

Five Simple Steps

A Pocket Guide

The craft of words

Part two: microcopy

by *The Standardistas*

A Pocket Guide to The Craft of Words - Part Two: Microcopy
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Published in 2013 by Five Simple Steps
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Publisher: Five Simple Steps
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ISBN: 978-1-907828-21-8

A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.



Foreword

The Craft of Words (in two parts) covers the role of words as a design element.

Part two (this book) explores the craft of words at a micro level, considering how words can satisfy a functional requirement by aiding and improving design interactions, enhancing interfaces for both function and delight, and helping a user on their journey. Part one (published separately) examines words at a macro level, showing how words can help set a tone and voice, as well as establish and reinforce the personality of a brand.

At both levels – macro and micro – words can, when used in a considered manner as a part of the design process (indeed as another, core design element), aid and improve the user experience leaving users delighted and happy. Given the power words can exert, it's important to give some thought to them, to see them as an element with the power to fundamentally alter and improve a piece of design, and to consider them at the heart of the communication process.

Where part one focused on words as a design element at the service of the tone and voice of a brand, this book explores microcopy: the carefully crafted words that help you fill in that complex credit card field; the handful of words that offer advice and support in the face of unexpected confusion; or the empathetic words that offer a little solace and comfort when encountering an obstacle or mishap. In short, words at the service of functional requirements, words that ease the process, effortlessly guiding you through the task at hand.

We'll investigate the intricacies of functional copy and explore how words – when used well – can lead to interfaces that are both satisfying and pleasant, while ensuring the user gets the job done with the minimum of fuss. We'll also explore how using appropriate terminology can enhance user experience and help avoid missed opportunities.

Microcopy is by no means a new phenomenon. Joshua Porter, Jared Spool, Rely Annett-Baker and many others (including your seasoned authors) have been stressing its importance as a core part of the design process for a number of years. It's also worth noting that the team at 37signals, ever focused on the importance of the written word, dedicated a chapter to its importance – “Copywriting is Interface Design” – in their excellent book [Getting Real](#). (Get it, it's free, no excuses.) As they put it:

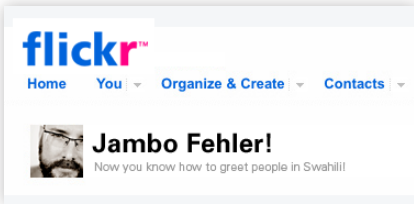
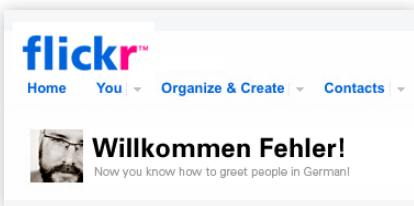
“Copywriting is interface design. Great interfaces are written. If you think every pixel, every icon, every typeface matters, then you also need to believe every letter matters. When you're writing your interface, always put yourself in the shoes of the person who's reading your interface. What do they need to know? How you can explain it succinctly and clearly?

Do you label a button Submit or Save or Update or New or Create? That's copywriting.

Good writing is good design. It's a rare exception where words don't accompany design. Icons with names, form fields with examples, buttons with labels, step by step instructions in a process, a clear explanation of your refund policy. These are all interface design.”

Rewind to Flickr's heyday (a heyday that might just be returning with its recent redesign) and one of the innovations the company placed front and centre in its design philosophy was the careful use of language. Language to delight; language to inform; language – in short – to get things done in a pleasurable way.

Welcoming its users in a multitude of languages was just one memorable and [talkaboutable™](#) way that Flickr set itself apart from the tired and stale world of dull websites that characterised the time. This microcopy, a brief welcome in the service of the brand, lives on in many, many designers' memories, even after the company's recent redesign chose to retire it.



One of Flickr's most popular 'delighters' ([see chapter 4](#)) was the way it welcomed its users back in a multitude of languages.

As we've moved from a service-focused industry (one where we solely build websites or applications for clients) towards a product-focused industry (one where we increasingly build products for consumers), our focus has become considerably more user-centered. In light of this, it's no surprise to see the design approaches we use changing. This shift, from service to product, is not only changing our industry and its characteristics, but is forcing designers to consider the copy they use much more carefully, trying to ensure it serves its functional purpose.

This attitude, which puts the craft of words at the heart of functionality, is becoming more and more important, as the work we do on the web increasingly involves user interactions. In the last decade, the web has moved from being primarily a consumption medium, to one where we're all actively contributing, creating and sharing content with each other. More than ever, we need words to guide us through these increasingly complex exchanges.

In the words of Tim Radford, respected and award-winning writer for The Guardian:

"Words are instruments, they are tools that, in their different ways, are as effective as any sharp edge or volatile chemical. They are, like coins, items of great value, but they represent a currency that, well spent, returns ever greater riches."

— Tim Radford, *The Address Book*, 2011

We couldn't agree more and, on that valuable note, let's get started.

1

Words can help, words can hinder

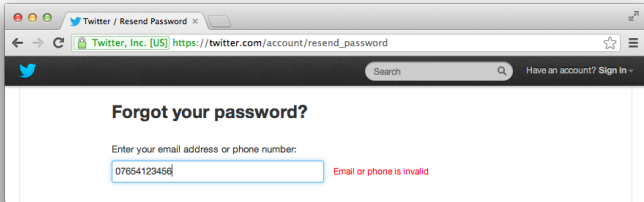
Use the right language and we enhance a user's passage through a site or application; use the wrong language and we stop a user dead in their tracks. We communicate with language (both verbal and visual). It forms the backbone of how we express ourselves. With this inescapable fact in mind, it comes as a surprise, and even a shock, that language – the words we choose to convey our meanings – is often relegated on the design agenda, coming a distant second, third, fourth... long after a design's visual grammar is in place.

The reality is that language, when crafted well, can prove integral to a piece of design; indeed, it often forms the core of the message to be conveyed.

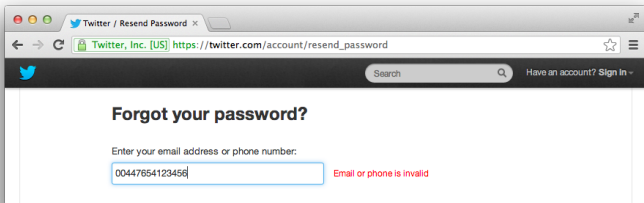
As Joshua Porter, one half of the dynamic duo behind [52 Weeks of UX](#), states: “The fastest way to improve your interface is to [improve your copywriting](#).” We couldn’t agree more. In this short, introductory section we explore how carefully considered microcopy can aid your users through even the most complex of interactions.

When written well, microcopy can rescue a situation; when written poorly, it can confuse and perplex. Forgotten your password for Twitter? No problem, Twitter allows you to reset it in a number of ways. The language Twitter uses, however, when providing user feedback could be improved considerably.

