

Usability "Tactics"

Concrete recommendations to catch common usability problems before user testing

CLARITY IS THE JOB #1

Provide clear layout and experience

- **Use the Principle of Least Astonishment.** The best user interface is the one that minimizes any surprises to the user. In other words, make it do what the user expects it to do.
- **Show one primary action per screen,** and keep secondary actions secondary by making them lighter weight visually. One hundred clear screens is preferable to a single cluttered one.
- **Avoid the tendency to over-explain,** or show all at once. Show only what is necessary on each screen. If people are making a choice, show enough information to allow them the choice, then dive into details on a subsequent screen.
- **Make good use of whitespace.** It helps to make things much more clear than just having everything crammed in competing for attention.
- **Make actions visible.** When a user is in a certain flow, make sure the primary call to action is a visible button. Any optional secondary actions should be presented like a link.
- **Keep users in control** by regularly surfacing system state, by describing causation, and by giving insight into what to expect at every turn. Don't worry about stating the obvious, the obvious almost never is.
- **Reduce workload with a smart organisation.** Group together like elements, show natural relationships by placement and orientation.

SHOW THE ERROR

Display obvious error messages and alerts

- Give an error message that's **noticeable at a glance**.
- **Don't force people to scroll** down and back up: state the error at the top of the page and also at the specific problem area.
- Use colour icons, and text to clearly **highlight and explain** the problem area.
- **Be consistent:** always identify errors the same way.
- Make sure people don't have to backtrack to correct errors.

LEGIBILITY MATTERS

Provide clear instruction

- **Don't speak tongues:** avoid confusing terms, technical information, and unfamiliar language.
- **Keep text brief and simple** to ensure the message is received:
 - Lead with a clear headline and the most important informations.
 - Offer bullet points rather than blocks of text.
 - Use bold text and colour variation to highlight crucial information.
 - Edit copy so that it's brief yet meaningful.
- **Use visual cues:** whenever possible, meaningful visual cues (when appropriate to the audience) should be chosen instead of lengthy textual descriptions.

CONSISTENCY MATTERS

Provide standard conventions

- **Use Standard Controls:** Don't create new controls unless there is a clear reason to do so. Users are used to the standard controls and know how to use them.
- **Be Consistent:** There should be a convention accross all pages / dialogs / screens that maintains the users expectations when using a control or performing an action.
- **Use affordances** to make controls understandable. Avoid confusion between emblems, banners, and buttons.

BULLETPROOF FORMS

Create friendly forms that are easy to complete

- Highlight required fields so that people know which one are optional.
- Users don't want to guess at acceptable entry type, so make sure you accept entries in all commonly used formats.
- Provide examples, pull-downs, and formatting hints to prevent data entry miscues.
- Explicitly state limits to characters, number of entries, etc.
- If people can't choose it, don't show it.
- Validate entries as soon as possible.
- Disable the 'Submit' button after it's clicked.
- Let people save lengthy forms so that they can complete them later.

ACCESSIBILITY MATTERS

Help people overcome missing URLs, old browsers, server issues, etc.

- **Offer customized 'Page not found'** or 404 error page that explains the situation and helps users get to the right information. You can design it with humour, too.
- **Overcome URL confusion** by accepting common misspelling, typos, incorrect case sensitivity, abbreviations, or other predictable domain name errors.
- **Use ALT tags** to describe your images, and their function.
- Offer alternative pages or upgrade for old browsers.

HELP PEOPLE INLINE

Make your interface learnable and usable

- Answer questions on the same page they arise. **Provide inline and contextual help**, available only when it's needed, hidden from view at all other times.
- **Offer a help section** and provide clear links to it.
- **Let users help themselves** through online forums and training sessions or demos.

- **Accompany every changes** by providing tutorials (tooltips, video).
- **Provide a human fallback plan** (mail, phone, etc.). And when people write you, get an answer back to them preferably within 24 hours. Also send an auto-response immediately.
- Help out forgetful users by offering a hint or email service to remind them of login information.

NAVIGATION MATTERS

Remove anything that isn't essential and provide a streamlined recovery route

- **Don't disable the browser back button.** It's a simple yet powerful escape and navigation tool for users.
- **Get to the point.** Display a navigation bar with clear labels and essential options. Avoid multiple navigation levels or huge dropdowns.
- **Eliminate unnecessary navigation** during multi-step processes such as checkout or registration.

SEARCH AND RESCUE

Deliver the right results with smart search engine assistance

- **Offer a clear explanation** when no results are found or inexact matches are shown.
 - **Anticipate common errors** and provide relevant results.
 - **Long list of results?** Offer features that let searchers refine and filter results.
 - **No result?** Return a screen that explains the lack of results, and offers a search feature that lets people easily modify the failed query.
 - **Complex search is intimidating.** That's probably why the vast majority of people never use it. If an advanced search is truly helpful, provide it as a supplement option, and use a simple search as the default option.
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References

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