

micro copy

Discover How Tiny Bits of Text
Make Tasty Apps and Websites

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

I like burritos. They're filling, delicious, and with the right ingredients, nutritious. But here in Manila, where I live, they're not exactly cheap. Since I spend way too much money to satisfy my craving, I recently learned how to make them myself. To my surprise, my first attempt turned out to be delicious. I made a batch of twelve, which we quickly consumed in one day.

A few days after that indulgence, I made another batch using the leftover ingredients. Sadly, it wasn't as good as before. There was something missing that made it taste different. It turned out that some ingredients that I thought didn't matter actually made a huge difference.

Now, you may not care about burritos, but I'm pretty sure you care about building great software. You care about making good apps, websites, and innovative technologies that will create an impact and make the world a better place.

I've spent the last 11 years of my career learning about all the aspects of making software. I started out as a programmer, then became a trainer, lead developer, proposal writer, UI designer, business analyst, and marketing manager. Like you, I'm driven by the question, "what makes great software?"

After a decade of searching, I finally realized the truth: there is no single magic ingredient. Just like in my burrito story, the key is having the right mix. If you care about designing delightful technology, you've got to think about the whole recipe.

Consider Slack. You've likely heard about it or have even used it yourself; it's one of the biggest and fastest growing tech products today. As of this writing, it's valued at \$3.8 billion dollars [\[1\]](#). Huh? But it's just a chat program, which isn't exactly a new idea. How did it get this way? Wouldn't it be interesting to know?

Fortunately, the firm that designed it published an article that explains their secret sauce. According to MetaLab, Slack differs because it does three

things differently from other enterprise apps.

First off, it looks different. Slack uses electric and vibrant colors—something that you don't normally find in enterprise apps.

Secondly, it feels different. It uses hundreds of little delightful interactions and animations that make you feel you're playing rather than working. Just like its name.

Finally, it sounds different. Here's how they explain it in the article [\[2\]](#):

In Slack, every piece of copy is seen as an opportunity to be playful. Where a competitor might just have a loading spinner, Slack has funny quotes like, "Need to whip up a dessert in a hurry? Dump a bag of oreos on the floor and eat the oreos off the floor like an animal." A strange little injection of fun into an otherwise boring day. Slack acts like your wise-cracking robot sidekick, instead of the boring enterprise chat tool it would otherwise be. Like *Interstellar's* TARS, compared to *2001: A Space Odyssey's* HAL9000.

In this book, we'll cover the ingredient that's often overlooked—those little bits of text throughout your app and website.

What is microcopy?

Microcopy refers to the “letters, words, phrases, or sentences in a software product or on a website that help instruct and guide the user” [3].

Specifically, these are:

- 404 Pages
- Screen/Page Title
- Screen/Page Headings
- Taglines
- Hints
- Hints and Explainers
- Summaries
- Email Subject Lines
- Buttons
- Form Fields
- Navigation
- Success Messages / Toasts
- Error Messages

There’s some disagreement as to whether microcopy includes menu items, field labels, and error messages. For example, the Nielsen Norman Group excludes them from the definition of microcopy and uses the term “microcontent” instead. In their words [4]:

Not all forms of UX copy can be considered microcontent in our sense of the word, though: menu items and other commands, field labels, and error messages are self-sufficient, as opposed to being stand-ins (or summaries) of bigger things.

Others, however, don’t make this distinction. Regardless of the scope of their definition, most practitioners agree on the role of microcopy: to address user’s concerns in the most contextual way. They reduce commitment, build trust, encourage action, and foster relationships.

They might be small, but their power is immense. In the words of Joshua Porter, the usability professional who coined the term *microcopy*, “Don’t be

deceived by the size of microcopy. It can make or break an interface.” [5]

Why did I write this book?

This book is the product of equal parts passion and frustration.

I've long been a language and design nerd. In the various roles I've had throughout my career, I've seen the power of words. As a programmer, a single word made the difference between a "NullPointerException" and a working unit test. As a UI designer, the choice of words made the difference between confounded users and happy customers. As a marketer, a single sentence made the difference between generated leads and lost opportunities.

I'm often frustrated by poorly thought out writing in the apps and websites I use. I couldn't be the only one who notices these things, right? But in the UX and product design communities I belong to, we didn't have a lot of discussions about the writing aspect of design. And since I enjoyed public speaking, I thought giving a series of talks and workshops might help open people's eyes to the magic of microcopy. This book is a written and expanded version of those talks.

I hope to improve the overall quality of software by compiling my observations and sharing them with the people who are in charge of building the apps and websites that people will use—designers, developers, product and project managers like you.

What can you expect from this book?

Chapter 2-5 will talk about the various concerns that you can address with microcopy and give a ton of examples along the way. Chapters 6-7 will give tips on implementing the principles learned from the earlier chapters and Chapter 8 will wrap up the lessons and provide further reading resources.

Chapter 2 - Gain Users' Trust

Before people start using your app or website, it has to do the most difficult job of all—gaining their trust. Little bits of text—microcopy—go a long way towards building that all-important bridge and addressing their concerns at the time and location they need it most. Let's have a look at the many ways we can address this mistrust with microcopy and avoid the mistakes that other apps make.

Will this work for me?

If you've ever bought anything from digital channels, you're riding on the hope that you'll get a product or service that fits your needs. After all, you don't want to waste time or money on something you can't use. Most buyers share some fear of waste or regret, intensified by their own bad experiences or horror stories from other people.

For example, one online shopper shared how he bought a rug for his room, but upon receiving the item, realized how wrong his assumptions were about the item's size (See Figure 2-1).

Adam Hess ✓
@adamhess1

Following

Bought a rug online for my room & realised the importance of specifying the size of the product you're selling

Rug Carpet Embroidered Fur
by chendongdong
★★★★★ 1 customer review

RETWEETS 547 LIKES 993

The image shows a tweet from Adam Hess (@adamhess1) with a blue 'Following' button. The tweet text reads: 'Bought a rug online for my room & realised the importance of specifying the size of the product you're selling'. Below the text is a product listing for 'Rug Carpet Embroidered Fur' by 'chendongdong' with a 5-star rating and '1 customer review'. To the left of the video is a product image of a blue and red patterned rug. To the right is a video of Adam Hess holding a tiny, miniature version of the same rug, illustrating the size discrepancy. At the bottom, the tweet has 547 retweets and 993 likes, with a row of profile pictures of users who interacted with the tweet.

Figure 2-1: Adam Hess shared on Twitter how the size of his rug purchase didn't match his huge expectations.

So how does microcopy help address commitment concerns? They help by providing information that anticipates concerns regarding the product.

Examples include:

- Product specifications like weight, size, and volume to address the concern of not meeting the user's physical requirements
- Data export features to address a user's fear of being unable to access their data if they stop using the service
- A money-back guarantee or trial period to address the general fear of not meeting the user's expectations
- Warranty period statements to address the fear of product failure
- Uptime (percentage of availability) statements to address the concern about the service going down, especially for SaaS or cloud-based apps

When the explanatory copy is inconsistent, it can lead to friction. For example, I use the Grab app to hail rides. It's like the Southeast Asian Uber, but can also hail regular cabs aside from private vehicles. Besides transporting people, Grab provides a service called Grab Express for transporting packages. So when the time came for me to send a box of DVDs to a client on the same day, I tried it out. However, upon opening the app, I got confused. I wasn't sure if the regular GrabExpress had door to door delivery since the GrabExpress Lite description said "curb to curb" while the regular GrabExpress service had no corresponding explanation (see Figure 2-2). I was just left to guess. I risked using it anyway, with great anxiety. Others might not have continued. Cases like these add friction to

the action that users are supposed to take, so it's important to be consistent.

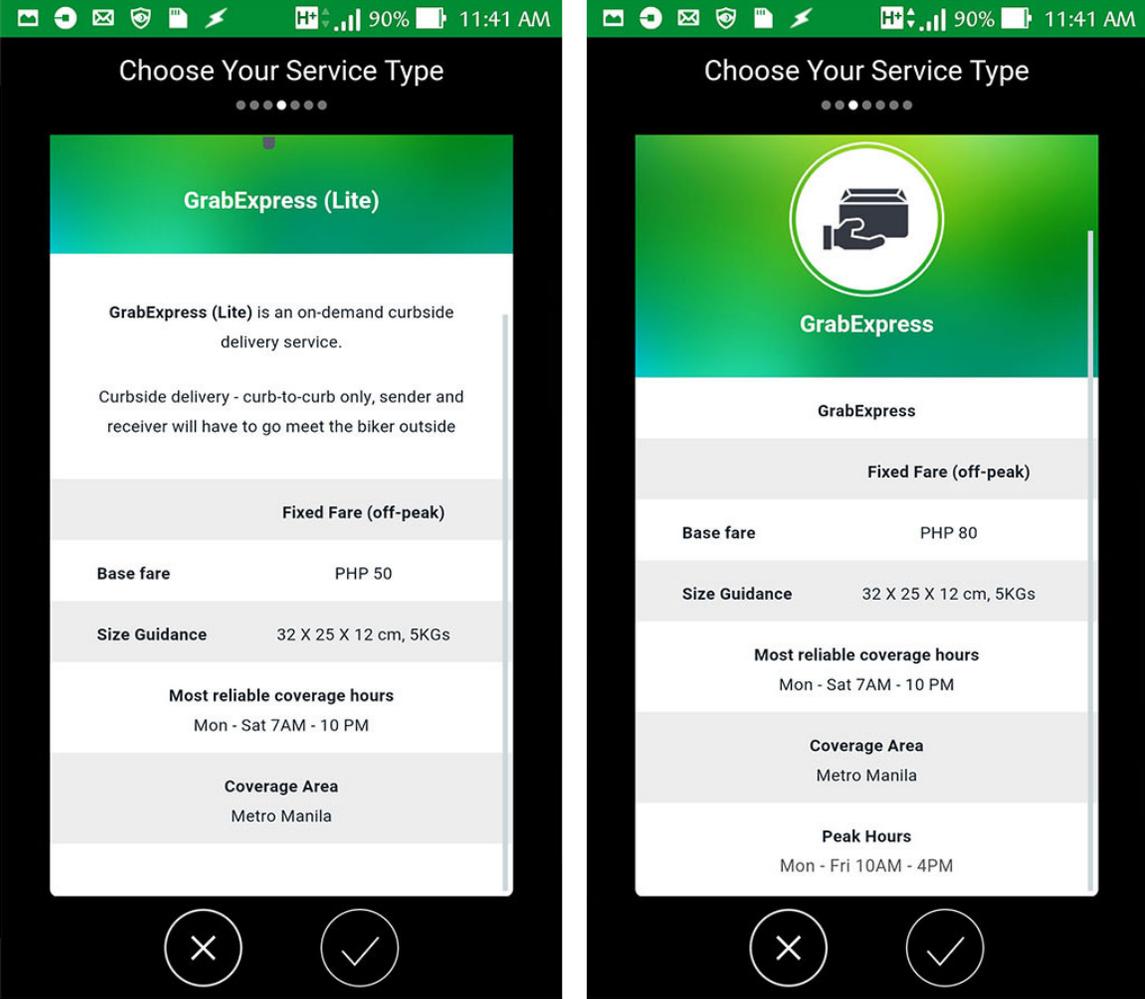


Figure 2-2: GrabExpress Lite showing a description but GrabExpress not doing so

Will it be compatible?

Sometimes, the instructional text can lead the user to believe in a false sense of compatibility because of hidden assumptions. Whenever I visit my parents' house, I take on the role of Family Tech Support™ whether I like it or not. In a recent visit, my dad disclosed a conundrum he's had with a Piano app he'd been trying to install on Windows. Instead of showing up on Windows like he expected, the app appeared on his mobile phones. It turns out he found the app via Google search and pressed Install on the Google Play website (see Figure 2-3). He got confused since there was a piece of text that said "This app is compatible with all of your devices," but he did not understand that Google Play apps were for the Android operating system only. It would have helped if the text at least mentioned Android or explicitly spelled out the devices.

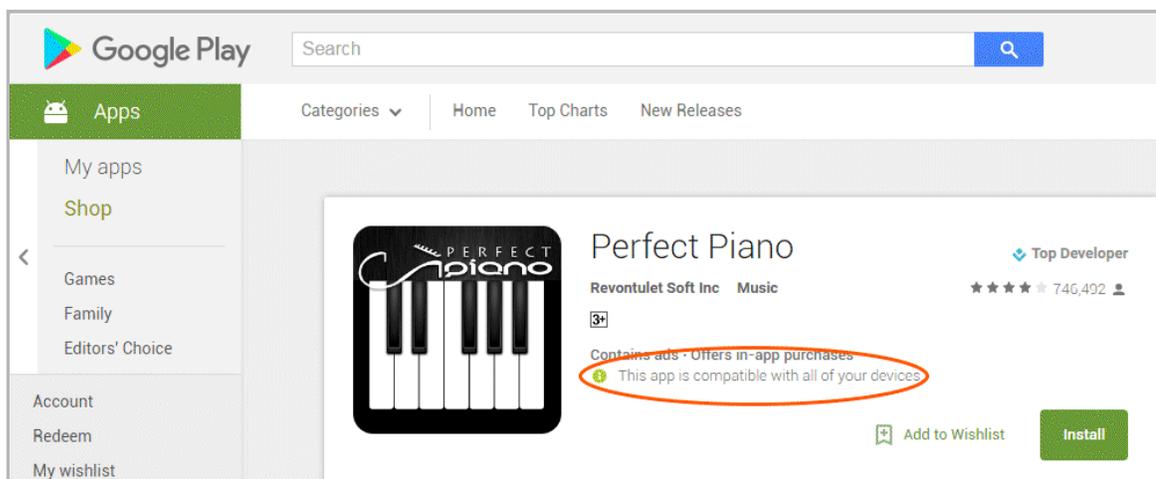


Figure 2-3: App on Google Play store with the instructional text saying, "This app is compatible with all of your devices"

Is it fresh?

Recently, I was trying to fix some codecs for a video editing project and remembered that I could download a codec pack from the CCCP website. But when I got there, I had a moment of doubt (see Figure 2-4). The button said it was last updated 2015 — two years old! That's a long time in the software world. I took a risk because I was desperate, but the date certainly caused me to hesitate downloading the package. Two lessons can be derived here. First, putting a recent date reassures users. Second, having a date that's old causes friction.



Figure 2-4: Combined Community Codec Pack Download page

Are you asking me to have a relationship with you?

Sometimes, it only takes a single word to dramatically increase revenues. How would you feel if a change to a small part of your user interface led to millions of dollars of additional revenue?

That's what happened with the story of the \$300M button [6]. Jared Spool of User Interface Engineering was consulting for a large retail firm doing billions of dollars of revenue a year. To test and optimize the online shopping experience, they asked volunteers to come into the lab with their shopping lists and gave them pocket money to buy whatever was on their lists.

They noticed a lot of people were abandoning the checkout process because of a simple screen (see Figure 2-5). Signing up meant faster checkout, so it should be a no-brainer, right?

I'm a Returning Customer

EMAIL ADDRESS:

PASSWORD:

[Forgot your password?](#)

LOG IN AND CHECKOUT

I'm a New Customer

Save time, stay updated, track your order, view your order history, create a wishlist, and more!

REGISTER AND CHECKOUT

Figure 2-5: An example login and registration page with no other choice but to create an account.

Wrong. They found that first-time users shoppers resented registering. One first-time user told the team, “I’m not here to enter into a relationship. I just want to buy something.” They felt that the retailer only wanted to pester them with marketing messages.

But here’s the kicker: the site was not asking for any additional information in the registration. It only asked for the same kinds of information required to complete the purchase, such as the shipping address, billing address, and payment information.

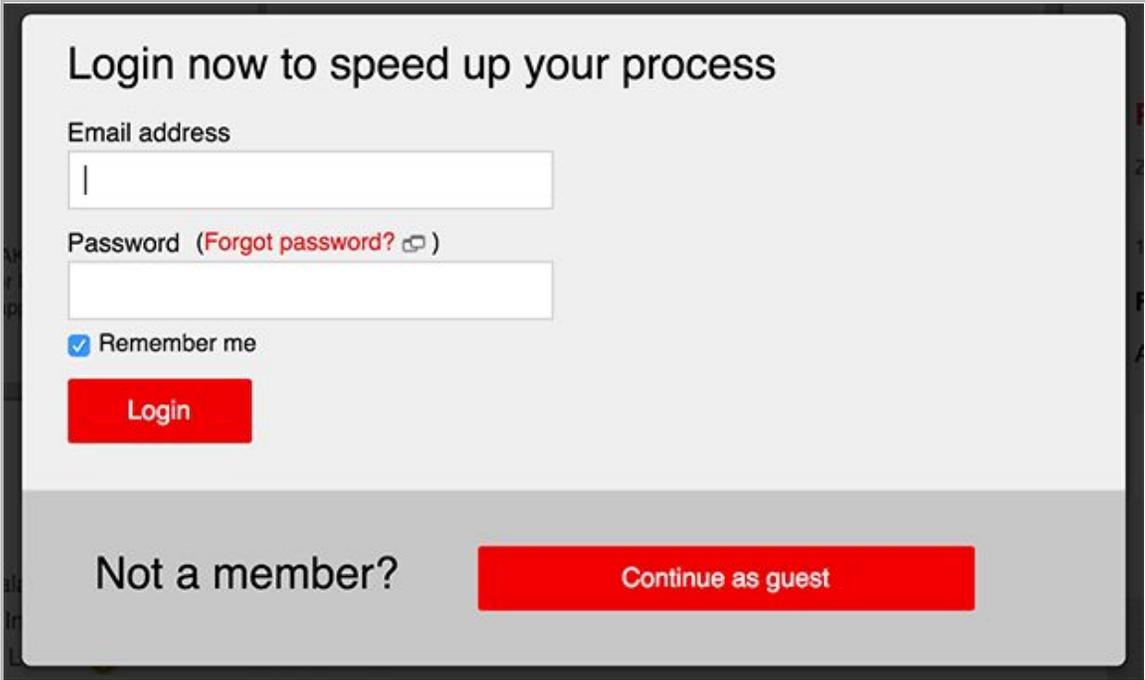
Even returning customers had trouble remembering their passwords or even if they had an account at all. They discovered that 45% of all customers had multiple registrations and 75% of customers who requested new passwords never tried to complete the purchase.

So when the team redesigned the checkout process, they replaced “register” with “continue” (see Figure 2-6) and provided an option to create an account after the checkout. The kind of information they collected was still the same. Only the flow and labels were different. The reduction in perceived commitment caused less people to abandon their shopping carts and increased the number of purchases by 45%, leading to an increase of \$25M per month—an additional \$300M in the first year.

The figure shows two side-by-side checkout options. On the left, under the heading "I'm a Returning Customer", there are two input fields: "EMAIL ADDRESS:" and "PASSWORD:". Below the password field is a blue link that says "Forgot your password?". At the bottom of this section is an orange button labeled "LOG IN AND CHECKOUT". On the right, under the heading "Guest Checkout", there is a short paragraph: "Proceed to checkout and you will have a chance to create an account at the end." Below this text is a large orange button labeled "CONTINUE".

Figure 2-6: An example login and continue page.

Air Asia is a good example of this principle in action. When I was booking a flight, a dialogue appeared asking me if I wanted to login but also gave me an option to continue as a guest (see Figure 2-7). It also described the benefit of signing in, i.e. “to speed up your process,” which helps reduce that concern about giving away personal information.



The image shows a login dialog box with a light gray background and a dark gray footer. At the top, the text reads "Login now to speed up your process". Below this, there are two input fields: "Email address" and "Password (Forgot password?)". A "Remember me" checkbox is checked. A red "Login" button is positioned below the password field. In the dark gray footer, the text "Not a member?" is on the left, and a red "Continue as guest" button is on the right.

Figure 2-7: Login dialog on Air Asia booking website

Sure you won't feed me to the crocodiles?

If your brand isn't well-known, users fear how you will treat them and their data. Like letting a skittish stray animal smell your hand, new users need gentle reassurance that your app or website won't betray them. Effective microcopy helps do just that.

Velocity Partners, a B2B marketing agency, for example, uses casual and honest language in their newsletter signup form [7] to reassure users of the privacy of their emails with the line "we're unlikely to spam you" underneath the email address field (see Figure 2-8).