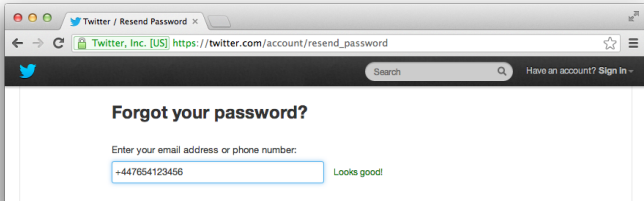
In the following three examples, the phone number is exactly the same, it’s just formatted differently. In an ideal world, all three phone number formats would be accepted; Twitter, however, has opted to accept only one format. By providing poor microcopy, which offers very little guidance, the user is left floundering, wondering what’s wrong with the number they’ve entered (they are, after all, all the same phone number).



This dialog could be more helpfully written to provide some insight into the type of phone number formatting Twitter expects. The phone number is, in fact, correct; it's just not formatted the way Twitter requires.



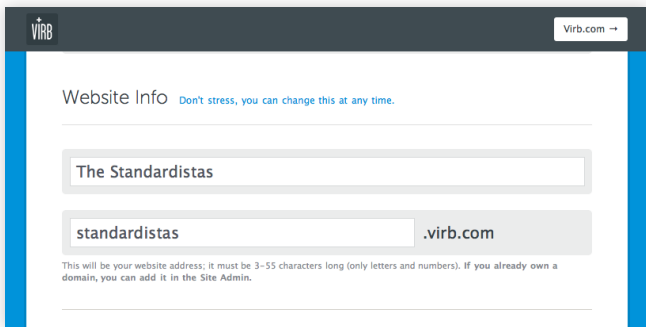
Here's the same phone number, but with the country code added. Still no joy, still invalid and we're still none the wiser.



After three attempts, a little guesswork and a lot of frustration, we're finally there. A better approach to this microcopy would be to provide an example, formatted as required, perhaps as placeholder text, within the form field.

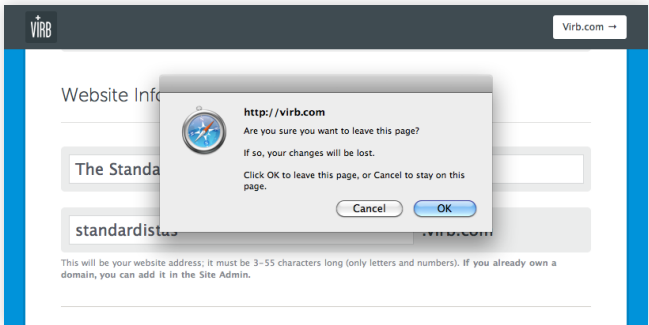
Consider how much easier this could have been for the user if the words – the microcopy – had been carefully chosen and designed with the user in mind. A little effort and an understanding that words can be design too, could remove the guesswork and certainly reduce the frustration, helping the user on their journey.

Virb, on the other hand, eases new users through its signup process with well-crafted copy at every step. When it comes to the field in which new users select a URL, Virb helpfully states: “Don’t stress, you can change this at any time.” By informing new users that they can return to this information later and change it, Virb removes an element of stress from the sign-up process. No more endless worrying about crafting the perfect URL or, worse, abandoning the process. A handful of words and the user is helped on their way.



The screenshot shows a web interface for setting up a website. At the top left is the Virb logo, and at the top right is a button labeled "Virb.com →". The main heading is "Website Info" followed by the microcopy "Don't stress, you can change this at any time." Below this is a form with two input fields. The first field contains the text "The Standardistas". The second field is split into two parts: "standardistas" and ".virb.com". Below the form, there is a small line of text: "This will be your website address; it must be 3-55 characters long (only letters and numbers). If you already own a domain, you can add it in the Site Admin."

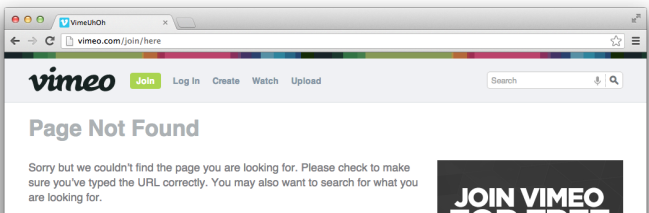
By informing users that they can return to this information – and change it – at any time, a potentially significant barrier to entry is removed.



Should you navigate away from this page, the user is alerted that their data will be lost. Again, this microcopy is clearly written, outlining the implications of leaving the page.

Microcopy can – and should – be used in the service of function, easing a user through a task. But microcopy can also delight and entertain. Hit a 404 page on [Vimeo](#) and the page title reads “VimeUhOh”. It’s a small and easily overlooked piece of copy – and it offers nothing more than a smile – but it entertains and brings a little delight to what might otherwise be an annoyance.

Easily overlooked, Vimeo’s VimeUhOh page title for its 404 page brings a little delight to a frustrating situation for anyone that notices it.



In each of the preceding examples, we recognise the importance of carefully considering microcopy. Twitter's microcopy is a hindrance; Virb's lends a helping hand; and finally, Vimeo brings a smile to your face.

To write effective microcopy we need: an awareness of the importance of empathy (we need to relate to our users); an understanding of the role psychology plays in the design process (we need to know when to step forward and when to step back); and a solid overview of the journeys our users take through the sites or applications we build (we need to understand we can make them easier and less painful).

Hey! Hey! Can U Relate

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. We need to learn to put ourselves in the shoes of our users and learn to understand their needs. As Erin Kissane puts it in [The Elements of Content Strategy](#), we need to learn to "Adopt the cognitive frameworks of [our] users."

Kissane continues: "Publishing content that is self-absorbed in substance or style alienates readers." This is a critical point, and yet it's frequently overlooked. All too often we fall into the trap of using obscure terminology, when we should eschew jargon in favour of clear, plain language.

When we're up close and personal with the work we're doing, we fail to take a step back and look at the problem from the perspective of those who will ultimately use what we're making. It's easy to forget that when others use the shiny thing we've created they don't come equipped with our knowledge. In short, they didn't build it, so they don't know how it works. Perhaps the biggest mistake designers make when writing microcopy (or failing to write microcopy) is assuming that the user will fully understand how everything functions.

To craft helpful copy that aids interactions, we need to learn to inhabit the user's situation and see through their eyes. Such a perspective allows us to better help and guide our users, ensuring the content we write helps, rather than hinders.

In *The Design of Everyday Things*, Don Norman states: "Design is really an act of communication, which means having a deep understanding of the person with whom the designer is communicating."

