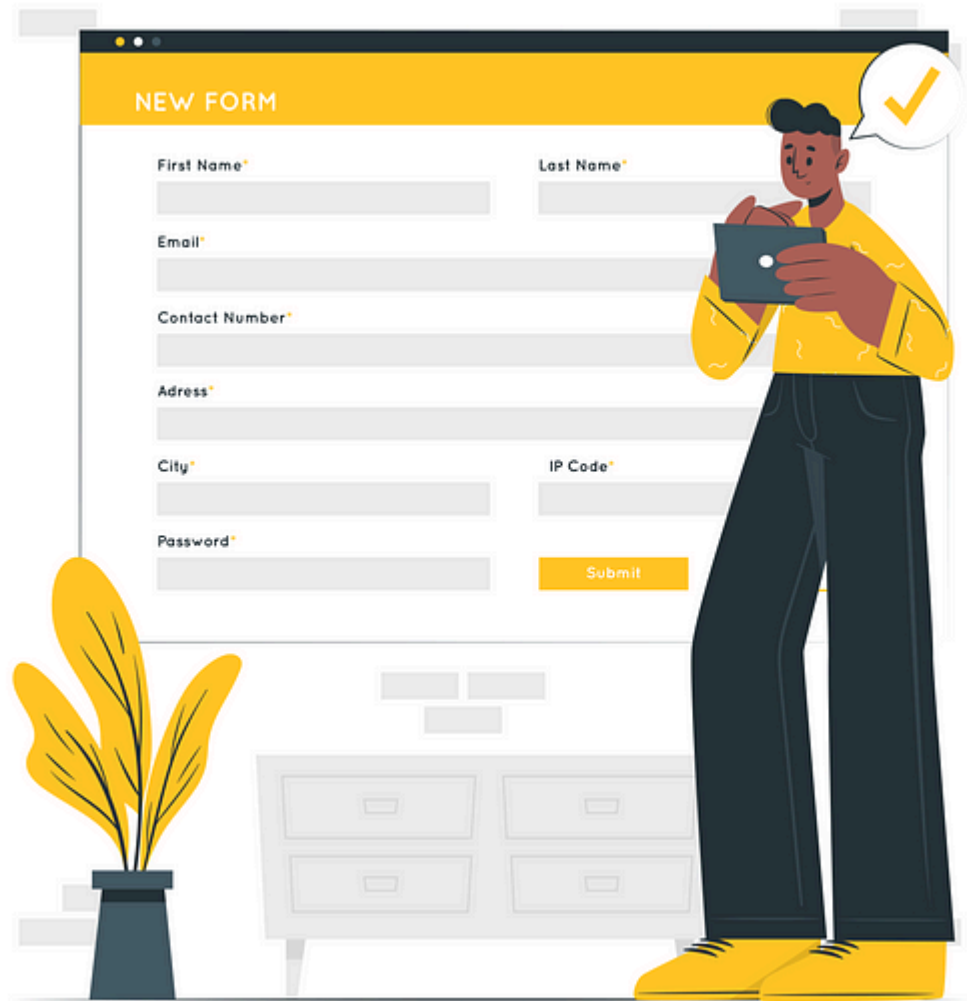


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The UX of Forms: Designing Forms with Better Words

Poorly designed forms ruin a user's experience and can ultimately affect business goals. Thus, how can we design forms that have great UX?



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A guide to designing forms that do not frustrate your users

bad forms too. We have so many poorly designed forms going around that most of us have experienced them at some point in our lives.

What are poorly designed forms and how can we kick them off the face of the earth? I'm glad you asked. If you are a UX designer, this one is for you.

Poorly Designed Forms

You know those forms that ask you to pick your job title from a drop-down, but your title isn't in the list provided? Or the one that asks for the name of the company you work for, make the question compulsory, but you are unemployed? How about the one that asks for your date of birth, mother's maiden name, and phone number just to subscribe to a newsletter?