Opt into our crap

To be honest, we don't do much outbound marketing. So if you give us your name, company and email, we're unlikely to spam you. But we will send the latest stuff written just for B2B content marketers exactly like you. Sound good?

*First Name

*Last Name

*Email Address

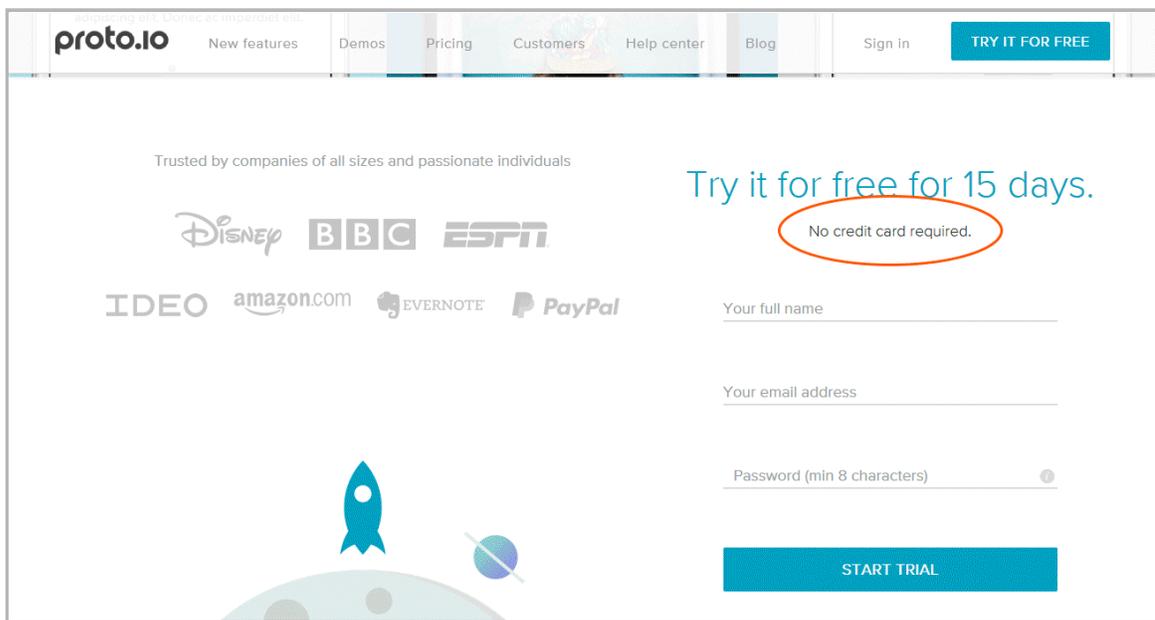
Submit 

Figure 2-8: Velocity Partners promises not to spam you and makes the case for why you should sign up to their newsletter with a little bit of humor.

Am I going to be destitute?

Earlier in the chapter, we talked about the resistance people encounter when buying products or services online. Among those concerns, money is one of the most emotionally charged. Good websites and apps address financial concerns by using microcopy whenever money-related transactions occur, such as in sign-up screens.

People want to know whether they'll be charged, how much they'll spend, how long they'll be spending, and if they can back out of any long-term spending commitments. For example, proto.io uses the “free for 15 days” and “No credit card required” to address the concern of being automatically charged in case the trial period ends (see Figure 2-19).



The image shows a screenshot of the proto.io website's trial signup form. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the proto.io logo and links for 'New features', 'Demos', 'Pricing', 'Customers', 'Help center', 'Blog', 'Sign in', and a 'TRY IT FOR FREE' button. Below the navigation bar, there is a section titled 'Trusted by companies of all sizes and passionate individuals' with logos for Disney, BBC, ESPN, IDEO, amazon.com, EVERNOTE, and PayPal. The main heading is 'Try it for free for 15 days.' with a red circle around the text 'No credit card required.' below it. The form fields include 'Your full name', 'Your email address', and 'Password (min 8 characters)'. A 'START TRIAL' button is at the bottom right.

Figure 2-9: Proto.io's trial signup form uses microcopy effectively to address spending concerns

Long term spending commitments are especially terrifying. Intercom handles this concern by deftly adding “Cancel at any time” in the signup page in addition to the typical “Free 14 day Trial” (see Figure 2-10)

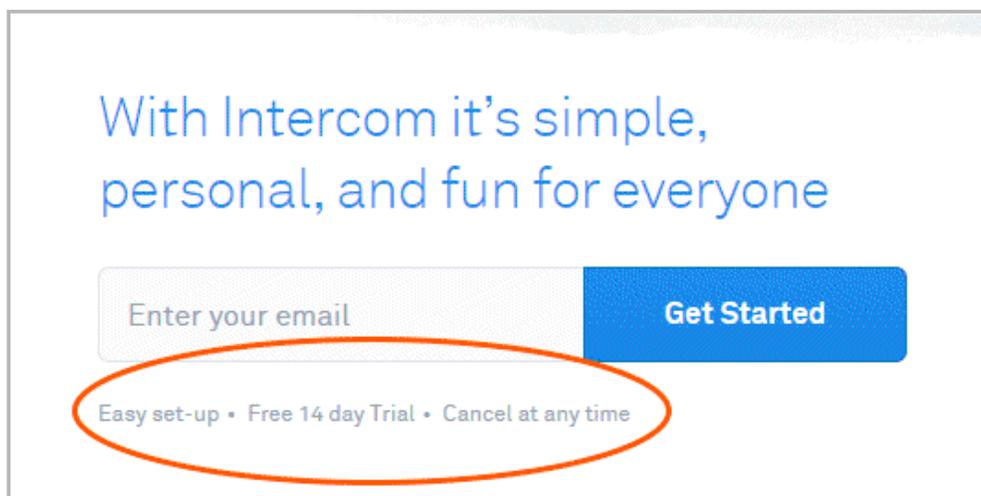


Figure 2-10: Intercom effectively wields microcopy in the trial form by saying “Cancel at any time” to address the concern of a long term spending commitment

In this chapter, you’ve seen how effective microcopy builds trust by addressing concerns about privacy, compatibility, appropriateness, freshness, and money. In the next chapter, we’ll look at how you can tweak microcopy to help users find their way around your application or website.

Chapter 3 - Guide the Way

When I was taking a summer course in China a couple of years ago, I played a game in which I would take randomly numbered buses, see where they went and then try to make myself back to the dorm where I was staying. In other words, I deliberately got lost. Scary, fun, and also very stupid. It's pretty rare, however, for most people to enjoy getting lost. That's why your apps should do their best to guide users and make sure they get to the next step until they reach their goals. In this chapter, we'll look at how apps successfully or unsuccessfully do that.

Is this thing working?

It's disappointing for a user to approach a kiosk only to find out that it doesn't work. Status indicator text helps prevent that disappointment by setting expectations. But it only works when the text is chosen well.

This reminds me of an experience I've had at a train station. Since I rarely take the light rail transit in my city, I momentarily got confused when I saw the status of the ticket vending machines (see Figure 3-1). Does "In Service Mode" mean it's under service or it's working? I couldn't really tell for sure so I had to watch some people buy some tickets before I found out that it meant they're working.



Figure 3-1: Vending machine at our local light rail transit

Why use something so convoluted? They could have used this opportunity to inject a bit of personality and greet the user with a cheerful “Hello” or “Welcome.” These are the perils when you don’t give some thought into the writing that you use for hardware or software. When technology can communicate its status clearly, it’s the machine equivalent of a warm human being beckoning a customer into their store, reassuring them that they’re open and ready to serve.

What am I supposed to do here?

Let's say you've applied what you learned from the previous chapter and successfully reassured potential customers that they should trust your technology. They've taken the plunge and made their first tentative steps. Don't leave them hanging here: they're at their most vulnerable. Fortunately, using effective microcopy can help. A few words here and there can help guide your users by handling what we call "empty states."

For example, the Pleco Chinese-English dictionary has a document reader (see Figure 3-2) where you can paste the contents of your phone's clipboard and it will give you tooltip translations of every Chinese word it finds in your text. When you first load it up or when your clipboard is empty, it shows instructions rather than just showing a blank screen to reduce the amount of guessing that the user needs to do.



Figure 3-2: Document reader feature of the Pleco Chinese-English dictionary on Android

In another section of the app where you can draw a character using your finger (see Figure 3-3), subtle tooltips at the bottom remind users what to do without being intrusive once they already know how to use it.

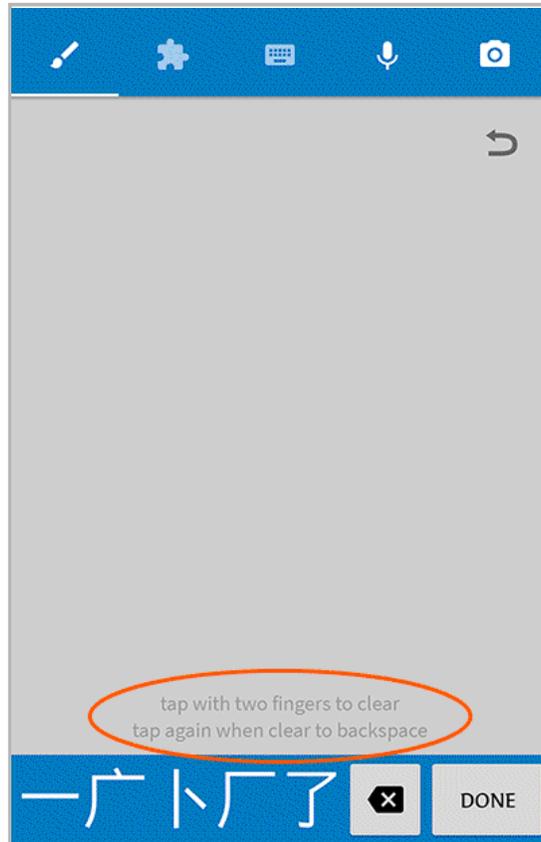


Figure 3-3: Handwriting recognition feature of the Pleco Chinese-English dictionary on Android

A little bit of instructional text paired with a button works even better. The Spotify app takes good care to not let empty states become big black holes of confusion. For example, when a user creates a new playlist, the app

doesn't just show a blank playlist. It provides some guidance as well as an action button that leads them to the next step (see Figure 3-4).

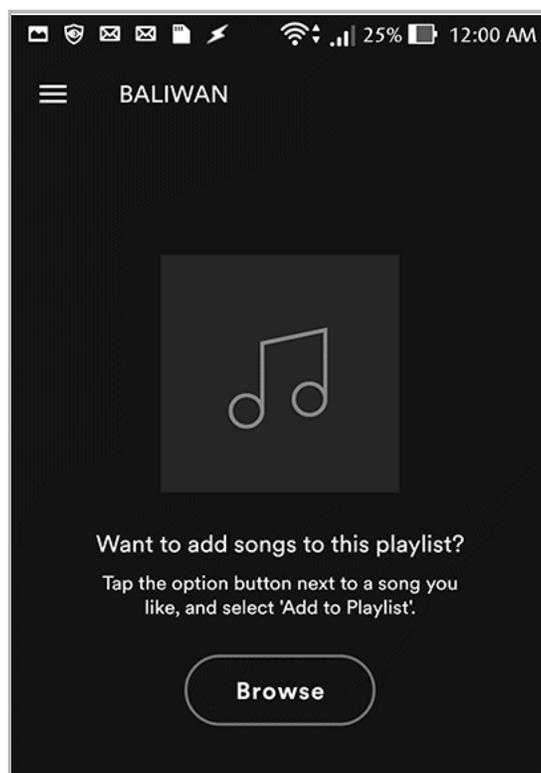


Figure 3-4: Spotify showing instructions and call-to-action when a new playlist is created

In contrast, when an app only shows a description of the empty state but does not provide guidance, users are left with no idea what to do next. For example, the empty state of Instapaper's friends screen is quite saddening when you haven't added any friends (see Figure 3-5). I mean, it makes me sad to have an app tell me I have no friends. To this day, I have no idea how

this part of the app should be used, despite my fondness for the app in general.

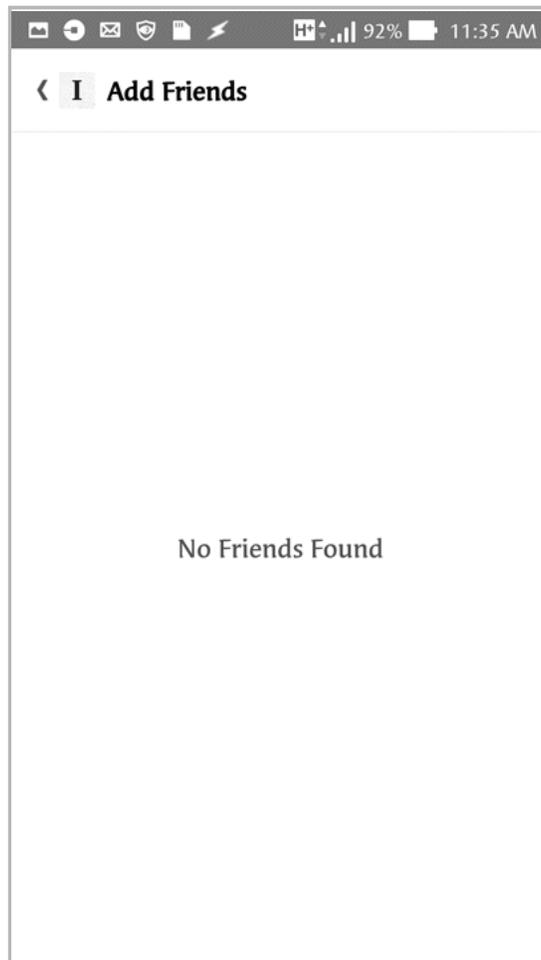


Figure 3-5: Instapaper's Friends screen when you don't have any friends. Pretty sad.

I use Instapaper to save articles, which the app then formats and makes it available offline. Its core parts are well designed, which makes the friends empty state message stand out all the more. The lesson here is that even the best apps have flaws, and it wouldn't do us well to blindly copy other designs without analysis.

Instapaper’s video feature handles the empty state better (see Figure 3-6), but it assumes you already know how to save videos (either by using share to Instapaper or by using the browser extension).

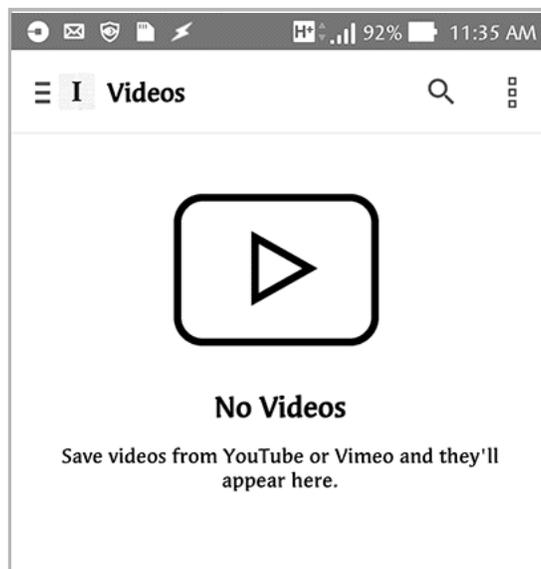


Figure 3-6: The Instapaper app’s video listing screen

Microcopy isn’t always about adding text. Sometimes, we can improve the design by deleting text and properly labeling the choices we give our users. In the PuTTY SSH/Telnet client for Windows, it takes a while to determine what should be done since the user needs to map the long-winded description with the buttons (see Figure 3-7). The instructional text can be significantly shortened by using the labels “Connect and trust this host”,

“Connect once”, and “Don’t trust this host and cancel” for the buttons (or if space is inadequate, radio controls).

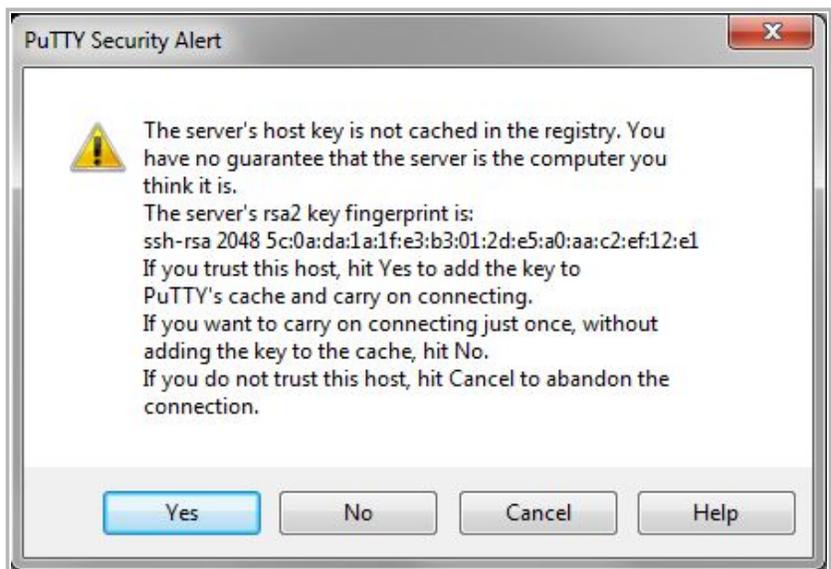
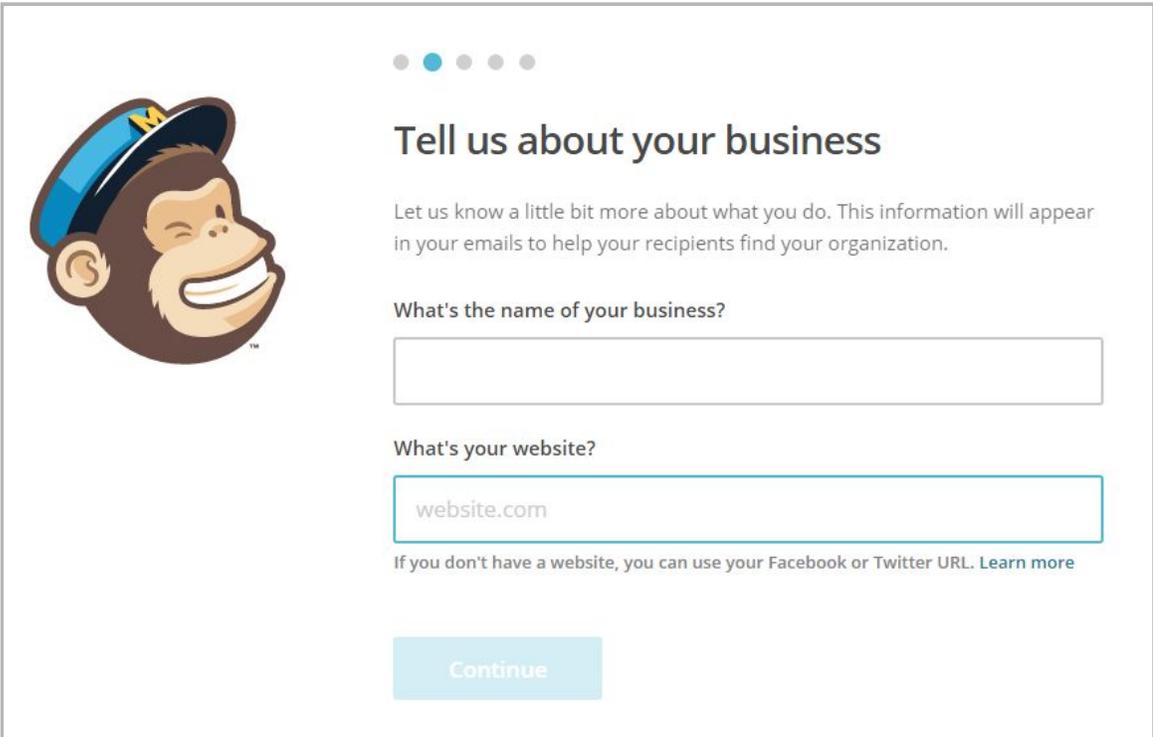


Figure 3-7: Putty's security warning taxes the user by requiring them to map the instruction with the button labels

So...what do you need from me?

For all but the simplest apps, we need to take input from our users. It's an opportunity to humanize the experience by tweaking our microcopy.

Onboarding, i.e. when a user starts using our application for the first time, is especially critical. Often, we need to get information from them so that we can provide the service we promised. The way we go about it and the words we use make up a big part of the experience. Some apps use language that guides in a way that makes the user feel welcome and provides reasons for why they need information. For example, when you sign up to the Mailchimp email marketing platform, it will ask you your business details, which is fairly typical (see Figure 3-8).