To grow as designers, we need to learn to understand not only the people we're communicating with, but also the psychology of interactions. Knowing when to gently nudge, when to step out of the way, or when to offer slight relief from a possibly daunting task comes with experience, but understanding that the words we use can play a role in each of these approaches allows us to make better products.

To get better at our craft, we should practise looking at everyday interactions and consider their conceptual models. How can we make these interactions easier? What makes these

interactions harder to complete successfully? What are the conventions established over centuries and decades governing the everyday interactions we undertake?

By asking these questions we can start looking at interactions with fresh eyes, and learn how to be mindful of the interactions we set up, enabling us to determine what small nudges, encouragements and pushes in the right direction our copy can offer.

Words to guide you on your journey

In the following three sections, we'll focus on three areas where microcopy can be put to good use. We'll consider microcopy to enable interactions, helping our users understand and achieve the task at hand; we'll explore how microcopy can alleviate a user's stress when things go wrong, as they all too often do; and, finally, we'll explore the role microcopy can play to delight and entertain our users.

2

Enabling interactions

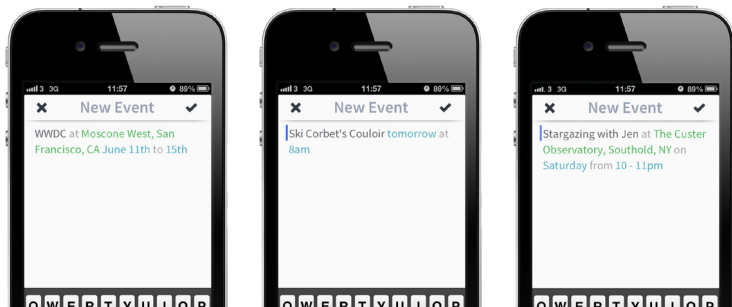
How can we use language to make our sites or applications work better, improve conversion rates, and enable people to fulfill tasks? We illustrate this section with a series of tiny but potent examples of well-crafted copy, which aid the user to achieve the task at hand, while also showing what can happen when microcopy gets in the way and acts as a mental barrier, adding to confusion.

In each case we demonstrate how microcopy can help or hinder; whether it's through: carefully crafted placeholder text that subtly but powerfully educates the user about the possibilities an application offers; somewhat confusing microcopy (courtesy of Amazon, no less) that acts as an impediment to enabling the desired interaction (completing a purchase); or the handful of words – just three to be precise – that show the human face of a digital service.

Horizon

[Horizon](#), a minimal, information-focused alternative to Apple's Calendar, uses the craft of words (with a clever and subtle dash of colour) to neatly guide new users through its unique data entry process. By providing a variety of placeholder text examples, Horizon guides new users, directing them to the different types of data recognised and parsed by the application's natural language processing (NLP).

Horizon's carefully crafted placeholder text subtly educates users on the different data types it can extract through natural language processing.



Horizon's use of colour in the screenshot is worth noting. By picking out keywords in different colours, users who are new to the application learn about the different data types the application supports: locations in green; dates (relative and absolute) in blue. The words themselves also play an important part: they're recognisable as types of content, allowing new users to recognise the kinds of language Horizon supports.

What's especially nice about this example is that this placeholder text offers subtle cues which assist the novice, while not getting in the way of the more experienced.

Language underpins Horizon's functionality, allowing users to enter information using natural language, instead of having to manipulate several drop-down menus and toggles to get the desired result. As such, it makes sense to use language to the full in the application design. There are no frills, no extra words, no cute copy – just what's required, and that's it.

Amazon's mixed messages

We need to be careful with the copy we use, ensuring it communicates a clear and unambiguous message. Too much can overload the user; too little can confuse. In this example Amazon suggests we "Apply Balance to This Order" and yet, just above, we see that we have already, "applied £16.00... to this order." We've already successfully applied some of our hard-earned funds to this order – do we need to apply more? It's impossible to tell.

You have successfully applied £16.00 in gift certificate funds to this order.

You have a Gift Certificate balance of £31.49.

 [Apply Balance to This Order](#)

Amazon – often obsessed with user journeys that lead towards a checkout – confronts the user with a perplexing and contradictory choice, leading to confusion.

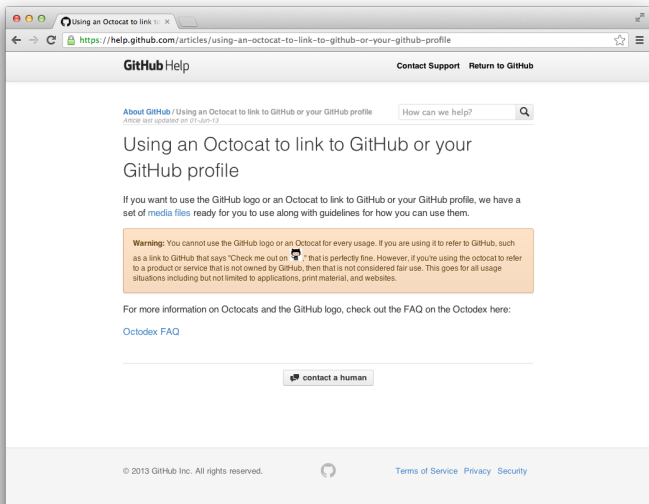
Amazon, usually ruthless when it comes to driving users to complete purchases, places a hurdle in the way. The language is confusing (but then, arguably, so is the decision to include this button). The bottom line: test, test, test. Ask your users what they understand your words to mean. If they don't understand, rewrite.

Help! I need somebody...

Getting lost in an FAQ section is never fun, especially when it can stretch to encompass numerous parts, each with numerous frequently asked questions. Faced with an endless list of FAQs, sometimes all you really want to do is ask someone – it's human nature, after all, to want to communicate with a person, not a machine.


[GitHub Help](#), while answering an extensive set of questions covering almost every conceivable outcome, at every point on the journey offers the user the opportunity to “contact a human”. These three words, microcopy at its most concise, throw a much needed lifeline to a potentially frustrated user.

GitHub’s “contact a human” is excellent microcopy. It would be difficult to use fewer words to get the message across.



The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying a GitHub Help article. The browser's address bar shows the URL: <https://help.github.com/articles/using-an-octocat-to-link-to-github-or-your-github-profile>. The page header includes the GitHub logo, "GitHub Help", and navigation links for "Contact Support" and "Return to GitHub".