These are all examples of poorly designed forms as they do not empathize with the user. If the form should only be filled by the employed, was it clearly stated? If you truly need my date of birth before I can subscribe to a newsletter, have you told me why?

Forms collect information from at least one party and deliver it to at least one other party. The first 'one party' I mentioned is a user. A human being. A real person with real feelings. When your form does not consider the feelings of this person as they provide you with their information, we can refer to your form as being poorly designed.

I'm not referring to how beautiful your form looks or doesn't. You can design a very immaculate form that offers a very terrible experience to your user, and they'd walk away from your form feeling frustrated, tired, angry, or without completing the form.

My focus here is on improving the overall experience of your user as they fill out your form, so they leave feeling satisfied and dare I say, happy.

Form Dimensions

According to Jessica Enders, there are three key dimensions to a form

- Words (what you say in the form and how you say it)
- Layout (how things are presented visually)
- Flows(how the user moves through the form)

Getting each of these dimensions right improves the experience of your form and resultantly reduces abandonment rate, user frustration, and other pain points. I'd go into each dimension in detail but will only be addressing words in this article.

Let's jump right in.

Words in Forms

Words make up forms. They are the most important element in a form and thus the most likely to cause frustration to your user. The first step to improving your user's experience is by paying attention to the words you use.

There are different categories of words used in a form. They include; Headings, Questions, Assistive Text, Button Labels, Messages, etc.

QUESTIONS

We'd begin with questions as they are the first things that can make or break your form. Here are tips to guide you:

1. Ask questions that are easy to understand.

If a user does not correctly understand the question asked, it can affect their overall experience and can result in them providing wrong information. The questions you ask should be simple and straightforward.

Google, I work in Nigeria, and I work from home. Which type of answer were you going for? The user may never know and may spend extra time figuring out what you want. In this situation, you could be more precise with your question e.g 'What country or state do you work in?'

Avoid long-winded questions. These types of questions confuse and overwhelm the user. You should keep the question short and only explore one concept per time.

⊗ Don't

2. Have you applied for a visa to another African country or any other country and had to submit your letter of employment? What was that experience like?

✔ Do

2. Have you submitted your employment letter during any visa application?

☐ Yes

☐ No

3. If yes, how would you describe that experience?

Do not ask long-winded questions

Brief prompts are usually better than full-sentence questions as they are quicker to read and comprehend. You can simply write 'name, email, phone number' instead of asking full questions like 'what is your name' 'what is your email' etc. However, full-sentence questions come in handy for information that isn't commonly asked or that will not be understood if only a prompt was given.

❌ Don't	✔️ Do
8. Books <input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	8. Do you enjoy reading books? <input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No

Use full-sentence questions where necessary

Use words that are familiar to the user. One time someone sent a survey to me to fill and I couldn't understand most of the financial jargon used in it. I told the person this and asked if the questions could be simplified. This person said those were their preferred words and they will not be changing them. I told them, "oh that's fine, it means I'm not your target audience for this survey." I wonder how many others simply abandoned it without giving feedback.

You must always consider your target audience as you design your form. Use words that are familiar to them so they do not have to struggle to understand.

2. Ask questions that the user can provide answers to.

There are certain questions that are almost impossible to answer. For example, What did you have for dinner every Wednesday in the last month? I don't think I can remember what I had for dinner last Wednesday, so imagine having to rack my brain to provide an answer to this question. Only ask questions that are easily answered.

⊗ Don't

3. Hairstyle you wore on your first day of school

4. Shoe you wore on your first day of school

Do not ask questions that are difficult to answer

There are also answers that may not be immediately available to a user that may need to be obtained from a secondary source, like an ID card or a receipt. You should let the user know at the start, that they will be needing this information. You can also include why you need this information so users are more willing to go search the bottom of their purse for an ID Card. Where necessary, let the user know where to find the information you're asking for.

✓ **Do**

BVN

[Tap to get your BVN](#)

! **BVN Privacy**

We need your BVN to set up and keep your account unique. Providing your BVN does not give us access to your bank account.