The screenshot shows a user onboarding form for Mailchimp. On the left is the Mailchimp monkey mascot wearing a blue cap with a yellow 'M'. At the top right, there are five dots, with the second one highlighted in blue. The main heading is "Tell us about your business". Below it is a sub-heading: "Let us know a little bit more about what you do. This information will appear in your emails to help your recipients find your organization." There are two input fields: "What's the name of your business?" (empty) and "What's your website?" (containing "website.com"). Below the second field is a link: "If you don't have a website, you can use your Facebook or Twitter URL. [Learn more](#)". At the bottom is a light blue "Continue" button.

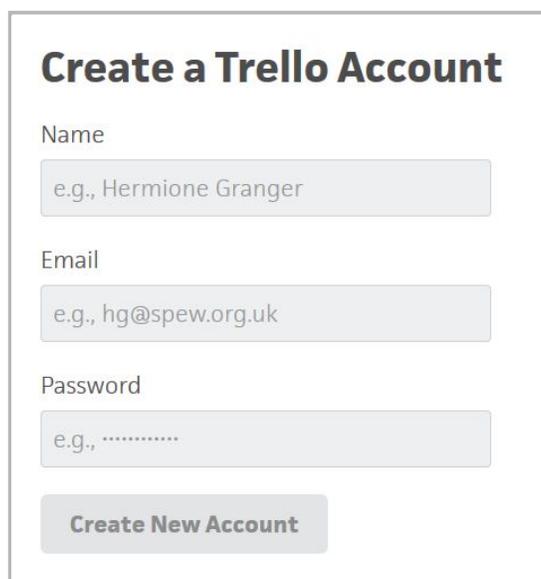
Figure 3-8: Mailchimp's onboarding forms use warm, conversational language that eases what would otherwise be a tedious process

What's not so typical is how it uses warm, conversational, but still respectful, phrases like "Tell us about your business" instead of transactional, technical language like "Enter your business details". In the

former phrasing, you feel that there is another party on the other side with the use of “us.” In the latter, it feels like you are simply completing a chore on an electronic version of a paper form.

When asking input from users, it also helps to show them what kind of input you expect to minimize the retries and erroneous attempts from users. A common technique is to use placeholders, i.e. copy inside the text fields in a lighter color to indicate that they’re not filled-in values.

Some apps go a step further by using the placeholder as an opportunity to entertain, apart from instructing, their users. For example, Trello provides placeholders (see Figure 3-9) that use names from pop culture in their signup page, which changes for every user [3]. By doing so, they’re associating the positive emotions users have with these characters with their application.



Create a Trello Account

Name
e.g., Hermione Granger

Email
e.g., hg@spew.org.uk

Password
e.g.,

Create New Account

Figure 3-9: Trello’s signup page uses placeholders using characters from pop culture — a nice touch to what would otherwise be a pretty dull transaction

For every app that takes good care of guiding users what information to put in, there are probably hundreds of apps that don’t. For instance, I use an app called Tasker on Android to automate many aspects of my daily life. After creating a new automation task, it shows a completely blank input field with no labels or placeholders at all (see Figure 3-10). You might think, “well I know what I tapped beforehand,” right? That’s true. But the design

fails to consider interruption. If, in the middle of the two actions, something else grabs the user’s attention, by the time they get to the next step, they might have already forgotten what the input field was for.

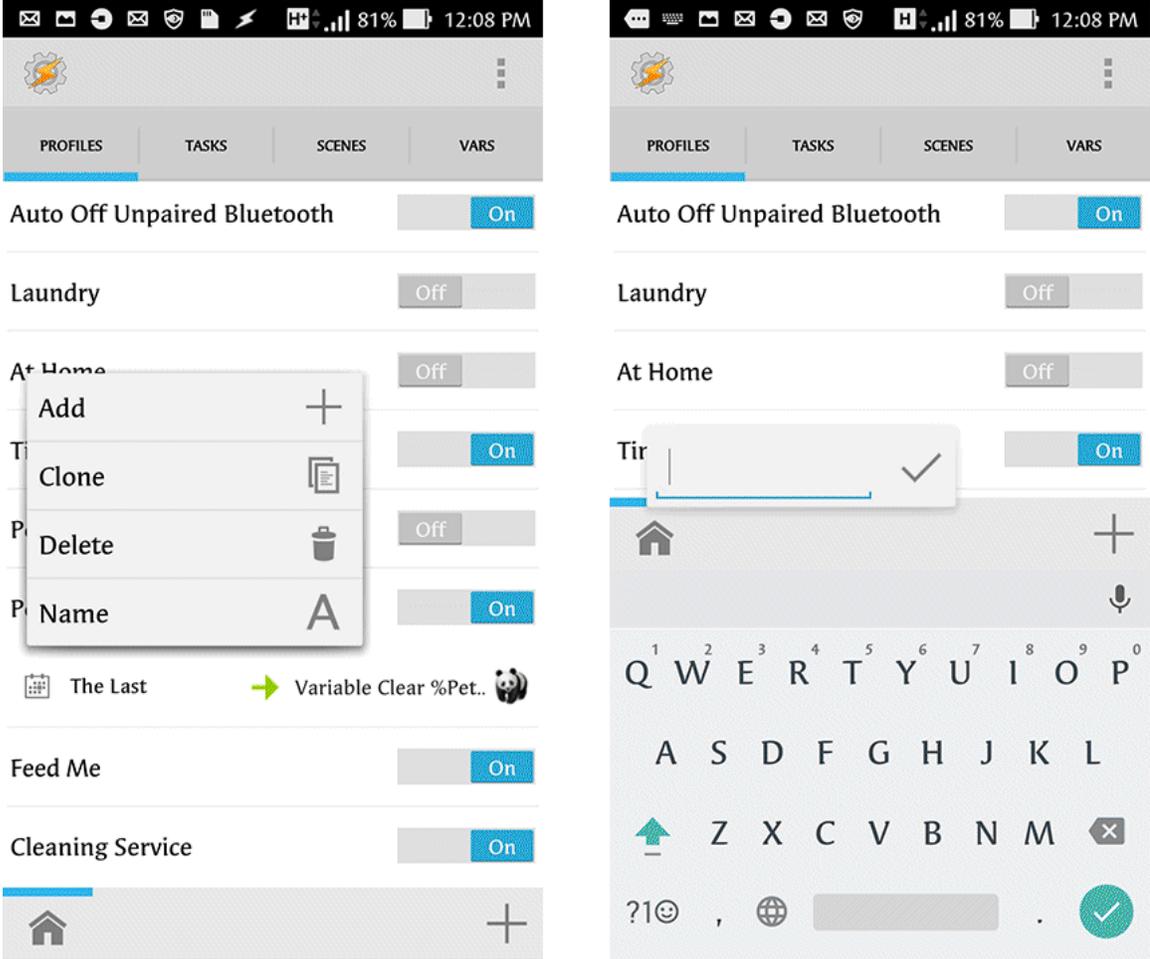


Figure 3-10: Tasker provides no labels or placeholders to guide user input

Phone number fields that ask for country and area codes without any guidance become an exercise in frustration (see Figure 3-11). How is the user supposed to know the format of the country code? Should it use a + symbol or not? They only get errors once they submit the form after

scrolling down the very long page, hitting submit, and seeing the errors at the top. Why subject the user to this torture?

	Email address is required			
* Email Address	<input type="text" value="screwthis@screw.com"/>			
	Confirm Email is required			
* Confirm Email	<input type="text" value="screwthis@screw.com"/>			
	* Country Code	Area Code	* Telephone Number	Extension
	Mobile/Cell phone country code is required			
	Mobile/Cell phone number is required			
* Mobile/Cell	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Home Phone No	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Business Phone No	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Figure 3-11: The PAL booking Contact section has no formatting guide for the country code and area code

Microcopy can be used to significantly reduce errors. When Joshua Porter noticed he was getting a ton of form errors on the “enter billing information” page, he added a tiny bit of copy to remind users to enter the billing address associated with their credit card (see Figure 3-12). Afterwards, the errors went away, “thus saving support time and increasing revenue on the improved conversion.” [4]

The image shows a web form titled "Enter Billing Information" with a light green header. The form contains several input fields: "Card Type" (a dropdown menu with "Visa" selected), "Card Number" (a long text input field), "Expiration date" (two dropdown menus for month and year, with "06" and "2009" selected), "Security Code" (a short text input field followed by a blue hyperlink "How to find this on your card"), "First Name" (a text input field), and "Last Name" (a text input field). A blue oval highlights a line of microcopy text: "(Be sure to enter the billing address associated with your credit card)".

Figure 3-12: Joshua Porter’s microcopy helps reduce errors by reminding users which address they should enter

Now what?

Good apps don't just leave you hanging after you've finished one action. It leads you to the next. A little dash of microcopy flies your user from one task to another in style. After signing up, Mailchimp asks the user to activate their account using email (see Figure 3-13). Nothing special there. What sets itself apart is the way they say it. "We'll take it from there," sounds like an approachable flight attendant instead of a gruff, stinky shop clerk who hates your guts, which is how the sentences in a lot of apps are written.

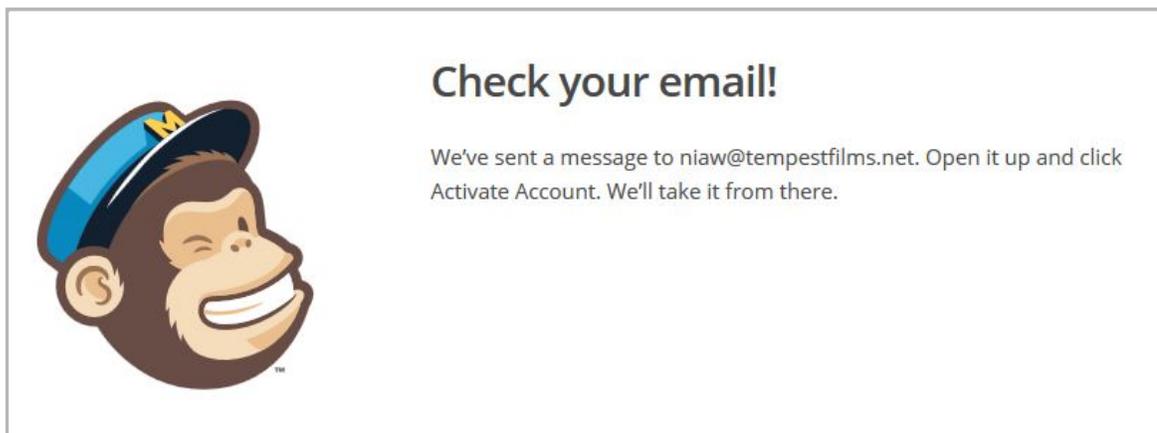


Figure 3-13: Mailchimp mail activation message

Great apps show you the way while explaining what it's doing. For example, once a user receives the Mailchimp activation mail, the message greets them, tells them what to do and why (see Figure 3-14).

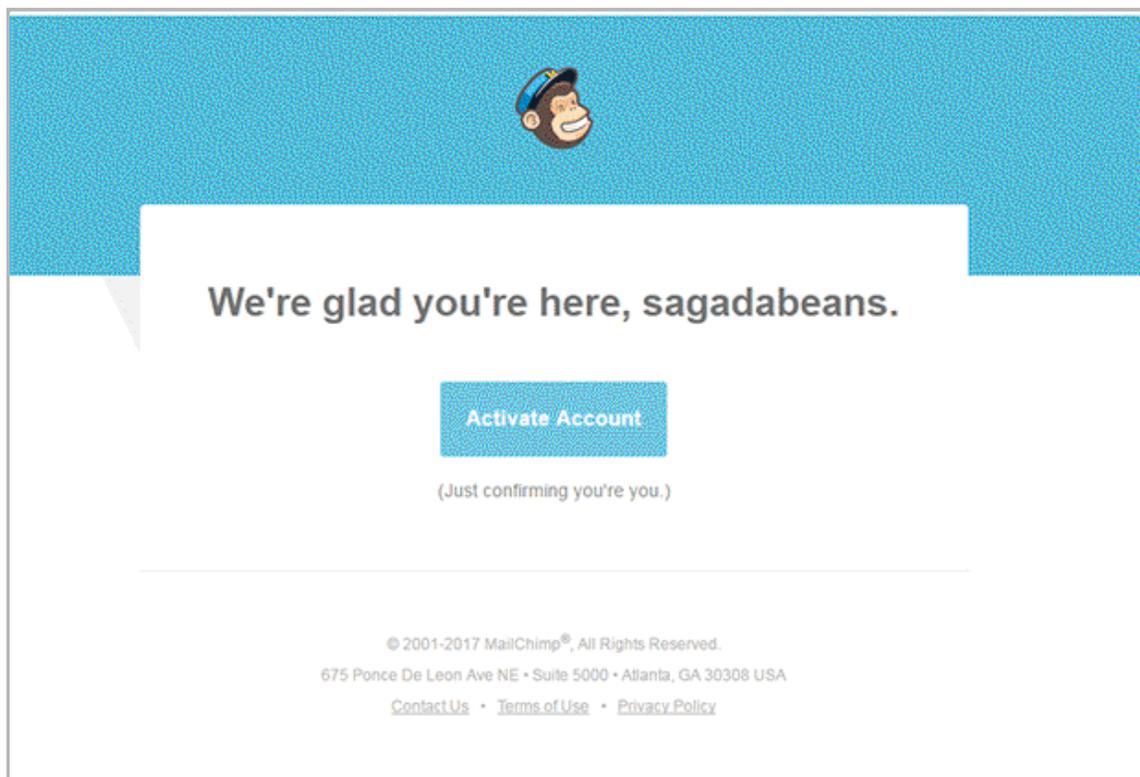


Figure 3-14: The Mailchimp activation email uses second person pronouns to really talk to you, gives you a warm greeting, and provides clear instructions. It also explains why you need to do it with the friendly note underneath saying, “(Just confirming you’re you).”

Digital courses also benefit from well-made microcopy by guiding the learner to the next lesson and enticing them with a preview of what they'll be learning next (see Figure 3-15).

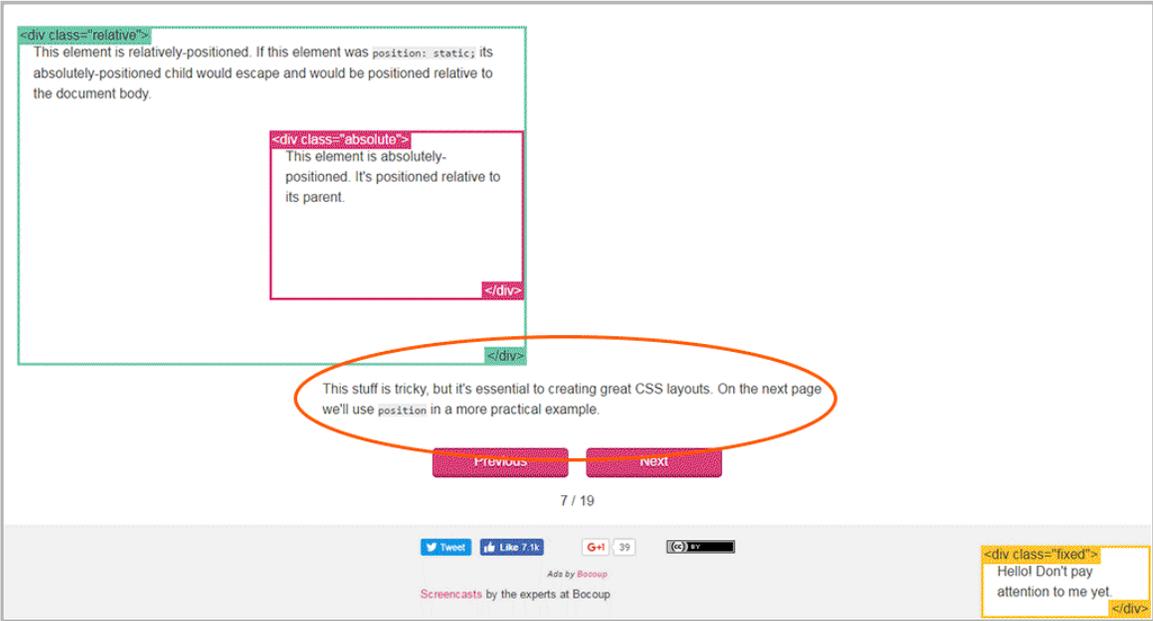


Figure 3-15: LearnLayout provides reassurance (“This stuff is tricky”), benefit (“it’s essential to creating great CSS layouts”), a teaser of the next lesson (“On the next page...”), and an action button (“Next”).

In content-heavy websites and apps, microcopy helps drive engagement, e.g. longer time on site, more frequent visits, lower bounce rate. If you haven’t used Medium, it’s a publishing platform that focuses on a consistent reading experience for substantial articles. To get visitors to read more

articles, they use a link that says, “Next story” and a title excerpt of the next recommended article (see Figure 3-16).

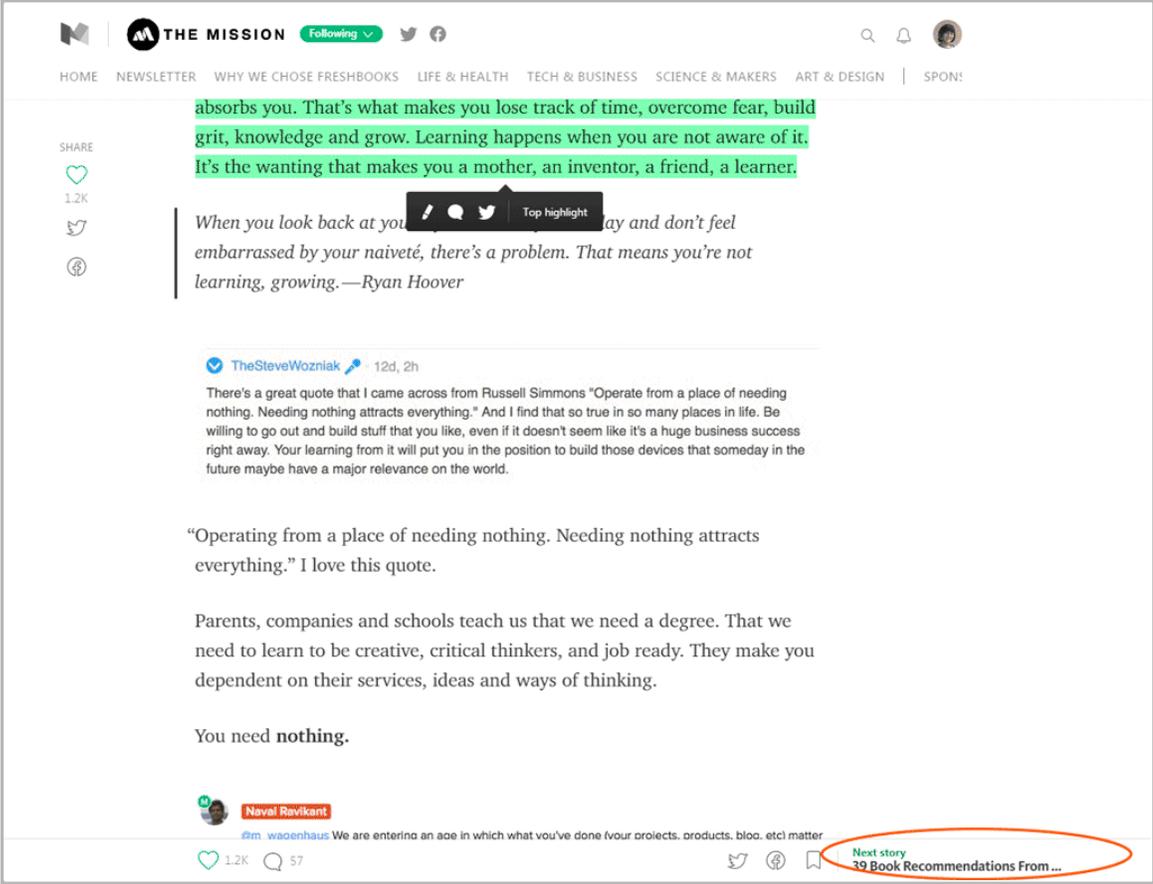


Figure 3-16: Medium.com leads readers to the next story with a link and excerpt at the lower right

What does this do?