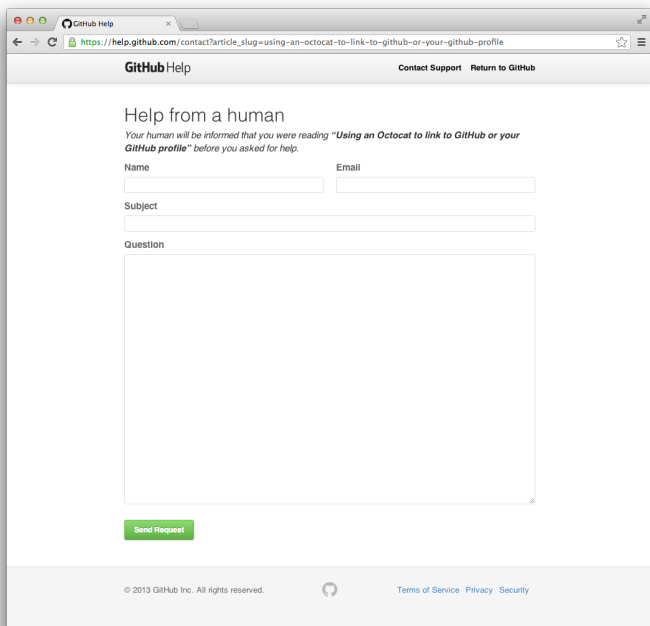
The article content includes:

- A search bar with the placeholder text "How can we help?" and a magnifying glass icon.
- The article title: "Using an Octocat to link to GitHub or your GitHub profile".
- A sub-header: "About GitHub / Using an Octocat to link to GitHub or your GitHub profile".
- A paragraph: "If you want to use the GitHub logo or an Octocat to link to GitHub or your GitHub profile, we have a set of [media files](#) ready for you to use along with [guidelines](#) for how you can use them."
- A warning box with an orange background: "Warning: You cannot use the GitHub logo or an Octocat for every usage. If you are using it to refer to GitHub, such as a link to GitHub that says "Check me out on ," that is perfectly fine. However, if you're using the octocat to refer to a product or service that is not owned by GitHub, then that is not considered fair use. This goes for all usage situations including but not limited to applications, print material, and websites."
- A paragraph: "For more information on Octocats and the GitHub logo, check out the FAQ on the Octodex here:"
- A link: "Octodex FAQ"
- A button: "contact a human" with a speech bubble icon.

The footer contains the copyright notice: "© 2013 GitHub Inc. All rights reserved.", the GitHub logo, and links for "Terms of Service", "Privacy", and "Security".

Click on “contact a human” and GitHub helpfully takes you to the following well-thought-out page that uses an equally delightfully crafted piece of copy: “Your human will be informed that you were reading...”

It eases the pain to know that a human is now involved in the process and that help is at hand. Great work from GitHub.



The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL https://help.github.com/contact?article_slug=using-an-octocat-to-link-to-github-or-your-github-profile. The page header includes the GitHub logo and navigation links for "Contact Support" and "Return to GitHub".

Help from a human

Your human will be informed that you were reading *"Using an Octocat to link to GitHub or your GitHub profile"* before you asked for help.

Name

Email

Subject

Question

[Send Request](#)

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Such attention to detail – which in this case amounts to but a handful of words – humanises the interaction, not just enabling it, but making it friendly and more relatable. In a world where all we hear at the end of a phone are automated messages (“Your call is important to us, please hold...”), it’s a pleasure to know that a human is ready to help.

Easing the flow

As we’ve seen in the examples above, carefully considered microcopy can ease the flow, aiding and enabling interactions or, when it’s been poorly considered, get in the way. Horizon’s designers use words to help bring new users on board, subtly showcasing how the application works. Amazon, on the other hand, applies a balance to your order yet wonders if you’d like to... apply a balance to your order. Confusing. In both cases – at opposite extremes of the continuum – language helps or hinders. Putting some thought into the language you use, in particular your functional microcopy, can ease a user’s passage through your website or application, and that’s something worth striving for.

In the next section we’ll look at how microcopy can be used when things go wrong, focusing on using words to defuse the tension of a situation and demonstrate a little empathy. Onwards...

3

When things go wrong! :-)

In this section we look at how we can help people get back on track when things go wrong (as they often do). As we mentioned earlier, empathising with your users is important; when things go wrong, carefully considered language – language which puts people first – is more important than ever. It's no surprise to discover that, in the face of a fault of some description, frustration often ensues. While carefully crafted microcopy might not solve the problem, it can at the very least offer your users a sense that you care.

In [The Craft of Words - Part One: Macrocopy](#) we mentioned MailChimp's [Voice and Tone](#), which clearly underlines the company's understanding of the importance of language:

"Before you write content for MailChimp, it's important to think about our readers. Though our voice doesn't change, our tone adapts to our users' feelings. This interactive guide will show you how that works."

MailChimp is well known for its use of fun and engaging language, especially when it applies to their mascot, Freddie. That tone, intended to surprise, delight and arouse curiosity, completely changes when things go wrong. As they state from the outset, "our tone adapts to our users' feelings."

MailChimp's approach to language alters completely in the face of failure. Gone is the light-heartedness of Freddie the chimp, replaced by straightforward language that gets to the point quickly and efficiently.

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the 'Voice & Tone' interactive guide for a 'FAILURE MESSAGE'. The page has a dark red background. On the left is a navigation menu with 'CONTENT TYPES' and a list of content items. The main content area is divided into sections: 'USER' (with a speech bubble containing the text 'What went wrong? I really need to get this campaign out.'), 'USER'S FEELINGS' (listing 'Confusion', 'Stress', and 'Anger'), and 'TIPS' (listing three guidelines: 'Be straightforward...', 'Be calm...', and 'Be serious...'). A 'MAILCHIMP' logo is visible in the bottom right, and a dark box contains the text 'We're experiencing a problem at one of our data centers.'

Voice & Tone

CONTENT TYPES

- Freddie's Jokes
- Success message
- App copy
- Company newsletter
- Blog
- App copy 2
- Public site
- Webinar
- Guide
- Twitter, Facebook
- Knowledge Base
- Guide 2
- Blog 2

FAILURE MESSAGE

USER

What went wrong? I really need to get this campaign out.

USER'S FEELINGS

- Confusion
- Stress
- Anger

TIPS

- ✓ Be straightforward. Explain what's going on right away.
- ✓ Be calm. Don't use exclamation points or alarming words like "alert" or "immediately."
- ✓ Be serious. Don't joke around with frustrated people.

MAILCHIMP

We're experiencing a problem at one of our data centers.

In the face of failure, MailChimp's tone alters. Gone is the light-heartedness of Freddie the chimp, replaced by straightforward language that explains what's at issue right away. MailChimp understands that when users feel confused, stressed and angry that its tone needs to change: "Be serious. Don't joke around with frustrated people."

MailChimp's Voice and Tone is a fantastic example of a company paying attention to the detail of language, and understanding the importance of communicating with a tone of voice appropriate to the situation.