Let your users know why you need a piece of information and where they can get it

In addition, it isn't a great idea to ask the user questions that do not concern them or that they had previously stated they had no business with. Recently I was answering a survey and was asked if I prefer to get an affidavit online or in court. I said online. A few questions later, I was asked "why do you prefer to go to court?" I was lost. I did not know how to proceed because I had just said I do not prefer going to court.

⚠ **Don't**

7. Have you read a book recently?

8. What is the title of the book you read recently?

✓ **Do**

7. Have you read a book recently?

8. If you have, what is the title of the book?

Kindly skip this question if you haven't

Consider all users and use assistive text

the user who said they had not read any book recently? To solve this, you should reword your follow-up questions to show you have all users in mind and possibly include question-help text.

3. Your questions should match the context of your form.

I remember filling out a survey that asked if I take illegal drugs and the form asked for my full name and email address. Unless I'm looking to get busted, why would I want to give you my name and email address just before admitting to a crime?

Consider the context of your form while asking questions. You do not want to ask questions that will cause the user to abandon your form as I have done for many newsletters. Usually, all that should be needed when subscribing to a newsletter is the user's first name and email address. You should think long and hard before asking for any other information.

ⓧ
Don't

Subscribe to my Newsletter!

First Name

Last Name

Age

Email Address

Phone Number

Current employer

Avoid asking questions that are not needed in a context

If you must ask for extra information, explain to the user why you need that information. If you're asking for my phone number while I subscribe to your newsletter, I want to know what it is for. Are you trying to call me to remind me to read the newsletter that just dropped? (You better not be!)

An alternative is to make this other information you are asking for, optional. Do not make the questions required so users can decide whether or not to share.

4. Make answering your questions easy

The first thing to consider is if the answers should be open or closed. That is, should the user type in their response or select from the options you have provided. Too many times I've filled forms that ask for information like my gender and make me type out the answer. Worse is when a question that requires a yes or no answer makes me type out the words.

The image shows two side-by-side form examples. The left example, titled 'Don't' with a red header and a warning icon, shows two open-ended questions: '2. Gender' and '3. Is this your first rodeo?'. Each question is followed by a large, empty rectangular text input field. The right example, titled 'Do' with a green header and a checkmark icon, shows the same '2. Gender' question followed by five radio button options: 'Male', 'Female', 'Non-binary', 'Prefer not to say', and 'Other (kindly specify below)'. Below the 'Other' option is a horizontal line for additional text.

Do not make your user type answers when selecting answers would be more convenient

Use closed answers as often as you can. They reduce the workload for the user and minimize errors. They are also great at helping the user interpret questions.

However, not all answers should be made closed as it does not apply to all situations. Questions like names, addresses, and phone numbers must be typed out.

In asking questions that require closed answers, be sure to include every possible answer the user may need. Do not ask what industry a user works in without including every possible industry. If this cannot be achieved, make the question open and allow the user to type in their industry.

HEADINGS

ASSISTIVE TEXT

This makes it easier for users to answer the questions you ask. Include assistive text to provide better clarity on a question or to explain why the information you are requesting is relevant.

MESSAGES

You will have a need for error messages on your form. Make sure that your tone is polite and non-accusatory. Your error message should convey that an error has occurred, state what/where the error is, and inform the user how to move past the error.

BUTTON LABEL

The labels on your buttons should be brief and explanatory. They should tell the user what action will be carried out once clicked. If the user is moving on to another page of the form, the button label should not read 'done' but 'next' or 'continue' so the user knows there's more.

Conclusion

It is important to keep your user happy at each point, so make sure you consider them and their feelings while designing your form and not just you or your business needs/goals. If you'd like to study this further, a great place to begin is in the book, [Designing UX: Forms by Jessica Enders](#).

[#form-design](#)[#ux](#)[#ui](#)[#product-design](#)[#usability](#)