When users become more familiar with the basics of an app, they'll start poking around. They'll wonder what those other features are for. If the feature has a potentially nasty consequence, microcopy helps set the users' expectation without resorting to annoying popup notifications. In the Settings screen of the Trello mobile app, a bit of microcopy at the bottom warns that "starred boards" will increase data usage (see Figure 3-17).

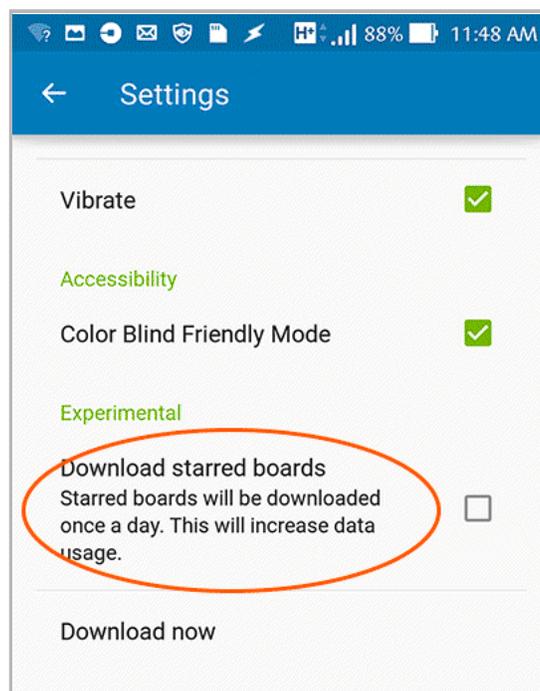


Figure 3-17: Trello Settings page informs the user about the negative consequence of Downloading starred boards without resorting to an annoying “popup dialog” asking for confirmation to enable the feature

Where am I?

Despite our best intentions, users can get lost in our website. This can happen when the site architecture changes or the linking site makes a mistake. When they do, help them get back on track with microcopy.

For example, the website Fluent in 3 Months has a 404 page (404 is the code for “page not found”) with a message that matches its brand culture (see Figure 3-18).

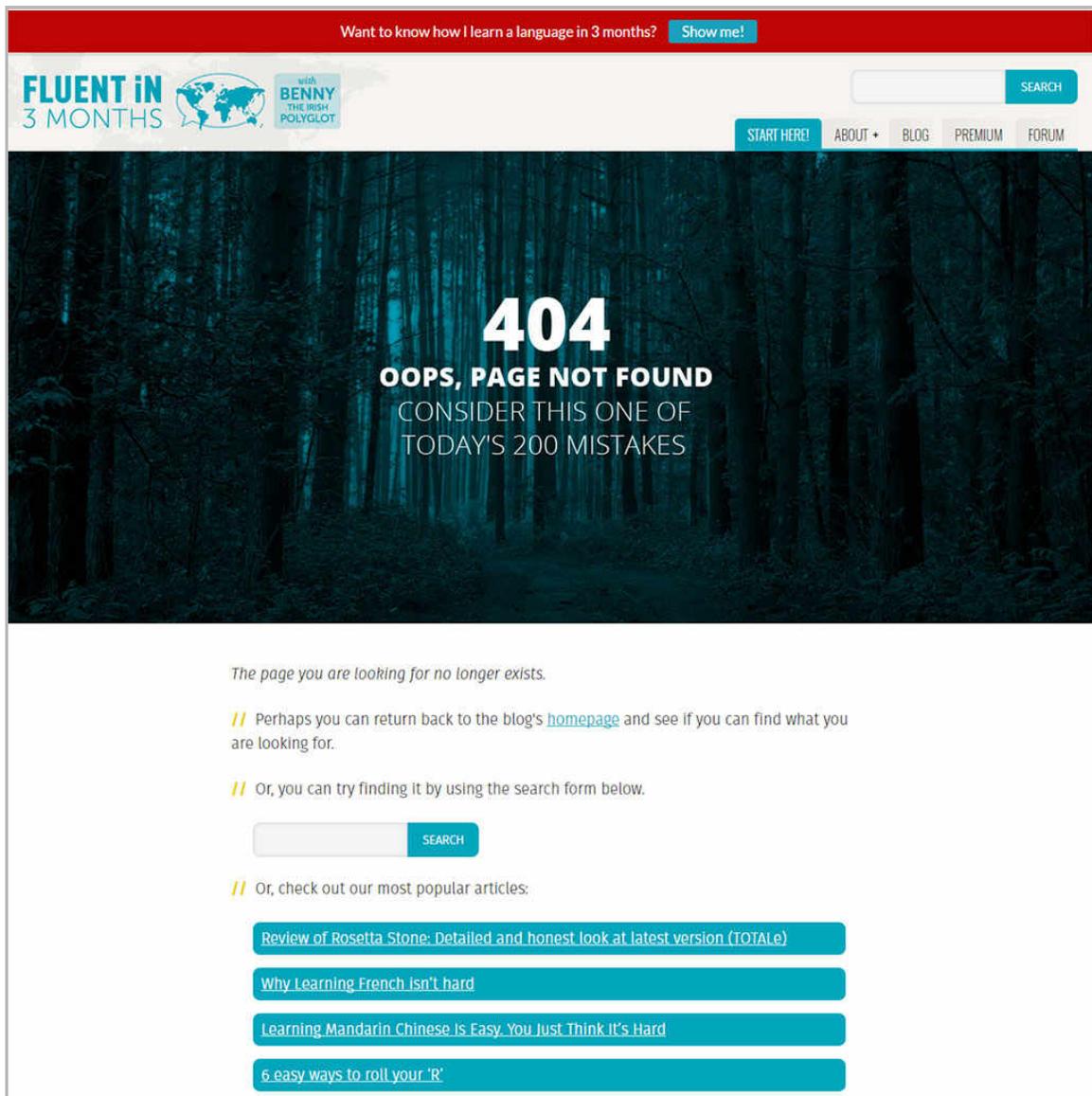


Figure 3-18: Fluent in 3 Months 404 page uses the phrase “Consider this one of today’s 200 mistakes.” It’s part of the site’s philosophy of making “200 mistakes” as a way to achieve language fluency.

Why can't I do this? Why????

Microcopy as tooltips can help in cases where the user shouldn't be able to perform an action, but they potentially don't know why. When I tested Adobe Muse to see if it was something we can add to our company's workflow, I wanted to use a responsive width and height for an image, but found I couldn't do so (see Figure 3-19). The software failed to help me understand why that action was not possible at the time I needed it. Since this was on the desktop, a tooltip when I hover might have helped do this. It's a tiny bit of text, sure, but it could have reduced my frustration with the program. In the end, I decided that Muse was not suitable for us. It wasn't because of this, but the poor usability contributed to that decision.

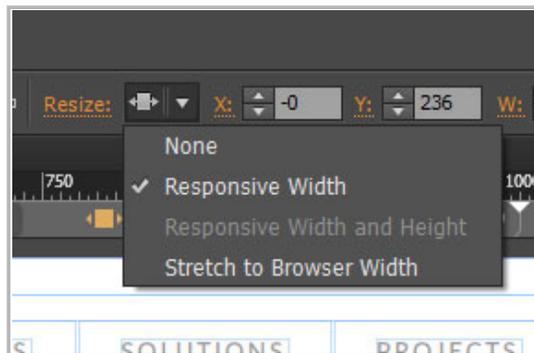
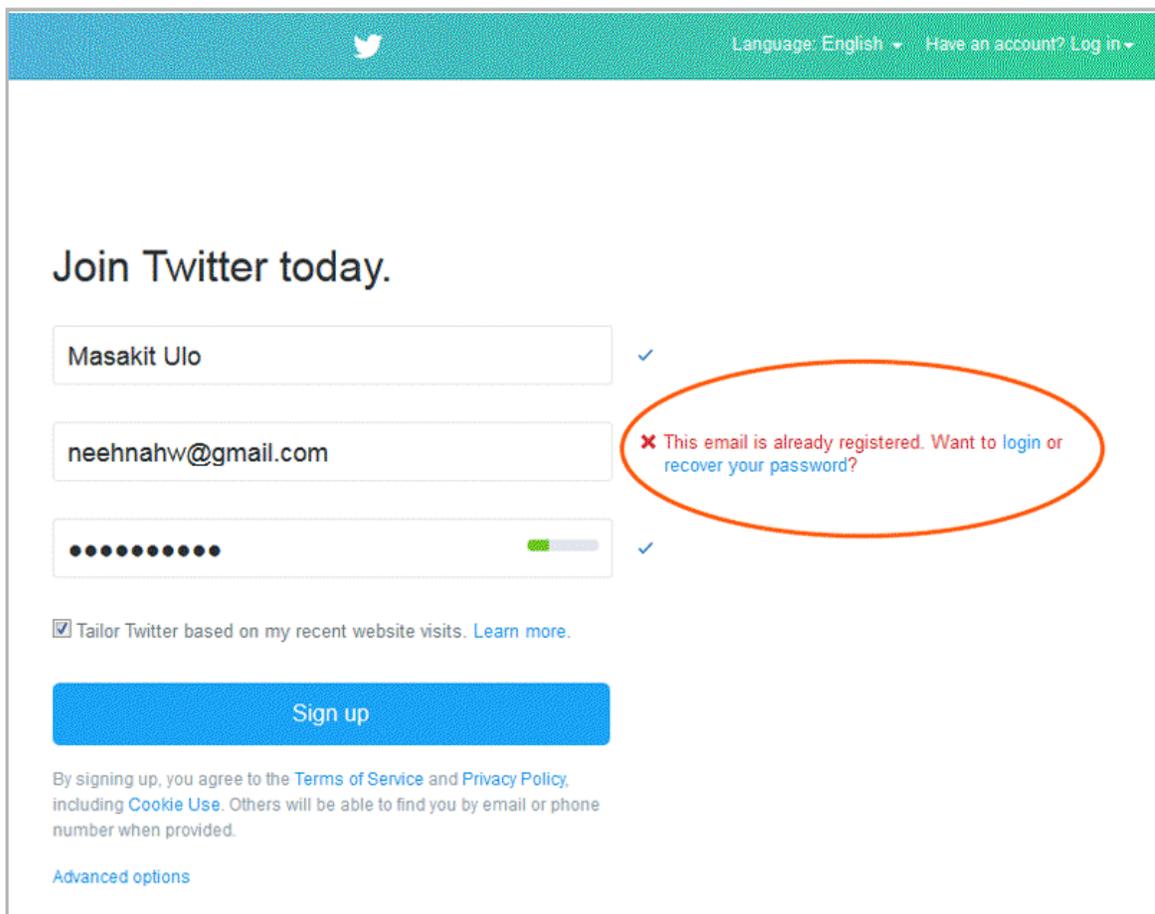


Figure 3-19: Adobe Muse size setting disables one of the options but provides no explanation

In contrast, Twitter explains very well [8] why you wouldn't be able to use an email address when signing up (see Figure 3-20).



The screenshot shows the Twitter sign-up page. At the top, there is a teal header with the Twitter logo and navigation links for "Language: English" and "Have an account? Log in". The main heading is "Join Twitter today." Below this are three input fields: a name field containing "Masakit Ulo" with a blue checkmark, an email field containing "neehnahw@gmail.com" with a red error message, and a password field with a strength indicator and a blue checkmark. The error message, circled in orange, reads: "✘ This email is already registered. Want to login or recover your password?". Below the fields is a checked checkbox for "Tailor Twitter based on my recent website visits. Learn more." and a blue "Sign up" button. At the bottom, there is a disclaimer: "By signing up, you agree to the Terms of Service and Privacy Policy, including Cookie Use. Others will be able to find you by email or phone number when provided." and a link for "Advanced options".

Figure 3-20: Twitter immediately shows why you can't proceed, provides clear instructions on how to fix the problem, as well as an action to get there

As soon as you enter the email address, even before pressing Sign up, Twitter already explains that it's registered. However, it doesn't stop at an error. It provides guidance on how to correct the problem. It considers the possibility that a user might have used the sign-up form to login or forgot they already had an account. As a user, the app feels thoughtful and anticipates my problems. It's a nice touch.

So far, you've seen how the appropriate use of microcopy helps the user understand what to do next, what information to provide, how to find their way back, and why things don't work. In the next chapter, we'll look at how the right kind of microcopy encourages users to take action, use features and willingly provide information.

Chapter 4 - Encourage Action

Once we've addressed our users' trust issues and guided them successfully around our application, our job's not done quite yet. We still have a ways to go in addressing their fear of making mistakes and their fear of the unknown. In this chapter, we'll look at how proper use of microcopy can help communicate the value of taking certain actions and reassure users that everything's gonna be okay.

Is this gonna be forever?

Permanent changes are scary. That's why good apps not only allow users to reverse their actions, they also communicate the ability to do so.

Microcopy can fulfill this role but it must do so in the right context, i.e. at the right place and time. For example, the message should be beside the button that triggers the action or near the fields that can be changed later on.

When I was setting up a Wordpress site for a client, I noticed a well-written piece of microcopy that addressed a common setup concern (see Figure 4-

1). If it hadn't done that, people would take longer to decide what to put in or perhaps even abandon the process as a result of analysis paralysis.

Welcome

Welcome to the famous five-minute WordPress installation process! Just fill in the information below and you'll be on your way to using the most extendable and powerful personal publishing platform in the world.

Information needed

Please provide the following information. Don't worry, you can always change these settings later.

Site Title

Username
Usernames can have only alphanumeric characters, spaces, underscores, hyphens, periods, and the @ symbol.

Password
Strong

Important: You will need this password to log in. Please store it in a secure location.

Your Email
Double-check your email address before continuing.

Search Engine Visibility Discourage search engines from indexing this site
It is up to search engines to honor this request.

Figure 4-1: The Wordpress setup effectively addresses the fear of not being able to change important information such as the Site Title and Username by saying, "Don't worry, you can always change these settings later."

Why the heck are you asking for this?

Apps should give users sufficient reason to provide information, especially if they're sensitive information like their contact details or weight. In a usability test conducted by Baymard Institute for Apple's online store, users didn't want to complete the checkout because the phone number was mandatory. They felt their privacy was violated.

Both Target and Victoria's Secret stores effectively addressed this privacy concern when they added text that explained why it was needed (see Figure 4-2). If it's truly really necessary, explain why. Otherwise, make it optional.

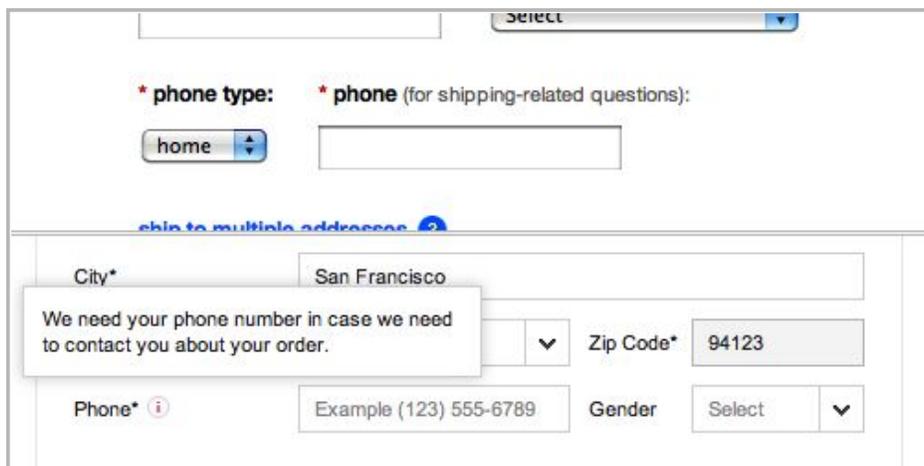
The image shows a screenshot of a checkout form. At the top, there are two fields: '* phone type:' with a dropdown menu showing 'home' and a plus-minus icon, and '* phone (for shipping-related questions):' with an empty text input field. Below these is a link that says 'ship to multiple addresses'. The bottom section of the form includes 'City*' with 'San Francisco' entered, 'Zip Code*' with '94123' entered, and 'Phone*' with 'Example (123) 555-6789' entered. A tooltip box is overlaid on the form, containing the text: 'We need your phone number in case we need to contact you about your order.' There is also a 'Gender' dropdown menu with 'Select' as the current value.

Figure 4-2: Target (top) and Victoria's Secret (bottom) provide good explanations of the phone number's purpose.

When apps don't give us any hint as to why they're asking for data, it can feel like we're spending effort and giving up information that has no relevance to what we want to do. Consider Lazada's customer account creation page (see Figure 4-3). At the minimum, an account for an e-commerce site is expected to require an email address and a password.

Providing a name helps personalize the experience when it comes to email messages and greetings inside the site.

The screenshot shows the 'Create new customer account' page on the Lazada website. The page has a dark blue header with the Lazada logo and navigation links. The main content area contains a form with the following fields and options:

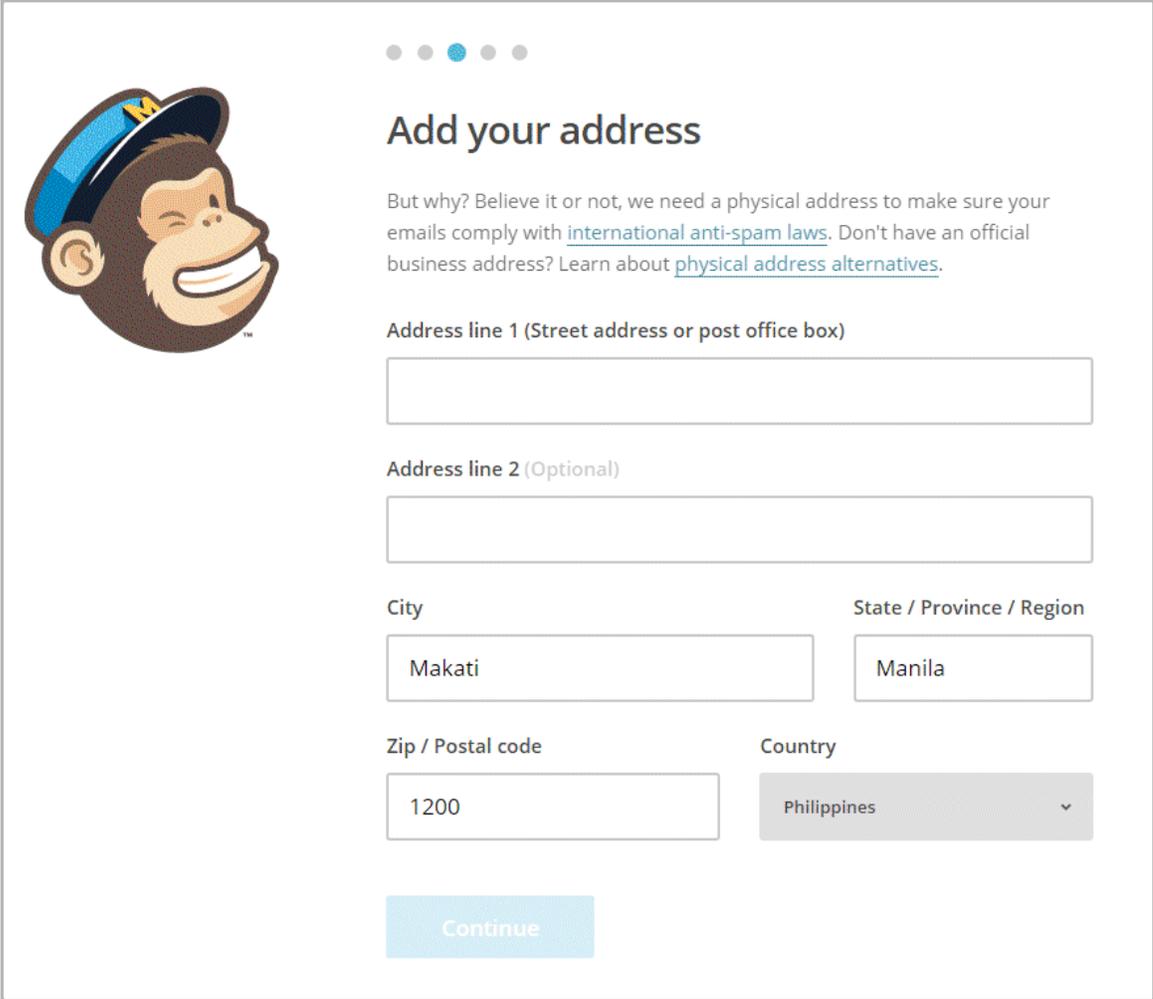
- Gender: Radio buttons for Male and Female.
- E-Mail: Text input field.
- First & Last name: Text input field.
- Birthday: Three dropdown menus for Day, Month, and Year (2011).
- Language: Dropdown menu set to English.
- Password: Text input field with masked characters (***).
- Retype password: Text input field.
- Sign up with Facebook: Button with Facebook logo.
- Sign up with Google: Button with Google logo.
- OR: Text separator.
- Required fields: A label above the SUBMIT button.
- Newsletter: A checkbox checked, with the text 'I want to receive exclusive offers by e-mail'.
- Privacy Policy: A link below the newsletter checkbox.