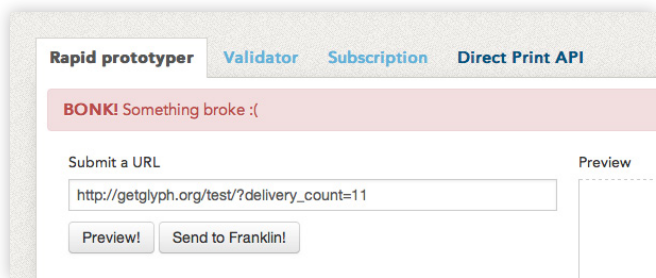
Bonks and clanks!

When things go wrong, our instinct is to try to lighten the mood. A parent will immediately try to distract a young child who's just fallen flat on their face, so that only seconds later (and with a mouthful of gravel) they happily run along without a care in the world.

On the web, things go wrong all the time, so it's not unexpected that we often encounter copy that serves that very same purpose: to lift the mood and distract us – even if just for a moment – so that we, too, can run along happily (hopefully without a mouthful of gravel).

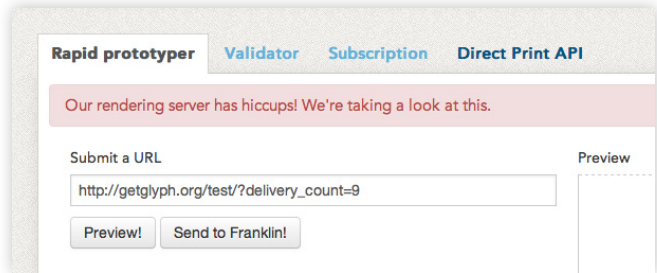
The folks at BERG, behind the wonderful [Little Printer](#) understand this all too well. When things go wrong with their Little Printer Rapid Prototyper they communicate this using microcopy that echoes the Little Printer's lifelike personality: "BONK! Something broke :(".

BERG's Little Printer Rapid Prototyper attempts to lighten the mood by recalling the sound an actual printer might make if something went wrong: "BONK!" The emoticon, a couple of characters, also offers a little light anthropomorphic relief.



Naturally – when you're in the middle of your working day and trying to get something done, namely test a prototype – repeated BONKs might become a little frustrating and annoying. Faced with this circumstance, the BERG folks alter the message, offering a little more information on what's gone wrong, and still with a light-hearted touch.

An error message that evolves, while maintaining its light-hearted tone, offers the user a sense that, joking aside, its technical team are taking a look at this.



Traditionally, error messages were serious, for good reason: when something wasn't going right, any right-thinking designer or developer naturally assumed their duty was to get the user back on track as soon as possible. It seems that this approach, just getting the information across, is no longer sufficient. Unless we inject some personality into what might otherwise be dry copy we're not doing our job. As such, an abundance of whimsical error messages are finding their way to our screens.

Another similar example is [Dribbble](#)'s use of "Clank!" which accompanies and cheers up a more descriptive message of just what went wrong, in this case an attempt to upload a file type that Dribbble doesn't support.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL `dribbble.com/shots/new`. The page title is "What are you working on?". Below the title, there is a section "Upload a new shot" with a red bar that says "Clank!". Below this bar, a white box contains the error message: "Invalid file extension. Only JPG, GIF or PNG are supported." Below the error message is a large dashed box with the text "Drag an image here or browse for an image to upload." Below the dashed box, there is a note: "JPG, GIF or PNG. Dribbble shots are 400x300 pixels or 800x600 (for HDPI displays). If your image is bigger than the sizes above, we'll help you crop it." On the right side of the page, there are sections for "Bandooogle is hiring UI Designer (Anywhere)", "Upload Stats" (showing 32 shots free), and "Before You Upload" with a link to "Read the Player's Handbook" regarding content guidelines. At the bottom of the page, there is a footer with the Dribbble logo, a "Company" section (About, FAQ, Contact, Terms, Privacy, Shop), a "Community" section (Blog, Meetups, Newsletter, Testimonials, Handbook, Brand Guidelines), a "Connect" section (Find Designers, Jobs for Designers, Go Pro, Teams, Advertise, API), and a copyright notice: "Copyright © 2009–2013 Dribbble LLC. All screenshots © their respective owners. Shipped from Salem, Mass. USA." There are also social media links for Twitter and a note "Hosted by (mt) mediatemple". On the right side of the footer, there is a Dribbble logo and the text "121,339,156,253 pixels dribbled".

Dribbble explains the intricacies of the rather complex subject of file formats and image compression algorithms in a playful manner, while not obfuscating the actual error message relating to the image content type, thereby placating the average, self-respecting nerd.

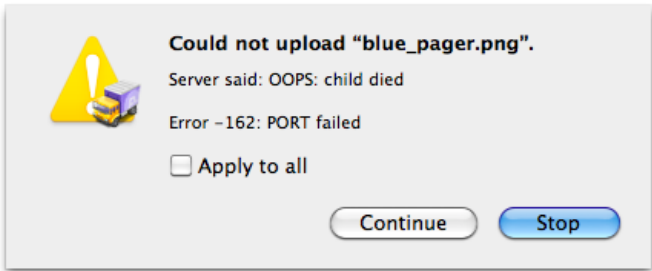
It has to be said, however, that sometimes dry microcopy is just fine. We can often get along with a factual description of the state of affairs, skipping the elaborately conjured up exclamation followed by the obligatory exclamation mark. On the other hand, there is an effort that's been invested into these messages. They show that someone cared about this particular interface, and the opinion you or I would have on it.

There are plenty of good examples of short, sharp messages that lighten the mood and make us feel better, without making the microcopy feel forced. If you're in doubt, there's no harm in running with an old-skool factually accurate message instead, as long as that message makes sense to the human on the other side of the screen.

Dōmo arigatō, Mr. Roboto

Alleviating a little frustration and tension might be just what the doctor ordered, but it's worth remembering that we're not always in command of the bridge. When things go wrong, we occasionally have no choice but to fall back on the low-level, generic messages provided by the system.

The following example, generated by Panic's excellent [Transmit](#) leaves the user none the wiser as to what has gone wrong: children have died, ports have failed and, worryingly, we have the opportunity to spread this carnage by simply ticking "Apply to all".



This error message from Panic's excellent Transmit delivers a message straight from the heart of the server; a message which would be daunting enough, even without the worrying fact that "OOPS" a "child died".

Originating in the world of [Linux development](#), oops errors were indications of deviations from the correct behaviour of the kernel. Oops is not an abbreviation, nor does it stand for anything in particular; it just means something went wrong. When your website or application throws error messages which are as low-level as this, something has definitely has gone wrong. Sadly, it's not always within your control to fix this kind of error, as it relies on higher level instances suppressing the incomprehensible messages from deep, deep down.