Figure 4-3: Lazada's customer account creation page asks for a number of fields that don't seem relevant to browsing items that I want to buy

However, Lazada asks for a whole lot more without explaining why, raising many questions in the mind of a potential customer. Why ask for the gender first? Perhaps it's used to determine how to address the user (e.g. Ms or Mr). What's the birthday for? Perhaps to see if I'm of legal age. Why is this site harvesting my information? No explanations are given to reassure me that they'll use the data responsibly and that they'll use it in a way that benefits me.

In other cases, we don't have a choice but to ask for our customers' information due to government regulations. Mailchimp, for example, asks for a physical address despite being an email delivery service. However, the site does so in a considerate manner (see Figure 4-4). The page

explains why the information is necessary and offers alternative suggestions if you don't have an official business address.



The image shows a screenshot of Mailchimp's 'Add your address' form. On the left is the Mailchimp monkey logo wearing a blue cap with a yellow 'M'. At the top right, there are five dots, with the third one highlighted in blue. The main heading is 'Add your address'. Below it, a paragraph explains the need for a physical address to comply with international anti-spam laws and offers a link to 'physical address alternatives'. The form includes two text input fields for 'Address line 1 (Street address or post office box)' and 'Address line 2 (Optional)'. Below these are four fields: 'City' (with 'Makati' entered), 'State / Province / Region' (with 'Manila' entered), 'Zip / Postal code' (with '1200' entered), and 'Country' (a dropdown menu with 'Philippines' selected). A light blue 'Continue' button is at the bottom.

Figure 4-4: Mailchimp's physical address form explains why they're asking for this information with a few well-written sentences

Many websites require a way to prevent bots from abusing their service, but they don't always explain why such a step is needed. Good designs say why and take advantage of the opportunity to use comforting language. Mailchimp's signup process uses a CAPTCHA check (see Figure 4-5) but uses warm language to make users feel welcome. Notice how they're talking to you in the first person ("you") and injects a bit of humor? Contrast

their approach with other similar tests that assume you're guilty of being a bot until proven an innocent flesh and bones being.

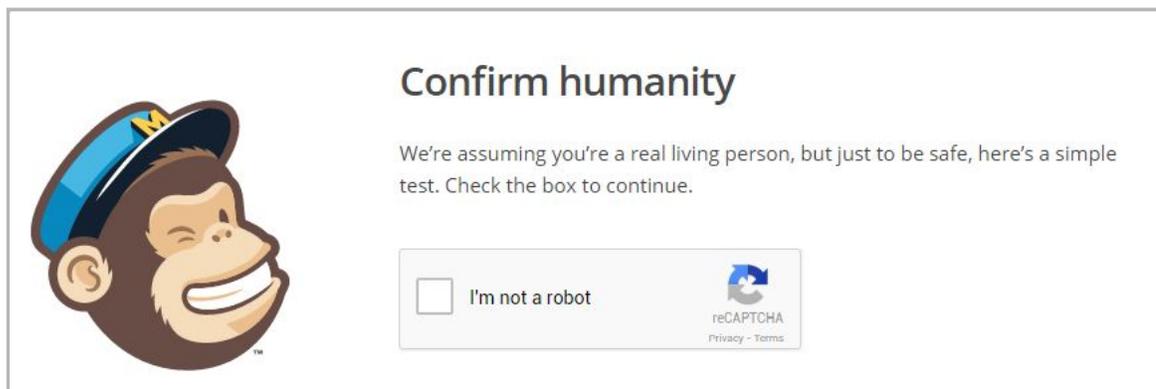


Figure 4-5: Mailchimp's bot prevention page uses warm, non-accusatory language to explain why it's a necessary step

Why would I do that?

In the apps/websites that we're building, we usually want the user to use certain features that will benefit our business in some way, e.g. improve customer satisfaction, reduce bounce rates, or gain revenue from add-ons. It's not enough to just show them the feature. Effective websites communicate how certain actions can benefit their users.

For example, in Google Drive, the "Upgrade Storage" action is paired with the storage balance information (see Figure 4-6). When it's close to running out, this little bit of text gives the user incentive to upgrade. Google Drive shows us that it's a good idea to place data related to the action beside the actual action (instead of being hidden away in some obscure settings page).

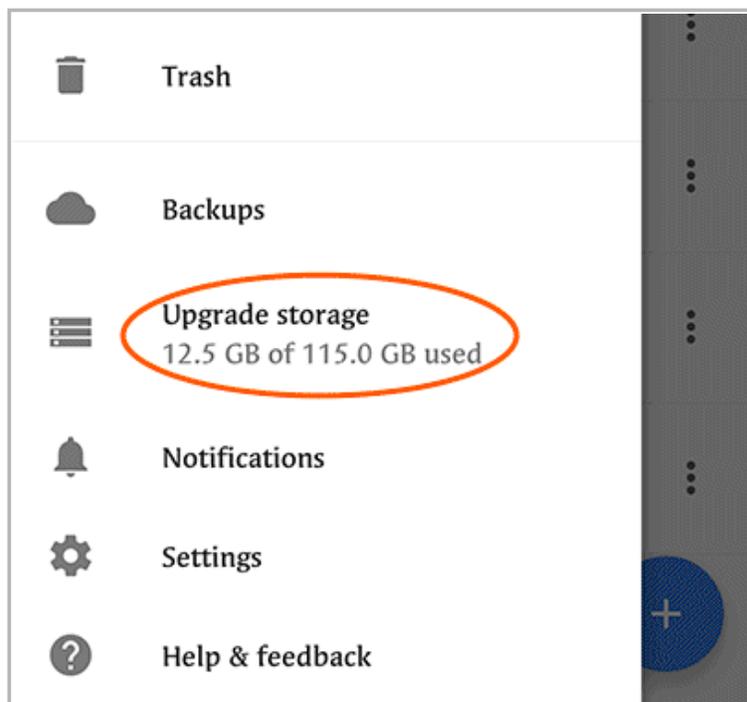


Figure 4-6: Google Drive effectively pairs your remaining free space with the Upgrade storage action, which helps them get more revenue from the higher price plans

A generic reason that's not tailored to the action the user is trying to make can cause confusion. MetroMart, which I use for grocery deliveries, states

that you need to sign in to proceed with the checkout. However, it uses the same generic message regardless of the actual action taken. After tapping on the Past Orders icon, it asked me to sign in to continue with my check out (see Figure 4-7). This caused a momentary panic; I thought I accidentally ordered something. That's why it's important to contextualize the microcopy to avoid confusing our users.

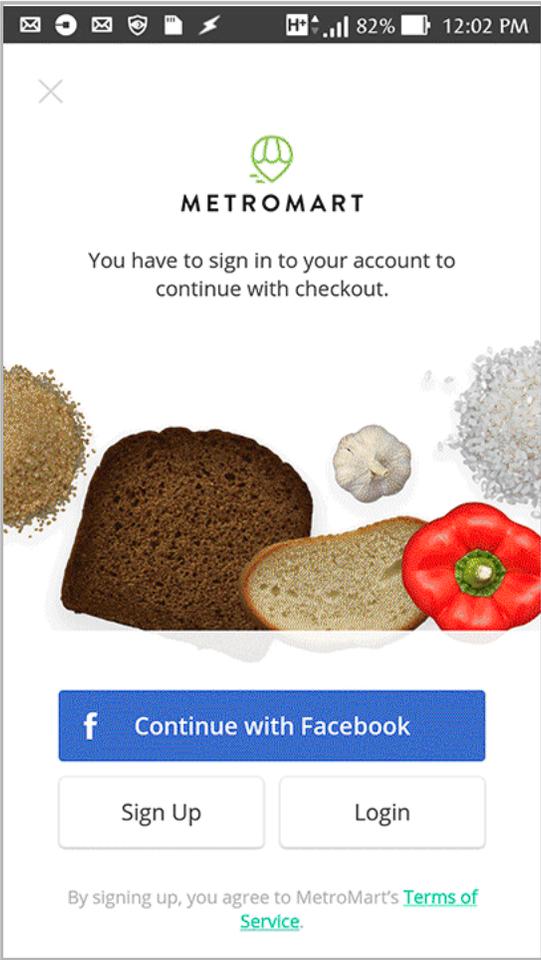


Figure 4-7: MetroMart asks me to sign in to continue with checkout even if I only wanted to check my past orders

Some apps add social features to improve user retention. Memrise, a successful language learning app, invites users to add friends by stating the benefit of doing so (see Figure 4-8).

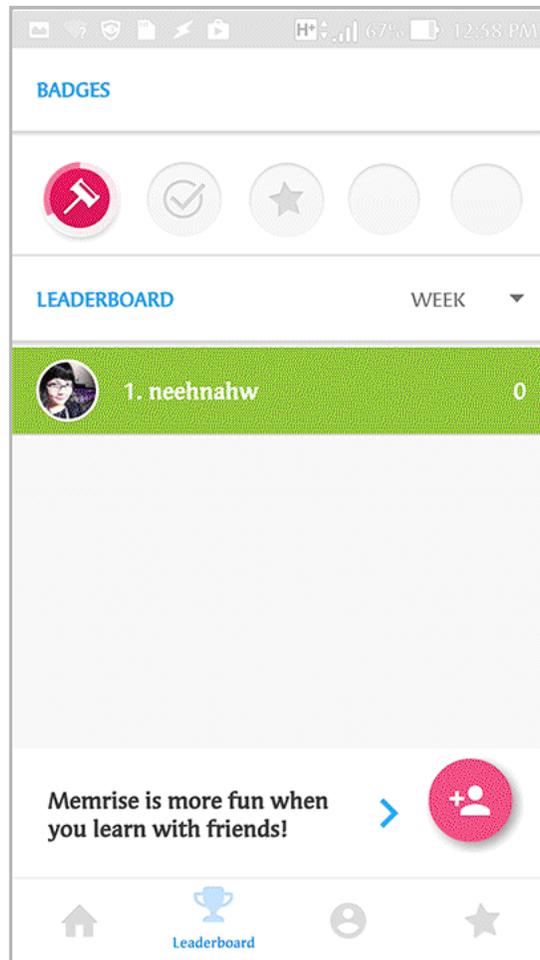


Figure 4-8: Memrise encourages users to use the social features with the promise that doing so enhances the learning experience: “Memrise is more fun when you learn with friends!”

Other apps, instead of stating the benefit, use well-crafted microcopy to engage our imaginations or evoke our emotions in order to propel us into action. For example, Facebook’s wall post form (see Figure 4-9) doesn’t just

say “enter wall post” or “input status”. Instead, it engages the user’s imagination by asking, “What’s on your mind?”

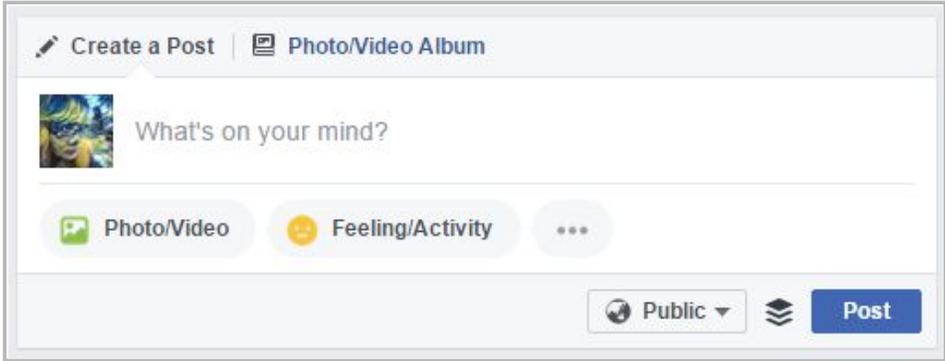


Figure 4-9: Facebook’s placeholder question engages your imagination

Hubspot has a service that makes it easy to post to and manage your social network accounts. In its sharing page, the form doesn’t just say “Post something for your followers.” It uses the opportunity to evoke an emotional response (see Figure 4-10). By reminding the user of their relationship with their followers or the dream of having many followers, they are relying on the hopefully positive associations we have with having adoring fans for our brands.

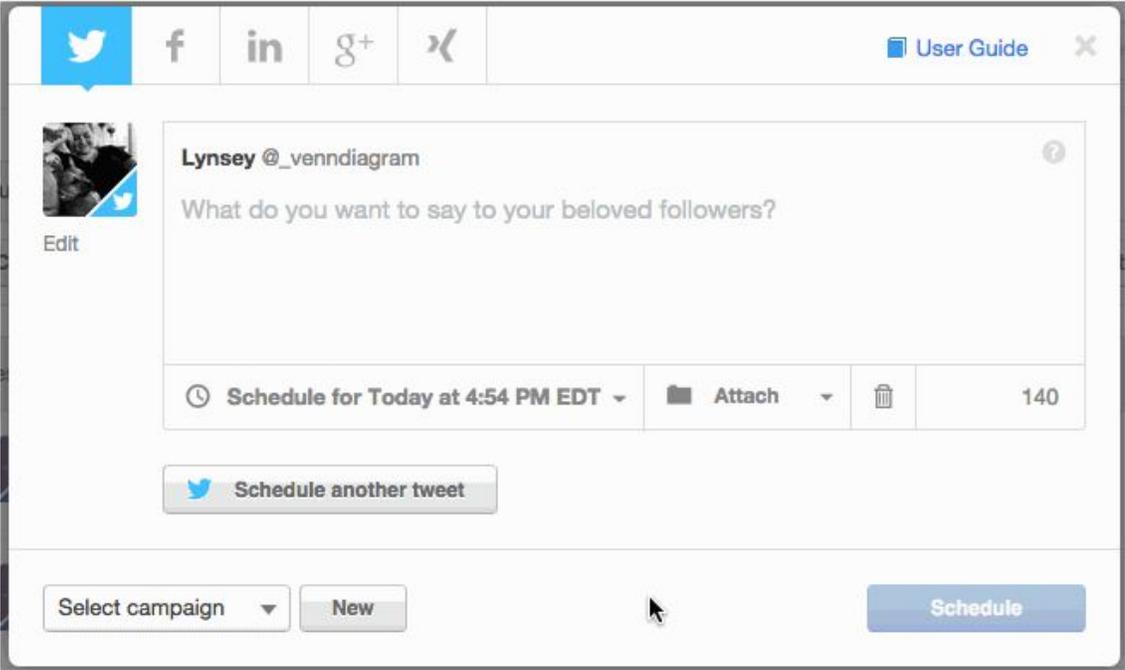


Figure 4-10: Hubspot's social media sharing form brings to mind your relationship with your followers and all the hopefully pleasant emotions associated with it

Evernote, my all time favorite note-taking and clipping app, provides another good example of microcopy that helps users take action. One time, I was exploring the app and came across a screen where you could update your name and profile name. Since I primarily think of Evernote as a solo note-taking app, this feature confounded me. Fortunately, a little bit of text underneath the “Full name” field stated its purpose and encouraged me to fill it up and put one of my cats in the profile photo (see Figure 4-11) in case I wanted to use their Chat feature in the future.

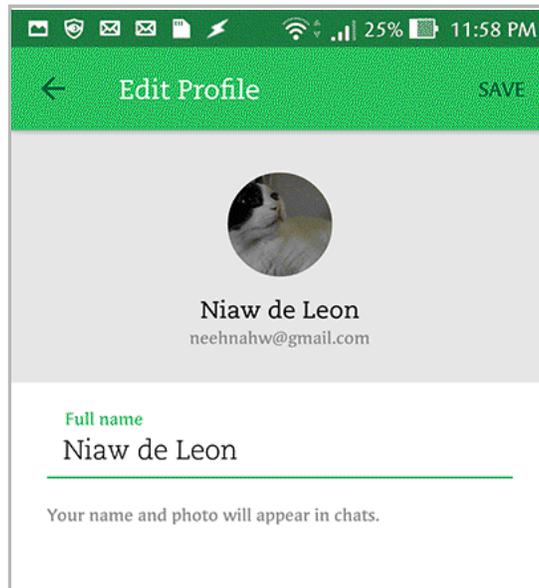


Figure 4-11: Evernote's profile screen explains why such a feature would exist on a note-taking app

Is this really gonna be okay?

In some cases, people hesitate to do something not because of the lack of any apparent benefit but because of the fear of breaking things. In other words, they know they want to do something, but they want to make sure it doesn't affect what they've already made so far. While good app designers build ways to reverse actions, e.g. undo or reset to factory settings, the words we choose affect whether users hesitate to complete their goals.

I'm a fairly new user of SketchUp, and while working on an office interior model that I was going to animate for a video, I was looking for a way to ungroup elements. I couldn't find it at all! But after searching the web, I discovered that it was the "Explode" option (see Figure 4-12).

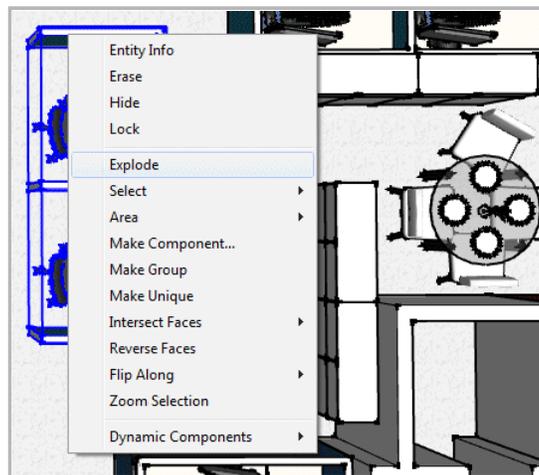


Figure 4-12: SketchUp uses the perplexing term "Explode" to ungroup elements

Even after that mind-blowing discovery, I still hesitated to use it because "explode" seemed so scary and final. Is "explode" qualitatively different from "ungroup"? Or is it just a standard term for 3D modelling or interior design/architecture? Even so, if they were marketing this app as something that's friendly for people with no 3D modelling or architecture background, why use jargon from an alien domain?

How long is this going to take?

Time is something a lot of us don't have much of. Today's hectic world makes us hesitant to take actions that we believe will use up a lot of time without any returns.

Good designs take this scarcity into consideration and build accordingly. For example, Medium.com shows an estimate of the time it will take to read the article beside the publication date (see Figure 4-13). When users see that it will only take 5 minutes, they'd be less inclined to save it for later and likely forget about it. Instead, they'll be more likely to read it immediately.

By using microcopy like this, Medium encourages higher levels of readership, which, in turn, motivates the community's creators to publish content.

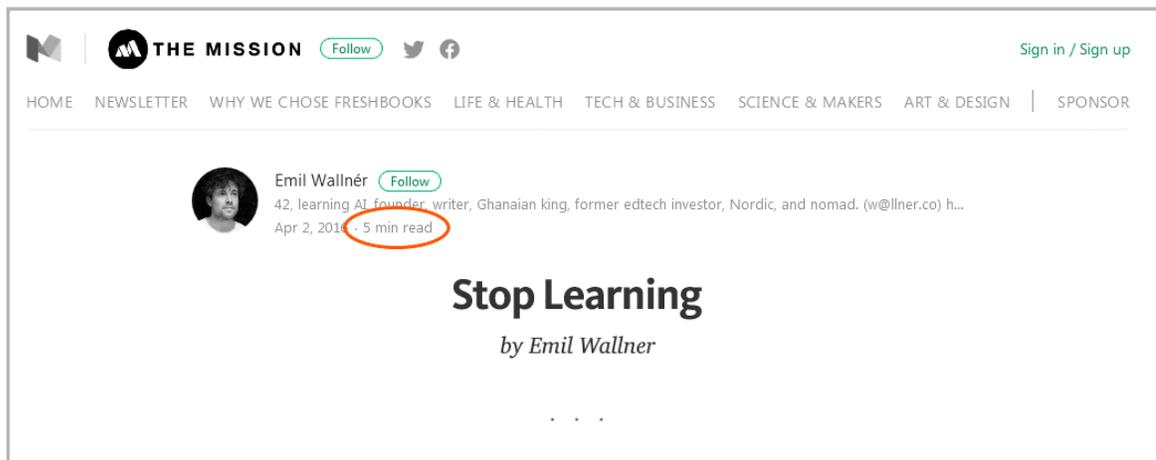


Figure 4-13: Medium shows an estimated time to read (“5 min read”) near the story’s headline

We’ve seen how good designs employ microcopy to encourage users to take action. In the next chapter, we’ll talk about how to make them feel good using the magic of a few words.

Chapter 5 - Make Them Feel Good

The most successful apps don't just help us get things done. They make us feel special—even loved—in the same way that businesses with great customer service make us feel valued. If we think of our user as the guest and our apps as the place of service, then it makes sense for us to not just serve their needs through our functionality, but also to make them feel good so they'll keep coming back. Once we've made sure that we can meet their requirements, build trust, help them find their way, and encourage them to take action, we can turn our attention towards tweaking the microcopy to give our users the best experience possible. In this chapter, we'll learn from examples that do this well and examples that don't.

Am I welcome here?

The first few interactions we have with our users matter. That's why successful brands make it a point to perfect those moments to create an inspiring experience. Starbucks, for example, became one of the world's most successful coffee companies by emphasizing positive experiences and forging personalized emotional connections with their clients, such as when a customer first enters the store.

In the case of apps, we can tweak our microcopy to make our users feel welcome. Mailchimp's onboarding process does this well by choosing their words carefully. In line with their brand voice, Mailchimp uses playful language to make users feel welcome and reward them for completing the setup questions (see Figure 5-1). Note the use of accommodating words and phrases ("Come on in"), second person pronouns ("your list", to walk you through"), inclusive pronouns ("Let 's go!"), and rhyming ("Account's ready, Freddie").

In some cases, a more reserved or formal tone is needed, while still being conversational and welcoming. Think hotel reception or banks.

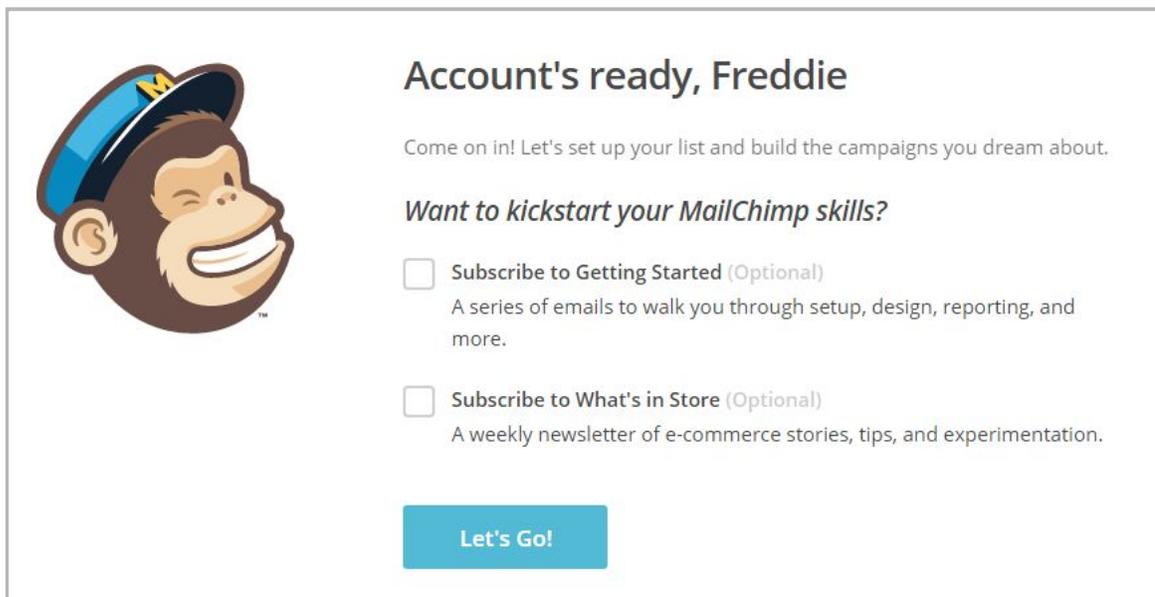


Figure 5-1: Mailchimp's account completion page uses warm, inviting language

Huh? What language are you speaking?

Have you seen the film *Arrival* (2016)? If not, go watch it. It's okay; I'll wait. Oh, still here? Alright. It's a lovely movie for people who love language. I happen to like it a lot since few movies feature a linguist as their protagonist.

In the movie, 12 gigantic spaceships show up around the globe and proceed to...just float and wait—to humanity's wonder and dread. In response, the U.S. government taps linguistics professor Louise Banks (Amy Adams) to figure out the visitor's language and discover their intent before conflict escalates and consumes the world. The conflict arises from humanity's deep mistrust in the aliens not just because of their strikingly different appearance, but also because of their completely different mode of communication.

When an app relies on jargon, highly technical language, or internal vocabulary, it can alienate the user and create a jarring experience that fails to connect with them emotionally (see Figure 5-2).



Figure 5-2: In this funny example from a Foodpanda SMS, we come across the perplexing use of the word “polygon.”

We could guess that the Foodpanda error message meant “area” or “territory” but the usage in Figure 5-2 is absurd. It could have been an error because that part in the sentence was just automatically replaced by whatever system term that they had. Obviously, it would’ve been better had the order not been cancelled. But it would have helped ease the pain better if the app clearly explained what happened and apologized for the oversight—just like how a helpful human being would.

Some time ago, I had some trouble using my go-to budget airline’s online booking and had to look for alternatives. I tried out the Philippine Airlines website first and was horrified. Aside from the total lack of respect for visual design principles such as the use of whitespace, information hierarchies, and appropriate colors, the lack of care in using the right words made for a booking experience that made me want to stab my eyes and drink superglue—not the kind of emotions you want to arouse in your users.

For example, the baggage size selection pull-down used “05kg checked baggage allowance” (see Figure 5-3). In real life, no one really says “zero-five kilograms of baggage,” do they? Unless they’re robots. While the page explains why the user should care about the baggage selection (cost savings benefit), it doesn’t do much in the way of making the user feel welcome.

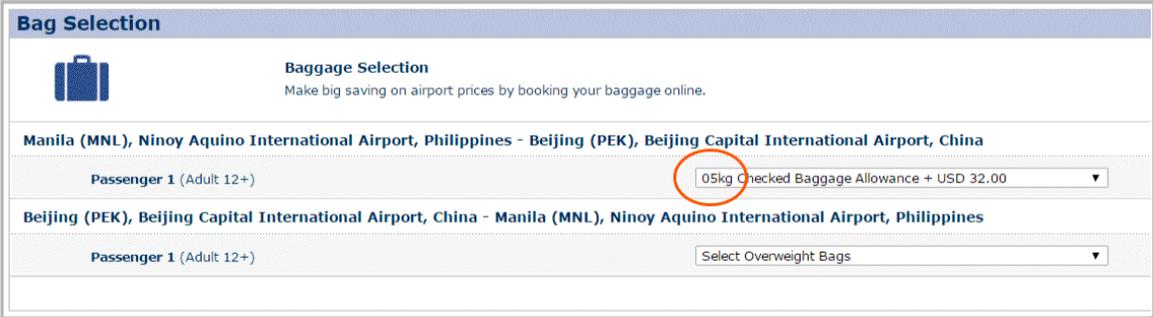


Figure 5-3: Baggage Selection section of the Philippine Airlines booking website

From the same booking website, the seat selection uses the term “carrier” (see Figure 5-4). Sure, that probably has a precise meaning to airline industry insiders, but used in this context, it sounds legalistic in a cover-your-ass kind of way and emotionally distant to an actual human customer on the other side of the screen. It would have been better for them to use conversational language that uses the first person POV to build trust with

the user, e.g. “We can’t guarantee your seat’s availability in case we need to prioritize safety, security, and operational regulations.”

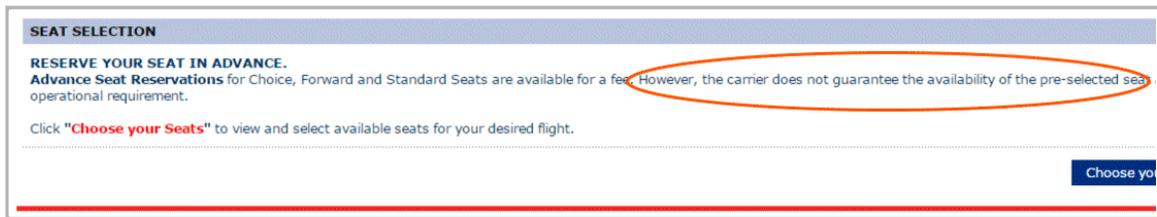


Figure 5-4: Philippine Airlines Seat Selection page using the internal jargon “carrier”

Sorry, but I don't speak technobabble.

Highly technical terms are also something to avoid. When I was part of a team that was developing a meeting application for corporate boards, we had a feature that synchronized the current page of the document across the participants' devices when the presenter swiped their own device. Initially, we called it "Share screen flow," (see Figure 5-5) but found that it confused potential customers and existing users.



Figure 5-5: Old meeting app using the term "Share Screen Flow"

After many iterations and testing, we settled on using the phrase "You are presenting" when the user is the sharing their own screen (see Figure 5-6). This change in the term, coupled with interaction model tweaks, reduced confusion and helped the salespeople present the app in a better light to potential customers. It's important to note, however, that we never could

have gotten to that state without talking to users, testing the app with them, and seeing their reactions. We'll talk about how to validate if your microcopy works in Chapter 6.

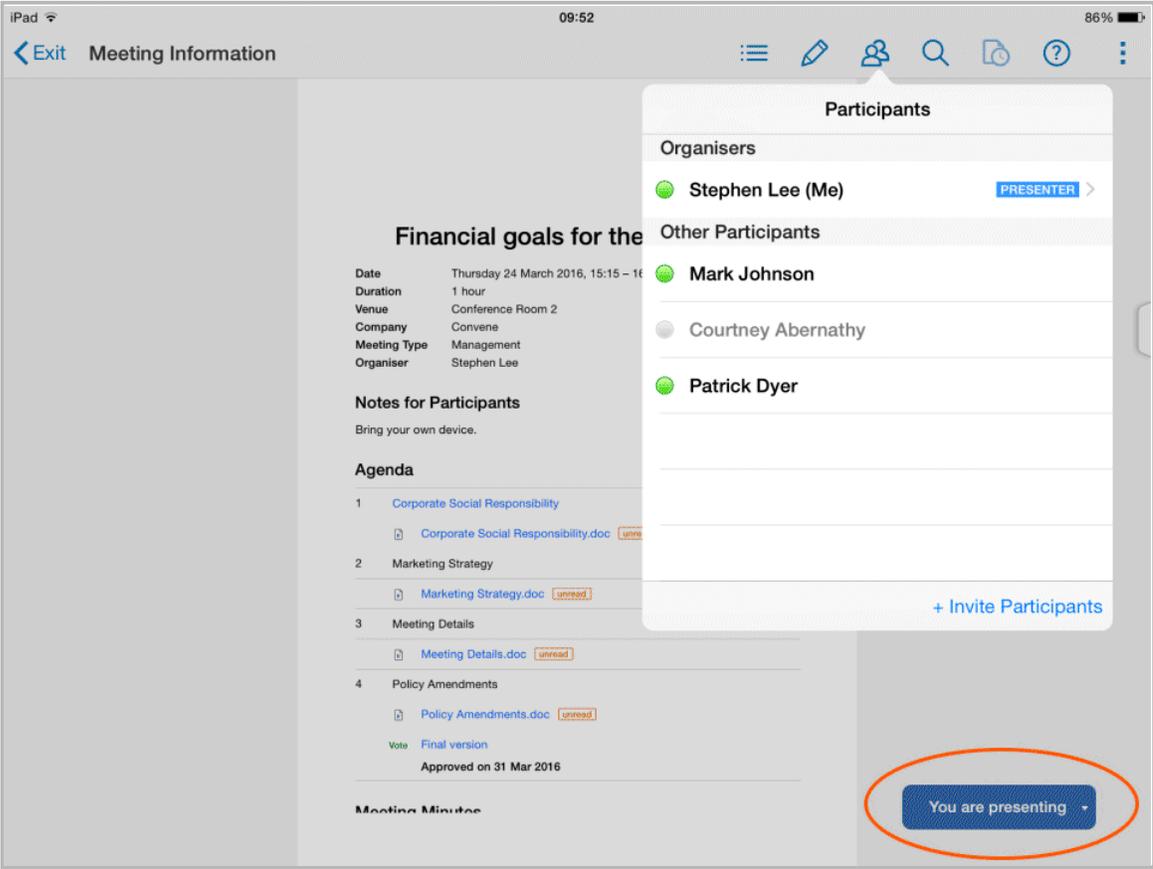


Figure 5-6: New meeting app using the term “You are presenting”

Say what?

Aside from jargon, regional linguistic differences can put off users. In one website I was developing, I used the sentence, “Thanks for downloading our app. For the meantime, you may check these resources.” I had thought “for the meantime” was perfectly normal. It turns out it was only mildly acceptable in the Philippine variant of English and considered incorrect in British and North American English.

Another example I’ve come across is the term “revert”, which is used in the variant of English spoken in India to mean “reply” in the context of an email. It might be normal to users from India but strange for others.

Ignore regional variations at your peril.

Later in Chapter 7, we’ll talk a bit more about the role of grammar in microcopy.

Do you care about me—at all?

It might be strange to think of software caring about you, but we form emotional attachments with our apps. A few choice words can change the mood and remind us that there are human beings behind its design and construction. In the Spotify music app, the heading used when browsing playlists changes according to the day and uses words that bring to mind something positive about that particular day. For example, on Mondays, it uses the heading, “It’s a brand new week” (see Figure 5-7). Note how the app personalizes the experience by showing sleep or night-time playlists since I took the screenshot at midnight of a Sunday getting prepared for the new week.

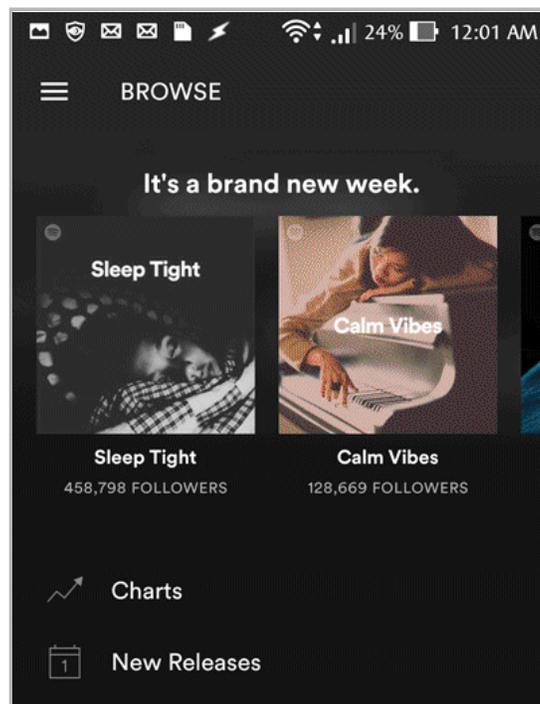


Figure 5-7: Spotify for Android showing its Monday playlists

On Sundays, it shows “Sunday slowdown.” (see Figure 5-8). These little touches make it feel like the app cares about making my life better.

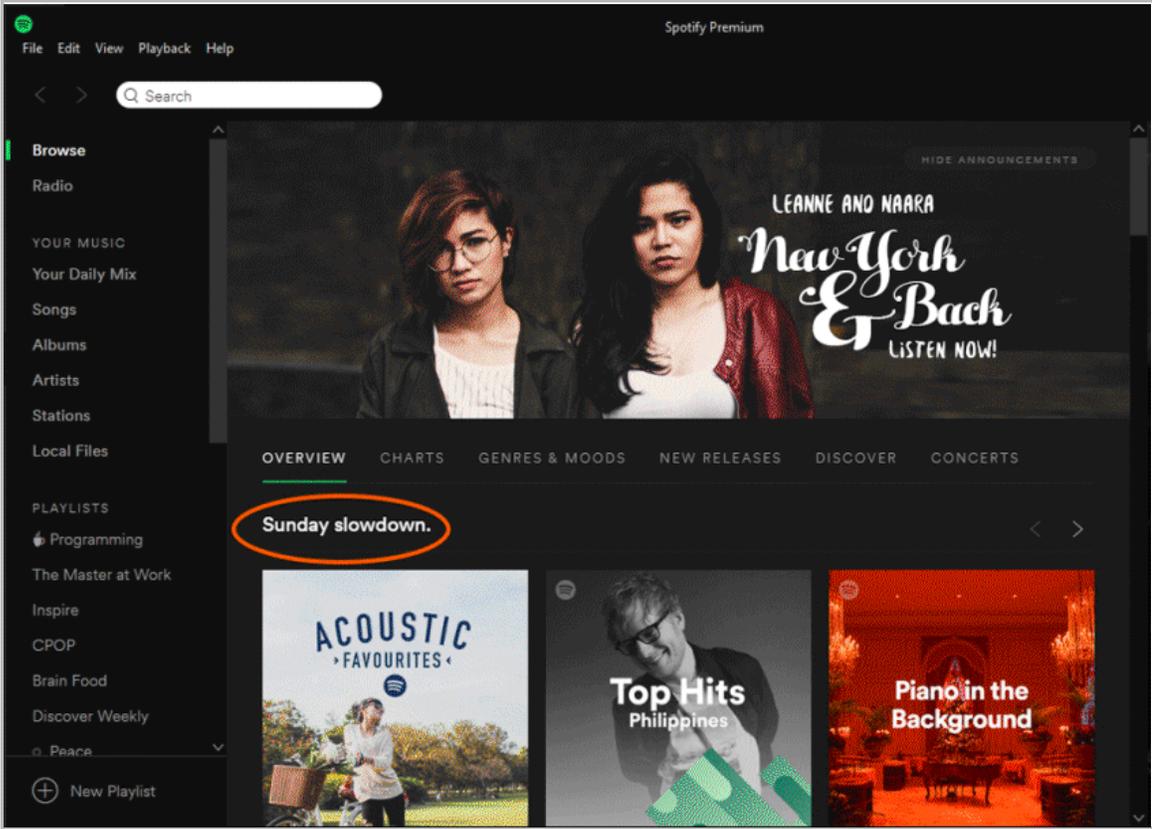


Figure 5-8: Spotify for Windows browsing playlists on a Sunday

UK-based firm Innocent Drinks uses a playful way of asking users to get in touch with the phrase “call the bananaphone” [7] in the Contact section of their footer (see Figure 5-9).



Figure 5-9: Innocent Drinks’ footer uses “Call the bananaphone” instead of the typical boring Contact Us

Using the term “bananaphone” works well for two reasons. First, it matches their brand voice and product (fruit-based juices). Second, they’ve used an

actual bananaphone as part of their marketing (see Figure 5-10).



Figure 5-10: Innocent Drinks' Banana Phone

Websites can also show they care by taking advantage of underused areas to make the user laugh. Take Cultivated Wit, a comedy consulting company, for example, which uses the footer to give users a taste of their humor (see Figure 5-11) [7]. This won't work for everyone, but it works for their particular brand.

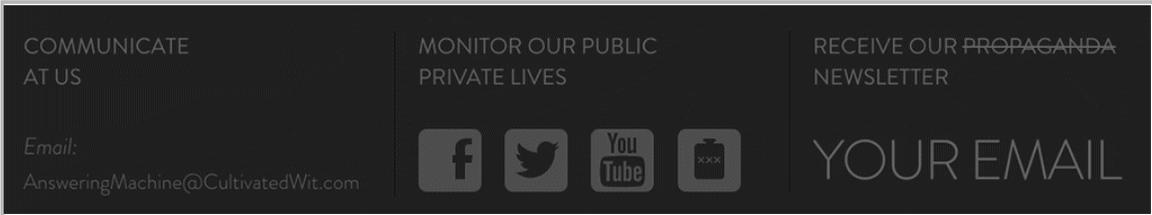


Figure 5-11: Cultivated Wit's funny footer

Did it work? Did it? DID IT?