Occasionally, error messages intentionally introduced at the design and development stage slip through the net. The following example, courtesy of [moo.com](#), shows what happens when some development microcopy makes it through unintentionally to the final, shipped product (an ironic oversight by a company which

prides itself on user-friendliness). Put yourself in the shoes of a typical user, who doubtless has never heard of a UI, and you can imagine the confusion this might cause: “Oh my goodness! Did I break something?”



This message from moo.com was never meant for a typical user's eyes. It was left in the code, unintentionally we hope, by a developer who needed this information when testing the site. At a later stage, it should have been replaced by something ordinary humans would understand.

Allowing error messages like these to creep through into your user interface is, more often than not, a sign of either laziness or incompetence. There are only a few reasons why we would want to see unadulterated server messages and most of the time we'd be better off with something less generic, and more understandable and considered (not to mention human-comprehensible).

Luckily, there are methods which allow us to intercept most low-level messages without too much effort. Doing so certainly makes your interface more human, which by all accounts isn't a bad thing.

404, 413... four what?!

Of course, as dyed-in-the-wool (tweed?) nerds, we pride ourselves on having mastered the complete list of HTTP response status codes. We know a 301 has moved permanently, a 404 is MIA, and a 500 is a sign that “Something has gone wrong!” (Or “Internal Server Error” to be more accurate, if a little less human.) We, however, are not typical users. Typical users see these quasi-magical numbers and – guess what? – have no idea what is going on. We can, and should, do better.

Put yourself in the position of a typical, non-technically literate user who has just signed up to use [TripIt](#). That user would like to add a new profile image to their account. Carefully following the site’s instructions, they choose a shiny, new portrait and attempt to upload it. Little do they know that their high-resolution JPEG is far, far too big for TripIt’s server to handle. The endless wait notwithstanding as the server attempts to cope with the user’s giant image, the following error message leaves them utterly confused. What exactly is the “Entity” in question here? The user has absolutely no idea and is left feeling like they’ve broken something.

When uploading a new profile image on TripIt, this message apparently lets us know that the image we attempted to upload was too big. Put yourself in the shoes of the average user and you’ll appreciate that this 413 error doesn’t offer a great deal of help.

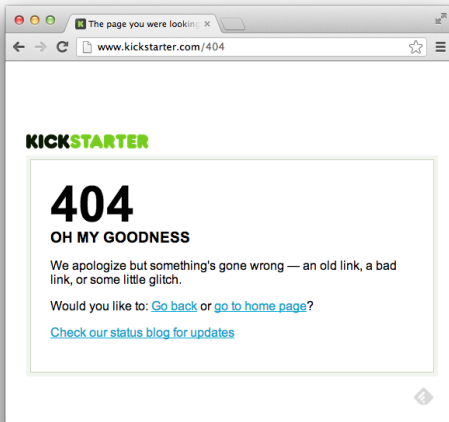
413 Request Entity Too Large

www.tripit.com/account/update

413 Request Entity Too Large

This could be handled so much more effectively. A little thought and care given to microcopy that actually communicates in clear and easy to understand language would solve this problem quickly, offering clear guidance to the user: “We’re sorry, but the profile image you tried to upload was too large...” Even better, offer some advice and guidance: what’s the maximum size of image accepted? (Providing this information before the user attempts to upload their profile image? Even better!)

Kickstarter, on the other hand, uses clear and plain language, tempered with a little playfulness: “OH MY GOODNESS”. Better still, they apologise (you’d be surprised, but very few people do any more).



Kickstarter’s 404 page explains in clear language that “something’s gone wrong”.

By offering some suggestions as to what might have gone wrong (“an old link, a bad link, or some little glitch”), the user feels relief: “Thank goodness! At least I didn’t break anything.” This kind of microcopy isn’t difficult to write. All it takes is a spot of empathy and an appreciation that although you might be a nerd and know your 404s, 413s (and all the others) off by heart, your users aren’t and don’t.

It’s not difficult, it just takes a little time and a willingness to care.

In the face of frustration...

As we’ve gleaned from the numerous examples in this section, in the face of frustration we can – and should – offer a little empathy when things go wrong. Identifying with our user’s predicament and letting them know that we’re aware of the problem (and, implicitly, that something is being done to remedy that problem) is an important part of the design process.

Microcopy, when crafted well, can help alleviate some of the tension, defusing frustrating situations a little. A BONK! here, a Clank! there and, hopefully, everyone ends up just that little bit happier.

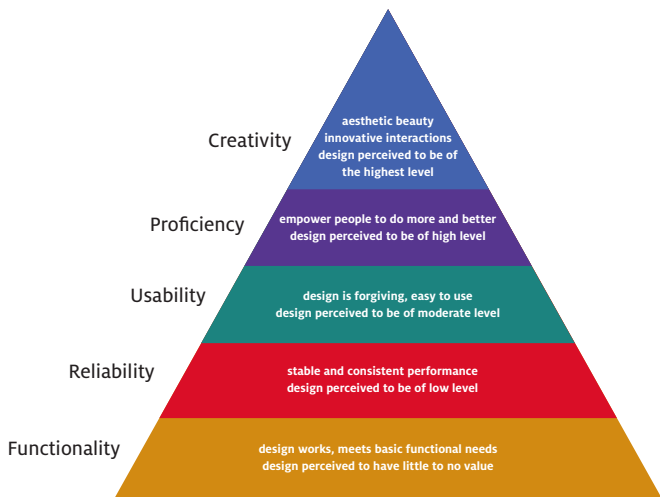
4

Afternoon delight

If we consider Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and how it might be reimagined at the service of "Designing for a Hierarchy of Needs", once we've got the functional basics down, we can start to focus on delighting our users. Bear in mind, however, that if we try to delight without having covered the fundamentals, we're focusing on the wrong thing. As we all know, "If you don't eat your meat, you can't have any pudding! How can you have any pudding if you don't eat your meat?"

Steven Bradley created a neat little diagram that summarises this perfectly, translating Maslow's pyramid into one which forms a design hierarchy from low to high, dealing, in order of importance, with: functionality; reliability; usability; proficiency; and creativity.

Steven Bradley's design hierarchy of needs places creativity – what we call 'delighters' – at the top of the pyramid.



Design Hierarchy of Needs

With the fundamentals in place, we can start to consider ‘delighters’, those small fragments of copy that add a little pleasure to your user’s day. Think of them as the icing on the cake, or the sprinkles on your cone.

Delighters can be used in a wide variety of circumstances: as ways of dealing with unpleasant situations, like waiting for something to happen or filling in long forms; for situations where an extra step is required to complete a task, like confirming you’re human and not a spambot; or for simply lightening the mood, as little Easter eggs designed to bring a smile and encourage talkaboutability.