Imagine if I sent someone to stand beside you as your work. The person would just criticize your mistakes and would never, ever praise you. How would that make you feel? I bet not good.

It seems ridiculous, but many apps actually make this mistake. They place so much attention into making users correct their input but never thought one bit about adequately rewarding them when they succeed. If you can compliment users in the apps you're building, it's a great way to differentiate against your competitors. A superb example of this is the password field of the Mailchimp sign-up page (see Figure 5-12). As you type, the password requirements in the bullet points greys out the very moment you've met that requirement.



Get started with a free account

Create a free MailChimp account to send beautiful emails to customers, contributors, and fans. Already have a MailChimp account? [Log in here](#)

Email

Username

Password 👁 Show

- One lowercase character
- One uppercase character
- One number
- One special character
- 8 characters minimum

By clicking this button, you agree to MailChimp's [Anti-spam Policy & Terms of Use.](#)

Figure 5-12: Mailchimp's signup page uses an interesting approach to password requirements that proves rewarding as you use it

Once you've completed all the password requirements, the bullet points immediately change into a rewarding success message (see Figure 5-13). It's like the software is a person who just patted you on the back and told you you're great. Doesn't that feel good?



Get started with a free account

Create a free MailChimp account to send beautiful emails to customers, contributors, and fans. Already have a MailChimp account? [Log in here](#)

Email

Username

Password Show

Your password is secure and you're all set!

By clicking this button, you agree to MailChimp's [Anti-spam Policy & Terms of Use](#).

Figure 5-13: Mailchimp's password requirements success message

How DARE you interrupt me!

Interruptions are a huge pain. So when an app interrupts a user, it should have a really good reason *and* communicate that reason well. Session timeouts are particularly annoying. For example, if you leave the Philippine Airlines booking website idle for a few minutes, it automatically erases everything you've done so far. This is understandable since the user has entered sensitive information and leaving it lying open places them at risk of disclosing that information to unauthorized persons. The issue with the error message in this example is that it doesn't communicate that reason well. It's a tautological explanation that adds no value (Figure 5-14). It didn't even warn the user it was about to expire, making it more exasperating.

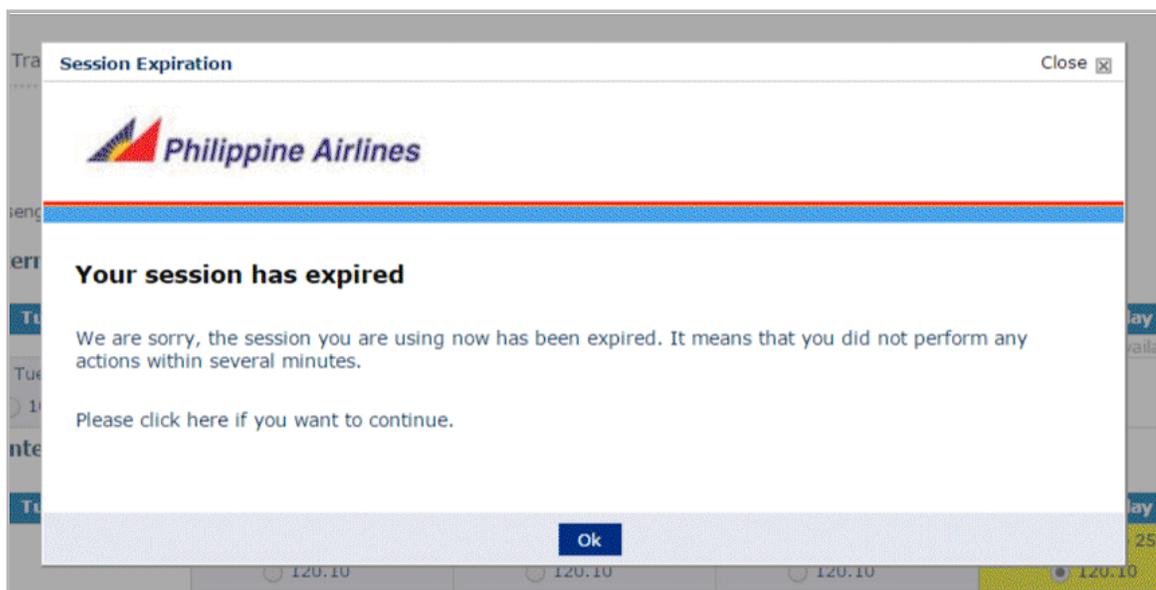


Figure 5-14: Philippine Airlines session timeout infuriates users by not explaining its purpose and benefit

If we can't avoid interrupting our users, then we could at the very least explain why we're doing it, and in terms of their own benefits, not ours. Here, we should have said we're doing this to "prevent your information from falling into the wrong hands".

Why are you showing me this?

You're talking to a new acquaintance and suddenly they're telling you about their bowel movements or sexual proclivities even when it's not the topic of your conversation. "TMI!" you say. It's awkward because the information wasn't relevant to you at that time.

Just like a considerate person, considerate apps would not waste your time and tell you too much about something you didn't need. Software should behave like a considerate human being. [\[9\]](#)

For example, when I was uploading an image to the Adobe Forums, the dialog told me that the file size maximum is 8.7890625 MB (see Figure 5-15). In practical terms, I didn't really need to know the file size to that level of precision. A single decimal would have been sufficient since it's not a scientific or industrial application where such precision matters. Extra detail like this only adds mental clutter that detracts from the experience.

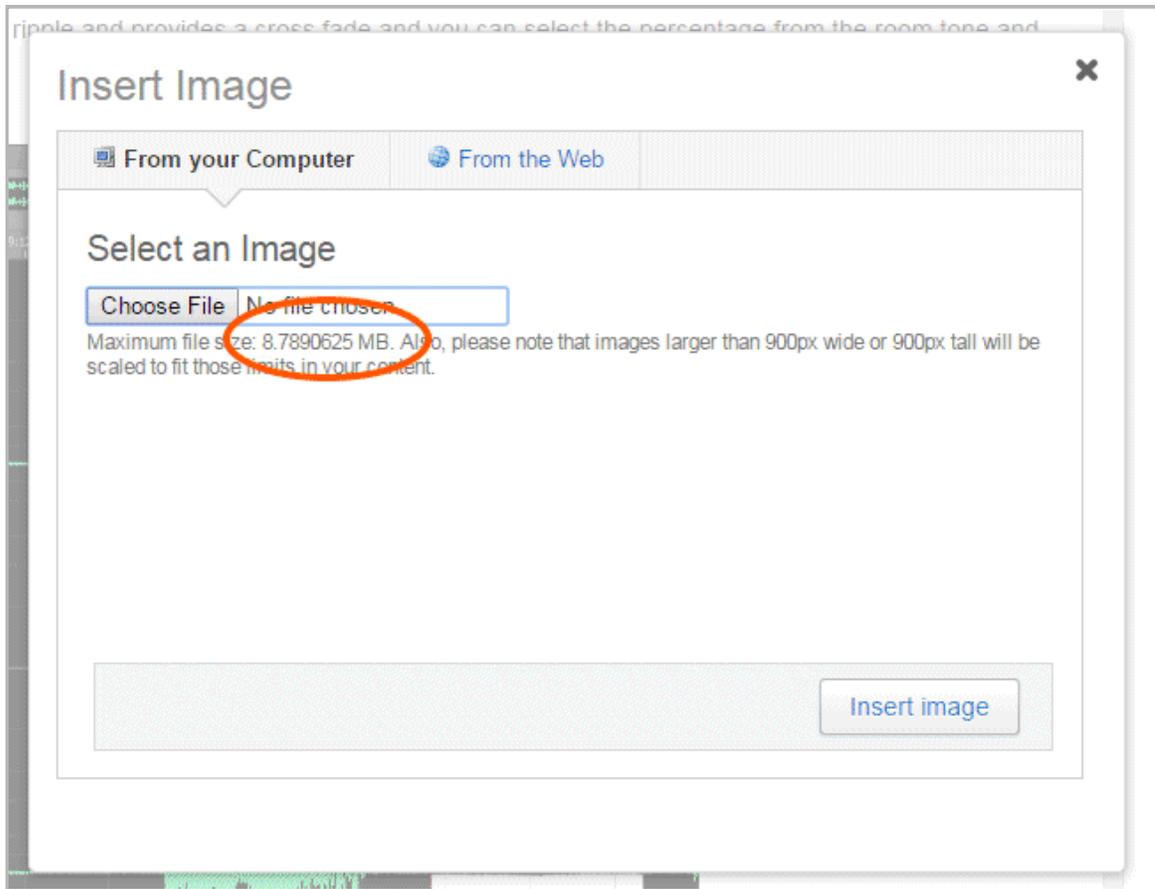


Figure 5-15: Adobe Forums image upload dialog uses an excessively precise maximum file size

What's going on?

It's tough to wait. What's tougher is when we're waiting and have no idea how long it'll take. Think about ordering at a fast food store expecting to get your food within the next 10 minutes. But it turns they ran into problems and didn't inform you about it. Fifteen minutes later, you're pacing and fuming mad because they didn't set your expectations correctly.

Badly designed software does that when it doesn't tell you what it's doing after you've clicked a button or pressed a navigation item. But the best ones not only indicate that you've triggered the action successfully, they use the opportunity to make you feel at ease.

For example, the Slack loading screen uses the opportunity to say something positive in the same way that a nice person would be genuinely happy about you being with them (see Figure 5-16) .

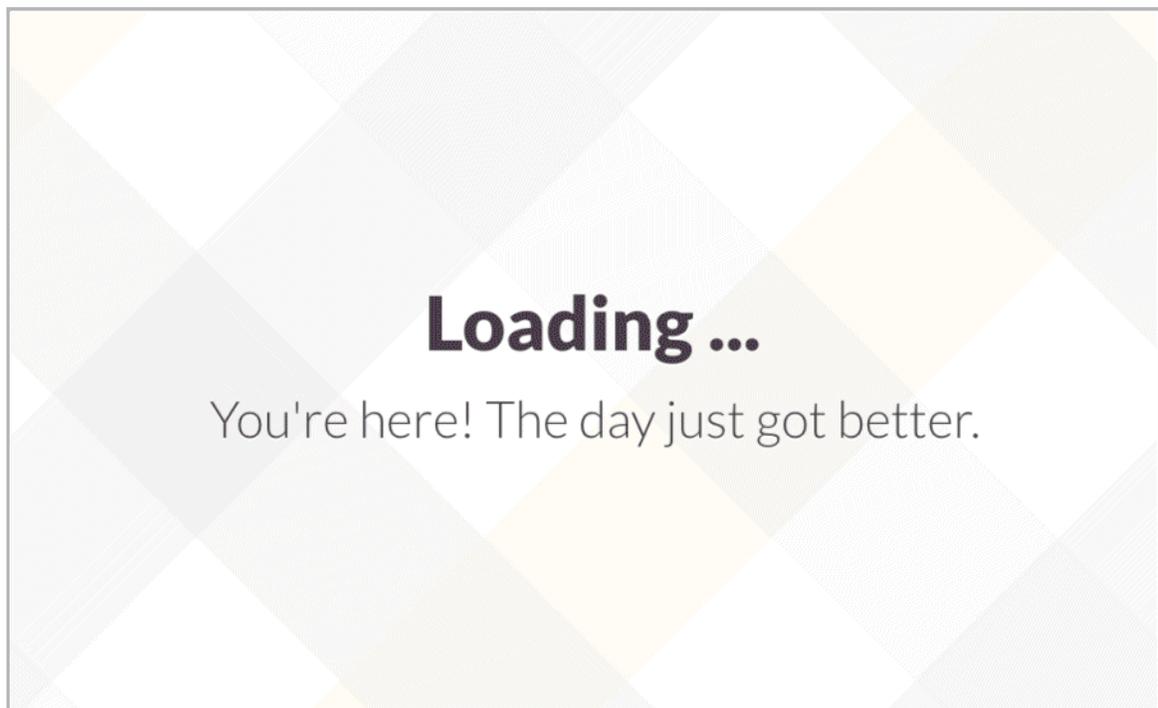


Figure 5-16: Slack's loading screen makes you feel at ease

Contrast Slack’s loading screen with one that uses highly transactional, impersonal wording (see Figure 5-17). Note how it says “the system” instead of “us”? Yes, it’s technically correct that the system is processing the request. But remember that we’re talking to an actual human being in proxy. The software represents the team that built it and acts as a front-liner for the brand. While the previous example (Slack) took responsibility for the loading time, the latter example passed the buck to an impersonal “system”, creating a very different experience—one that’s bland and emotionless.

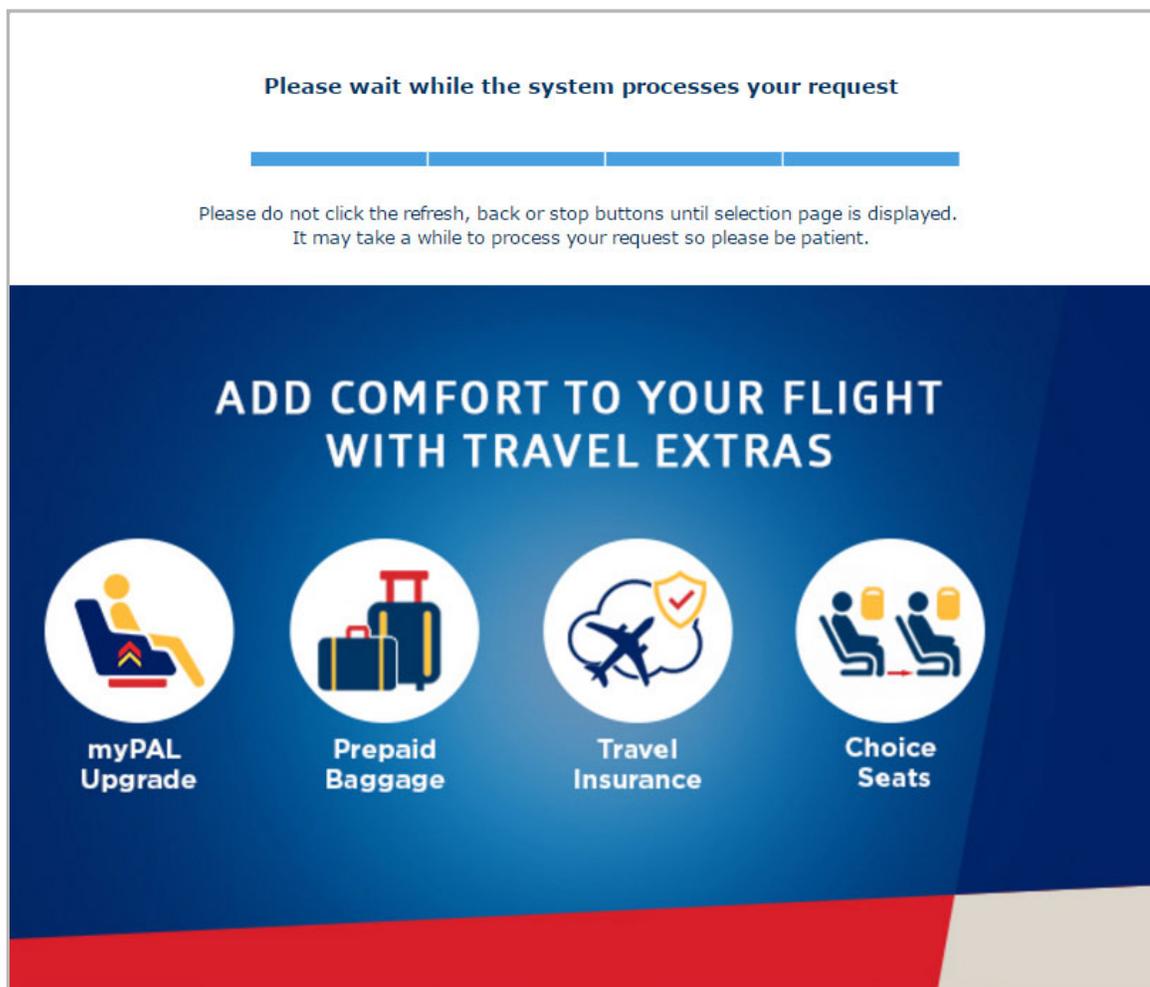


Figure 5-17: Philippine Airlines' loading dialog uses technical, legalistic, impersonal wording

When things will take longer than typical, it’s important to give the user an expected duration and why. E-commerce, for instance, benefits from doing so (see Figure 5-18). In the example, online shop Gitman explains how long

it will take (3 weeks) but also does a bit of marketing (made by hand) in its explanation. Clever, useful, and effective.

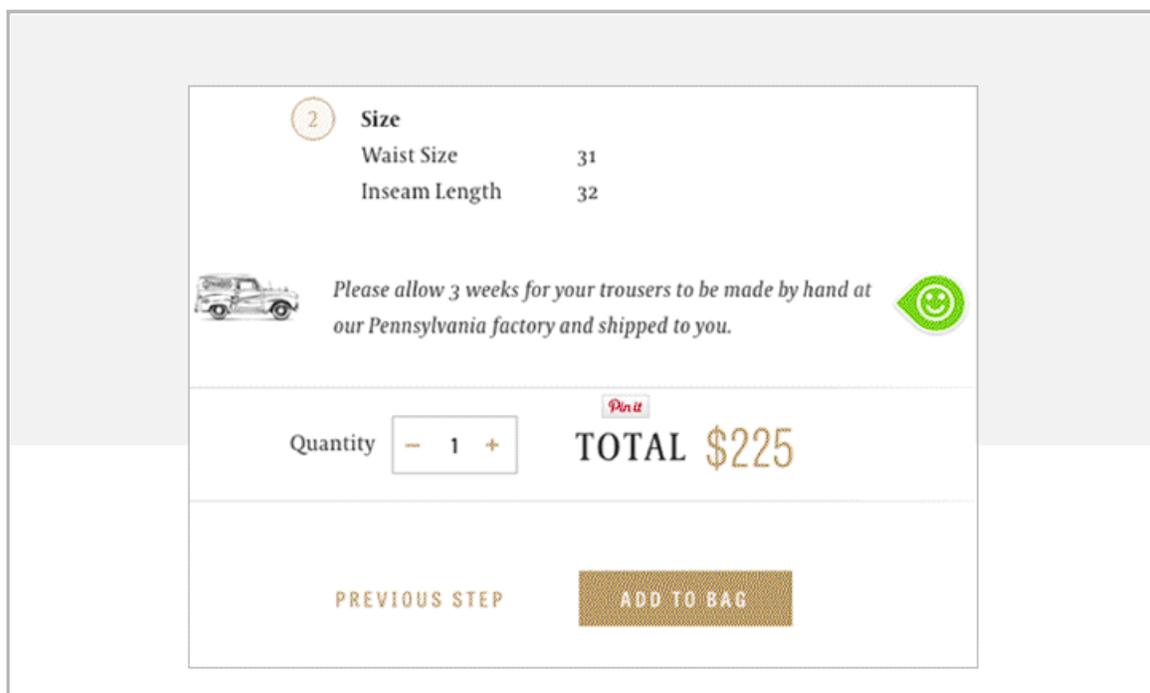


Figure 5-18: Gitman’s microcopy sets expectations while doing a bit of marketing

Thus far, we’ve seen how well-written microcopy welcomes users, makes them feel at ease, sets their mood, and prevents annoyances and disappointments. At this point, we’ve covered the areas of concern that can be addressed by tweaking our microcopy. In the next section of this book, we’ll go through some implementation tips so you can apply what you’ve learned in your apps and websites. In the next chapter, we’ll learn how to plan our microcopy according to our business goals and how it fits within other software development and user experience processes.

Chapter 6 - Process

Congrats! You made it this far? Whoa! Need to take a break? I won't mind. This chapter will be a little bit different. It's all about the process.

The past four chapters have immersed you in the different ways that user concerns can be addressed with well-written microcopy. But microcopy only works when it's appropriate to the target audience and used at the right place in your application. That's why it's crucial to use a user-centered design process from the very start of your project. Such a process typically includes the activities of user research, modelling, wireframing and prototyping, and testing. If you're unfamiliar with these terms, I'll list references in Chapter 8 where you can learn about these. If you're in the middle of your project and have done none of these, you can still use elements of this process to gain valuable insights to steer your development to the right course.