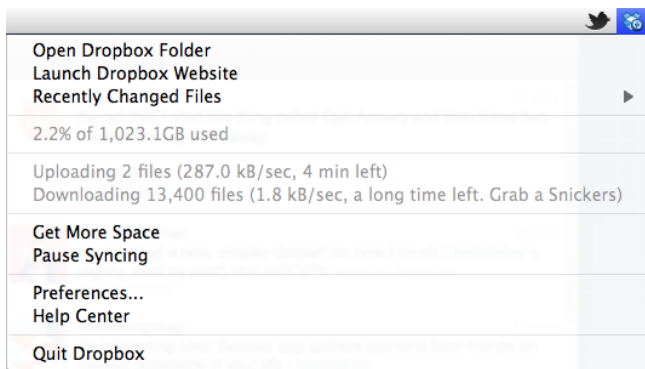
Dan Cederholm’s [Foamee](#) is a great example of the latter. Hover over the site’s brand in the masthead and the filled-to-overflowing glass of beer instantly drains to reveal the word “BURP”. It’s a delightful touch that serves no purpose other than to raise a smile.



Hover over the brand in Foamee’s masthead and not only does the pint drain away (like all good pints should), but the word “BURP” appears in a tiny speech bubble.

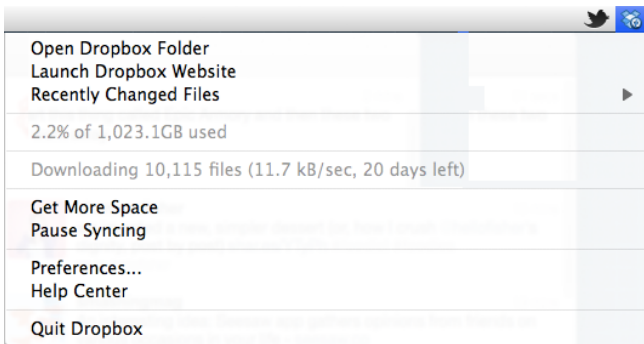
Grab a Snickers...

Nobody like to wait in a queue, certainly not a queue that looks set to last for a considerable length of time. [Dropbox](#) reframes this issue – of time dragging out to eternity – with some delightful microcopy. Rather than sit and stare at your screen as your 13,400 files download at a snail's pace, Dropbox informs you that you've, "a long time left." Better still, it makes a lovely little suggestion, "Grab a Snickers".



Everyone knows a watched pot never boils. Dropbox certainly does. Encouraging you to "Grab a Snickers" is a lovely little touch as you await your precious data's delivery from the cloud.

This tiny piece of microcopy when the estimated wait is a long time makes the wait something pleasant (or at the very least more entertaining) rather than annoying. Following up this little delighter a little later in the process, Dropbox replaces the humorous microcopy with some cold hard data, a realistic and useful estimate of the time remaining, in this case twenty days for those outstanding 10,115 files.



Dropbox's use of humour, coupled with a realistic estimate of how long all your data will take to download offers the best of both worlds: a delighter and some useful information.

This approach, of sympathising in the face of a lengthy wait for your vast amounts of data to sync to the cloud, followed by more prosaic timing estimates, provides the user with the best of both worlds. It brings a smile, before delivering the dry download statistics. Existing Dropbox users will well understand that their data might occupy large amounts of space and shouldn't be surprised about the time downloading this data will take (time they now have to head out and buy a Snickers).

Are you human?

The following two examples, by MailChimp and Letterboxd, do essentially the same thing – confirm humanity – but they do so in slightly different ways. In both cases, the user is being asked to jump just one final hurdle to confirm they're a human (a good thing, by and large) and not a spambot (evil, no doubt). No one likes to jump hurdles, especially when they're the final, possibly irritating barrier to getting down to business, so sugar-coating this pill with some delightful microcopy ensures it's just that little bit easier to swallow and can help bring a smile to the user's face.

Do you ever relish the prospect of completing a CAPTCHA (or a [reCAPTCHA](#) for that matter)? By asking its users to “Confirm Humanity”, MailChimp uses witty microcopy to make a bad situation that little bit better.

The MailChimp logo is displayed in a black, handwritten-style script font.

Confirm Humanity

Before we get your account set up, we need to confirm you are a human (it's a spam prevention thing). Type the phrase from the reCAPTCHA below and click the "confirm signup" button.



Enter The Two Words:

Confirm Signup

MailChimp's use of the title "Confirm Humanity" brings a smile to the face, and the main copy explains what the reCAPTCHA is for ("to confirm you are a human"), while clearly identifying that its purpose is to prevent spam.

The folks at [Letterboxd](#) arguably go one better. As an alternative to a reCAPTCHA (which they also offer, should you be that way inclined) Letterboxd transforms the otherwise horrible experience of confirming you're human with something delightful, appropriate and talkaboutable.

SIGN UP FOR LETTERBOXD

Email address

Username

Password

I'm at least 13 years old and accept the [Terms of Use](#).

COMPLETE THE QUOTE...

"One does not simply walk into _____."

walls

Walmart

a bar

Mordor

Don't know it? [Try another...](#) or use [ReCaptcha](#).

SIGN UP

By asking its users – who “live their life in film” – to complete a quote from a well-known film, Letterboxd transforms the process of confirming you’re human into something enjoyable and utterly appropriate to the site.

With just a couple of well-chosen words in MailChimp’s case and a little creativity in Letterboxd’s case, the final hurdle is transformed into something just a little less painful (in Letterboxd’s case, one might even go so far as to say pleasurable).

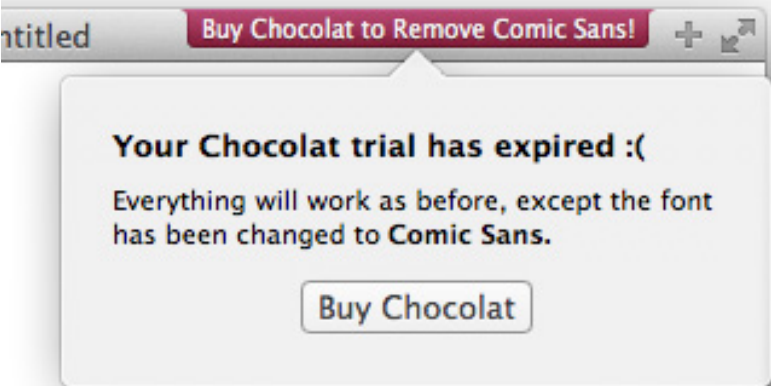
Remove Comic Sans

Alex Gordon and Jean-Nicolas Jolivet, the folks behind [Chocolat](#) – “A tasty new text editor for Mac” – take a novel and decidedly witty approach to encourage their users to pony up for a full licence when their free trial expires. Knowing their (self-respecting) audience inside out, they offer a simple choice.

It’s a choice that isn’t hard for this application’s audience to make (apologies, Mr Connare): “Everything will work as before, except the font has been changed to Comic Sans.” It isn’t hard to imagine users instinctively clicking the Buy Chocolat button and reaching for their credit cards.