Let's now look at how microcopy fits into this larger design process.

Assigning Roles

There's likely no single correct way to determine who will write microcopy. But it's less likely or even impossible for good microcopy to emerge accidentally. Programmers rarely care or possess the perspective needed to choose effective microcopy when left to their own devices. When I was starting out as a programmer a decade ago, my main concerns were to comply with the design specifications, write maintainable code, and meet deadlines. At that time, I didn't have the skill or time required to tweak the microcopy effectively and as a result resorted to technical terms in my interfaces. I'm still seeing the same tendencies today when working with developers.

Chances are, you might not have someone who can dedicate their time to write the words in your software. Or perhaps you are that person. I've had situations where our writers were alternating between writing proposals and helping with feature names and microcopy. It helped with consistency but left less time to polish the texts on the application.

At the very least, it's a good idea to have one person own that responsibility, even as a partial role. It could be the product manager or simply someone in the team with the best grasp of your users' target language. I've been part of a team where the product manager was also doing sales. As a result, he was able to gain valuable insights about the user's language use during demos and sales calls.

For as long as you have a clear answer to the following questions, you should already have an advantage over many other software projects.

- Who will draft the text in your app?
- Is there someone who can review them?
- Who will maintain the style guide and preferred terms to keep things consistent?

Doing Research

The research phase involves fieldwork and investigative techniques to discover user behavior, such as interviews, observing people as they do their jobs, and reviewing competing products. When I was working on the ongoing enhancement of a meeting app, we also gained qualitative insights from demos with potential users and training sessions with users.

To help you gain the kind of insight needed to write effective microcopy, I've listed some guiding questions you can try to answer as you do your research.

- Who are your target users? Where are they from and what kind of language do they use?
- What industry are they in? Are there any peculiarities about how that industry uses words?
- What publications, books, articles, or media does your target audience use?
- When interacting with target users, what terms do they favor?
- Is there a pattern of language use or vocabulary among the users you've talked to?
- What are their typical concerns (e.g. cost, commitment, quality, speed) when looking for services to solve their problems?
- What business objectives matter most to you?
- Is there an analog equivalent of the service you're building? If so, which ones do well at customer services? Can you tease out specific words and phrases they like to use?

At the end of this process, you can compile your findings as part of a Style Guide or UI Standards document.

Wireframing and Prototyping

In the wireframing and prototyping stage, try to get to the actual wordings as early as possible. No lorem ipsums. No dummy texts. The layout and text should be in the wireframe—reviewed and tested together.

Unlike other aspects of building software, the text is much easier to change later on. But that doesn't mean you want to put it off as late as possible because it can make a huge impact on how the design works.

By this point you should have understood your users' concerns and behaviors as a result of your prior research. You can then use that research to see which pages require extra attention and see whether addressing those concerns with microcopy is the best approach. Most of the time, you'll want to reduce the amount of text and information density in your screens. Other cases call for the addition of information. Use the following guide questions to decide:

- Which screens or pages require important decisions from the user, e.g. sign-up, in-app purchases?
- In these screens, what potential concerns could your users have?
- Could you address these concerns by removing, tweaking, or adding microcopy?
- If you remove the text element, does it change the experience? How?

As Donald Knuth—eminent Computer Scientist and author of the seminal work *The Art of Computer Programming*—proclaims, “premature optimization is the root of all evil.” He was talking about code, but it applies to design too. Don't do too much optimization until you've tested the designs with a few actual users. No matter how well-crafted your words are, they are all, at best, hypotheses that need to be validated by actual users.

Validating Your Work

It's helpful to identify your success criteria at the early stages of your project. What metrics and characteristics would allow you to say that your microcopy was effective? If you don't define these clearly, you could get stuck in endless debates with your team about what's the best word to use. I've been in discussions between customer experience managers, lead product designer, and product managers that stretched for days and weeks with no resolution. Only after we introduced ways to validate our hypotheses using real data and actual users did we stop hemorrhaging precious time that could have been spent improving the application.

Another reason to clarify your goals is to determine what kind of microcopy you should focus on. Here's a list of business goals related to microcopy. It's not exhaustive but I hope it can guide your way.

- **App Downloads** - Download Button Label and Accompanying Text
- **Subscriptions** - Signup Form Button Label, Credit Card Requirement, Privacy Disclaimer, Note That Details Can be Changed
- **Bounce Rate** - Related Content Links, Time to Read
- **Feature Usage** - Empty State Text, 404 Message, Related Feature Links, Friendlier Feature Names
- **User Retention** - Welcome Texts, Loading, Hints, Tooltips
- **Data Errors** - Form Label, Tooltips, Placeholders

You can test your software qualitatively and quantitatively. I believe you should have both in your arsenal because relying on only one of these can lead to gaping blind spots.

Usability Testing

Usability testing is a qualitative way to see how well users can accomplish their goals using your software or website. It works by observing users as they attempt to accomplish scenario-based tasks using prototypes or the working system. I first got acquainted with the process in 2013 when a videoconferencing system project for an academic network in the UK required us to conduct usability tests as part of the requirements. The

concept was fairly new to the software consulting firm I was working for at the time and the responsibility fell on me to facilitate the process and introduce it to the organization. Good thing I found Steve Krug's book *Rocket Surgery Made Easy* and followed the process to great success.

I could say it began my journey towards the fascinating fields of user experience and interaction design because of the richness of insights I gained while interacting with users. I saw how users would miss buttons or controls that, to me, as one of the UI designers, were blatantly obvious. The experience quickly dashed any misconception that we, as a development team, could build good software without validating with users.

From those tests, I also saw how some terms we initially chose were misguided. For instance, we created initial prototypes using the term "Launch" for the buttons, but it turned out that the users expected to find "Start." In a usability test, it's good practice to get users to vocalize what they're thinking as they try to accomplish your task scenarios. The voice recordings and test reports are verbal gold mines that can help you identify what words you should use in your microcopy.

However, it isn't always easy to find people to do usability testing with. In one project where we were developing a board meeting application, our users were board directors of big companies, people who weren't easy to get access to. In those cases, we had to rely on training sessions, demos, and data from support logs to make our decisions. We discovered terms like "voting by circulation", "resolutions", "show of hands", and "secret ballot" only by immersing ourselves in their world. In turn, this kind of immersion allowed us to develop an app that 60-year-olds could use with minimal instruction.

Analytics and A/B Testing

Once your software is already being used by actual users, you can analyze the effectiveness of your microcopy by measuring the performance of your screens and controls. How many times are they clicking on the upgrade button? What percentage of people abandon the process? Why? If we tweak some words, will it improve the performance? These are the questions you can answer with analytics.

There's one important mistake I want you to avoid because I've made the same mistake in the past. You have a hypothesis, for example, that changing the label of a button from "Request a Quote" to "Get Pricing" will get you more leads. You decide to change it today and measure the changes in the next few weeks. You saw a decrease and conclude that it didn't work, so you revert to the previous wording. What you failed to realize was that there were three days of holidays in your target market's country, during which all business slows down to a crawl.

Seasonal cycles like these make such experiments dangerous. There has got to be a way to insulate from such changes, right? That's where A/B testing comes in. By segmenting your target users into buckets and simultaneously testing the performance of the current design vs. one where you changed a small part of the design, you can accurately compare the performance of the variants relative to each other.

Typically A/B testing is done with two variants, hence the term A/B. You can think of A/B testing as a science experiment. You're basically keeping everything else constant but modifying a single thing to see what the effect

is. Which is perfect for microcopy! See Figure 6-1 for an example of two variants.



Figure 6-1: A/B testing examples with varying headings and button labels

Since I'm telling you all about the wonders of A/B testing, I also need to inform you about a dangerous pitfall. Let's say, you wanted to test the effect of adding "Cancel any time" to your sign-up performance.

Variant A (Control): Free 14-day trial

Variant B (Treatment): Free 14-day trial * Cancel any time

After running the test for a day, you tracked 20 visits to variant A and 25 visits to variant B. Among the 20 visits to variant A, 7 entered their name and email address to sign up. And among the 25 visits to variant B, 10

signed up. That gets us conversion rates of 35% and 40% respectively (see Figure 6-2).

Variant	Visits	Trial Signups	Conversion Rate
A	18	7	39%
B	25	10	40%

Figure 6-2: Comparing the metrics of two variants in an A/B test

Using this data, can we now conclude that variant B performs better? The short answer is no. For instance, if we extended the test to run another hour and got 2 additional visits and 1 sign-up for variant A, then suddenly variant A would have performed better (see Figure 6-3). At this point, the numbers are too volatile to be reliable.

Variant	Visits	Trial Signups	Conversion Rate
A	20	9	45%
B	25	10	40%

Figure 6-3: With just two additional visits who also signed up in variant A, its Conversion Rate would have suddenly overtaken variant B

In mathematical terms, the results are not statistically significant. We are not confident that variant B will still perform better if we used a much larger sample size (i.e. if we ran the test longer and tracked more visits and sign-ups).

If you're not a fan of math or statistics, there are many online tools like the one at [GetDataDriven \[10\]](#) that you can use to calculate statistical significance automatically. Plus, many A/B testing tools like Optimizely have statistical confidence features built-in.

Thus far, we've looked at how to fit microcopy into your processes in a systematic way. In the next chapter, we'll talk about the exciting aspects of style, voice, tone, and the mindset you need to write microcopy.

Chapter 7 - Writing

I'm glad you're still here. In the earlier chapters, we discussed the kinds of concerns users can have and how we can address them with microcopy. We also discussed how microcopy fits into the larger design process. But how do you actually structure your words and sentences? How do you make them sound nice and conversational? While a single chapter can't magically grant you copywriting proficiency, I'll help you get started with a few mental exercises followed by specific tips you can immediately apply as you incorporate microcopy into your applications.

As always, validate your microcopy's effectiveness by using both the qualitative and quantitative techniques we talked about in the previous chapter.

Mindset

Before we discuss the specific tips, let me emphasize that microcopy is *not* about being clever. If the copy happens to be clever, that's fine. More importantly, it's about connecting with your users, giving them good service, and talking to them how they wish to be spoken to—with respect and with kindness.

Many of the examples we've gone through in the earlier examples have one common theme. If you can take away only one thing from this book, it's this:

Be considerate.

If you think of your application as a considerate person, how would it behave? How will it talk to your users? What words will it use? In what tone? It becomes easier to decide when you think about your website or app as a representative for your business.

Sometimes, when we're too focused on building apps, it gets difficult to get into the conversational voice and tone needed to connect with our users. To make that process easier, get a pen or your favorite text editing app and try the following exercises.

Exercise 1: The Good and The Bad

Recall two service experiences (e.g. ordering at a store, booking a flight, buying food, going to the bank, etc.).

1. An experience you found intensely satisfying
2. An experience you found infuriating

Write the words and phrases that the service person (e.g. clerk, salesperson, agent, etc.) used. How did they make you feel? Why?

Exercise 2: The Good and The Bad

Scenario:

- A customer walks into a restaurant and orders a piece of chicken with rice, spaghetti, iced tea, fries, a slice of chocolate cake, and coffee jelly.
- Seller needs to inform the customer that it will take 15 minutes to cook a new batch of chicken and that they've run out of chocolate cake.

Instructions

1. Write a script of the conversation between the two people in the scenario above. In this script, the seller is rude but still meets the minimum service required.
2. Make a copy of your first script but make the seller as considerate as possible. What would change? What words what the seller use? Write them down.
3. Having done that, compare the considerate version against the rude version. What are the differences? How can you apply those differences in the app you're building?

Exercise 3: Ticket Selling Booth

The tone of voice will depend on your industry and target audience. Are you developing a website or app for a luxury brand or a donut shop? A bank or a tattoo store? A gym for middle aged people? Here's an exercise to practice using a tone that's appropriate to the situation.

Scenario: You're at a booth selling tickets for a concert you're promoting. A teenager dressed in a hoodie approaches, removes her earphones and looks down to fish out her wallet from her messenger bag.

How would you greet that person? Write the exact phrase you would use.

Having successfully retrieved her wallet, the teenage girl looks up at you and asks, "um, how much for VIP ticket?"

How would you respond? Write the exact phrase you would use.

The girl hesitates a little, but pulls out the cash to buy the ticket. After counting the money, you take out one of the golden VIP tickets and hand it to the teenager.

Ticket in hand, she smiles and shivers in excitement as she carefully pores over the ticket and inserts it into her wallet. She looks back at you and says “thanks!”

What do you say to her at this point? Write it down.

Pull all the things you’ve written together as a continuous script in the following format:

- Customer: “What the customer says...”
- Ticket Seller: “What the ticket seller says...”
- And so on...

If your customer were an old wrinkly lady, hunched over from age and struggling to walk towards your booth, would you have responded differently? If yes, write the sentence and compare.

You look at the clock. 5pm. Almost over. It’s been a long day and you’ve sold a lot of tickets. You’re happy. You’ve sold out all the VIP tickets and only have the Deluxe and Regular tickets left.

From a distance, you see a familiar face. It’s your friend, Reena. How would the interaction go if she had wanted VIP tickets?

Now, did you notice any changes between the words you used for the different people you were selling to? As you build your app, try to imagine your users in this scenario and write down how you’d interact with them.

Writing Tips

If you tried the exercises, you should have gotten some idea on how to make things conversational and how to adjust the tone according to the situation. Let's now go through some specific writing tips that can help enhance your microcopy.

Use First and Second Person Pronouns

Talk to your users like human beings by using first and second pronouns as if you were standing beside them as they used the software.

- Don't say: The system is processing the request.
- Do say: We're working on your request.

There are some exceptions, such as airline ticket booking, where the user might be booking the ticket for someone else. In that case, it makes more sense to say, "We'll contact the passenger's phone number in case of flight cancellations or schedule changes," instead of, "We'll contact your phone number in case of flight cancellations or schedule changes."

Use the Active Voice

Most of the time, it's better to use the active voice where the subject of the sentence is the one taking action.

- Don't say: A message has been sent to your email account.
- Do say: We've sent a message to your email account.

The passive voice emphasizes the action over who performed the action. When used excessively, this kind of construction gives off an impersonal tone and a fear of accountability. Social psychologists Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson named their 2007 book, "Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)," to poke fun at how the passive voice tends to shift blame to some other, unknown party.

Replace Ambiguous Terms with Full Sentences

When you can't find a more layman alternative to a technical or ambiguous term, consider using a full sentence or a question as the label or heading. For example, in a food ordering app for a chicken brand that sold a hot and crispy and original recipe chicken:

Don't say: "Chicken Variant"

Do say: "What kind of chicken would you like?"

This guideline is especially important when the term is ambiguous and risks being taken out of context. For example, the website of TheLadders, a job-matching service, required information to match a user with the right job. They initially used the term "Target Job" as the form label. But in their tests, they discovered that people who didn't work in the job-search industry thought of "Target Job" as accomplishments they hoped to achieve at their current job, not as the details of their next job. When they switched to "What job do you want?" they instantly saw that users no longer hesitated. [\[11\]](#)

Don't say: "Target Job"

Do say: "What job do you want?"

Apply Symmetry

When describing lists of things like benefits or a set of instructions, use a parallel structure to reduce the user's effort to understand it. For instance, if you start the first item with a verb, do the same with the rest of the items.

Don't say: Upgrade to premium to get more space, functionality for note searching , and better team collaboration.

Do say: Upgrade to premium to get more space, search your notes, and collaborate with your team.

Emphasize the Outcome

When writing headings for sections of your site where users need to make important decisions, such as signing up, use the promised outcome to encourage users to take action.

- Don't say: Join the Brand Name's Newsletter
- Do say: Get Daily Design Tips in Your Inbox

Keep it Short.

The best apps use less text. "If you can't explain what a user needs to do in eight words or fewer, then reconsider the design." [\[11\]](#)

Use Grammar Appropriately

While grammar is important for us to communicate our intended message, following rules doesn't guarantee a good user experience. For example, sentence fragments and starting sentences with conjunctions like "but" or "and" are typically frowned upon but common in conversational speech.

In the next chapter, I'll summarize the lessons throughout the book and point you to a curated list of books and articles to expand your knowledge.

Chapter 8 - Conclusion

In the earlier chapters, we talked about the various concerns that can be addressed with effective microcopy, but talked about them in terms of user concerns. Here, let's summarize the lessons as handy rules of thumbs you can apply.

Gain Users Trust

- Demonstrate relevance and compatibility
- Show it is recent
- Don't force long-term commitments
- Explain why you're asking for sensitive information
- Assure them of their privacy
- Address spending and money concerns

Guide the Way

- Show them you're open for business
- Guide users when there's no data yet
- Lead users to the next step
- Show them the right way of entering information
- Add details for features with negative consequences
- Guide them when they're lost
- Explain why something can't be done

Encourage Action

- Reassure users they can revert their actions
- Explain why their information is required
- Describe the benefits of taking an action
- Reassure them that it'll be okay
- Tell them how long something will take

Make Them Feel Good

- Welcome your users
- Use familiar language
- Personalize the phrases
- Make them laugh
- Compliment them on their success
- Justify inconveniences
- Don't overload them with information
- Let them know what's going on

Don't forget, it's important to test all of these to ensure they work in your specific situation. I hope that, with the many examples you saw, you've gained a sense of what effective microcopy can do for your app or website.

As you use apps, I also encourage you to make your own collection of examples. Take screenshots and analyze why the words work or why they don't.

Microcopy, on its own, can't create great apps. But great apps can't happen without the right mix of ingredients, which includes microcopy. As you build your websites and applications, remember how the small things can often make the biggest difference. Now go make the world a better place.

Further Reading - Books

Don't Make Me Think, Revisited: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability by Steve Krug

If you haven't read any book about basic usability, Steve Krug's popular book would be a good starting point.

Rocket Surgery Made Easy: The Do-It-Yourself Guide to Finding and Fixing Usability Problems by Steve Krug

Rocket Surgery is a practical guide to conducting usability tests.

About Face: Essentials of Interaction Design by Alan Cooper et. al

Learn more about the considerate person paradigm in this jam-packed book about interaction design.

The Copywriter's Handbook by Robert Bly

I highly recommend Robert Bly's book as an introduction to copywriting. It's not focused on software but it should give you a good foundation.

Microstyles by Christopher Johnson

Once you've gained a good basic understanding of copywriting, you can then move on to Christopher Johnson's Microstyles, which teaches you how to pack a strong message in a few short words.

Further Reading - Websites

- Good Microcopy < <http://www.goodmicrocopy.com> >
- Copywriting for UX < <https://medium.com/theagency/copywriting-for-ux-1c577924698a> >

Oh my gosh, you made it all the way here! Here's a hug for finishing my book. You deserve that. Because you're awesome.

Contact

If you have questions:

- Join us at the UX Philippines Group to discuss UX and everything around it < <https://www.facebook.com/groups/uxphilippines> >
- Follow me on Twitter at twitter.com/niawdeleon
- Email me at niaw@tempest.ph

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Dedication

To my one and only Zap and our furbabies.

My parents, Jessica de Leon and Felipe de Leon Jr., for instilling in me a love of knowledge and insatiable curiosity.

About the Author

Niaw de Leon is a designer, developer, writer, and entrepreneur with 12 years' experience in IT, half of which were spent on technical roles, with the other half on design, marketing, and communication. In over 60 IT projects within the last decade, she's collected roles as if there were no tomorrow: she's been a framework coder, trainer, proposal writer, front-end developer, UI designer, UX practitioner, business analyst, SEO specialist, and marketing manager.

Niaw combines her deep love for technology, an unbridled lust for communication, and a growing interest in cognitive science to help cross-disciplinary teams build sexy software that sells.

When she's not pretending to write books, Niaw runs creative agency Tempest.ph as its co-founder. She's also the editor of Invent.ph, a publication that celebrates Philippine innovation. Niaw graduated with a B.S. Computer Science degree from University of the Philippines, Diliman.

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 3. What can you expect from this book?
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 1. Will this work for me?
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 1. Is this thing working?
 2. What am I supposed to do here?
 3. So...what do you need from me?
 4. Now what?
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 7. Why can't I do this? Why????
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 2. Why the heck are you asking for this?
 3. Why would I do that?
 4. Is this really gonna be okay?
 5. How long is this going to take?
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 1. Am I welcome here?
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 4. Say what?
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