This is about a delightful idea as much as microcopy, but we’re sure you’ll agree it’s a wonderful combination of a great idea and great copy.

Chocolat trial expired? No problem. Continue using it, but the font has been changed to Comic Sans. Simply buy it to remove everyone’s favourite font to hate. Genius.



Ask yourself, what self-respecting Chocolat user wouldn't choose to pay the small fee to save their eyes from a relentless bombardment of Comic Sans? Not only is the microcopy clever, the strategy is too (we might even go so far as to call it genius). Great show.

A smile is a curve that sets everything straight

Words don't always need to be pressed into service for functional needs; sometimes they can be used simply to satisfy our emotional needs. We're emotional creatures, so – even when everything's going according to plan – bringing a smile to your users' faces can make a world of difference.

Whether it's a friendly suggestion to go grab a Snickers while your files download, or an impromptu film pop quiz that distracts you from the chore of confirming your humanity, well-crafted microcopy can go a long way to delighting your users and keeping them engaged and happy.

5

The power of words

Looking more closely at examples of microcopy, as we've done in the last three chapters, we can see how good design can empower people by improving interactions through the use of words. These words, when chosen less carefully, can also lead the user astray, frustrate them, or even weaken their resolve.

In this final section, we'll introduce some practical suggestions, like establishing a dictionary of terms that can be used throughout a website or app to ensure consistency of communication. Finishing off with one last example, we explore the power of words, and how picking certain words over others subtly influences our users' behaviour and the identity of the product itself...

Who owns the copy?

As we stressed in *The Craft of Words - Part One: Macrocopy* – where we considered words in the service of the bigger picture – words are a critical part of the design process, and an often overlooked tool in the designer's toolbox. It's time we paid more attention to them, and put them to good use.

When designing an interface it isn't always obvious who's responsible for the copy that we use. Is it the client? The copywriter? The designer? The developer? Too many cooks have a tendency to spoil the broth (rather than just making more soup), so it's important to establish some rules of ownership early on in the process of defining your copy.

Regardless of who has the responsibility for final sign-off, designers and developers have an important role to play. As we work so close to the interface and will be intimately familiar with the interactions we're intending and crafting, it should be our responsibility to ensure that the microcopy we choose makes sense.

Even if we're lucky enough to work on a project where someone is in charge of the copy, designers and developers should have the responsibility to question inconsistencies and suggest improvements. But how can we formalise this process and make it painless and friction-free?

One answer lies in establishing a framework for your microcopy, a small dictionary of the phrases and terms used within your site or application.

A dictionary of terms

In his comprehensive presentation "[Designing Microcopy to Improve User Experience](#)", Des Traynor of [Intercom](#) introduces the idea of a microcopy framework: a simple, reusable dictionary of terms. The advantages of this approach are simple, but powerful.

To ensure that everyone is singing from the same hymn sheet, we need to ensure that there's one in place to start off with. All too often, the task of creating the text for a call-to-action button or an error message falls between two stools, and something that's hastily created and merely good enough ends up being shipped. To avoid this common scenario we can put a few simple measures in place.

First, we can collect somewhere central all the words and phrases used as user interface elements, so that it's possible to get an overview of the kind of language we're using, ensuring consistency of tone throughout the site.

This collection of words could be something as simple as a spreadsheet, which can be accessed by all stakeholders.

Having a document like this makes everyone's life easier.

When tasked with creating a new submit button, a simple glance at the microcopy dictionary saves wasting energy and time inventing a new label, or looking up that other page that had a button on it that you know was there somewhere because you remember working on it a few days ago: "Where was that file again?"

Occasionally, however, you have to create new pieces of microcopy. But how do you devise new terms and phrases? How do you ensure that the words you use are the right ones? Getting this right comes with practice and experience, but there are a couple of questions you can ask yourself which make the process of writing good functional copy a lot easier; for each new piece of microcopy you have to write, ask: "Who's it for?"; and "What is it intended to do?"

By answering these two questions satisfactorily, you'll find yourself closer to getting it right.

Microcopy: it's tiny, but powerful!

When Twitter first launched, its status update prompt asked the simple question: "What are you doing?" A few years later, this question was replaced by the more open-ended: "What's happening?" It was a subtle but important change, and one that demonstrated the power of language.

In [a post on its official blog](#), Twitter stated: “We don’t expect this to change how anyone uses Twitter,” but we’d wager it did. Not only did it change what we might have chosen to post, but it also opened up the service to users for whom the personal question, “What are you doing?” just wasn’t relevant.

By changing only a few words (and saving a couple of characters in the process) Twitter put in place an opportunity to grow into something much larger than a mobile status update service for personal musings, considerably opening up the tool’s potential.

Today, having grown into a well-established media platform which expects its users to be aware of common parlance, Twitter’s prompt simply reads: “Compose new Tweet...”. An extra word and an extra character; it’s less poetic, but it reflects the company’s changing status as an increasingly corporate player, focused on the bottom line.

Although these evolving prompts consist only of a few words, they fundamentally change the proposition of what’s expected and, as a consequence, alter the way in which the tool is used. A fact that’s well worth noting.

Although microcopy is tiny, it is also very, very powerful. As Joshua Porter, in an article on [writing microcopy](#), puts it: “Don’t be deceived by the size of microcopy. It can make or break an interface.” It can also make, break or define a service.

Focusing on crafting microcopy can have a huge impact on your website or application. As such, it's important you consider it as a core aspect of the design process. As we've seen in the numerous examples throughout this book, well-chosen words can help a user on their journey, just as poorly chosen words can act as barriers to comprehension.

Referencing the attention to pixel-perfect detail we pride ourselves on when we showcase our work on sites like [Dribbble](#), Des Traynor poses a short, but important question:

“We obsess over pixels, shadows, shades, typefaces, borders, gradients, opacities, blurs and more... Why not words?”

Words can do so much. We need to recognise the remarkable power they hold and put words to better and more considered use. Harnessing them, we can create wonderful products and services that not only serve our users well, but delight them in the process.



Resources

There are many great publications, both offline and online, to begin your adventure into the wonderful world of words. We've included a few below to start you on your journey. Godspeed!

Printed publications

- 37signals: [Getting Real](#)
- Erin Kissane: [The Elements of Content Strategy](#)
- Mark Shaw: [Copywriting: Successful Writing for Design, Advertising and Marketing](#)

Web-based publications

- MailChimp's "[Voice and Tone](#)"
- "[Writing Microcopy](#)" by Joshua Porter
- "[The Construction of Instruction](#)" by Relly Annett-Baker
- "[The \\$300 Million Button](#)" by Jared M Spool
- "[Microcopy that Strengthens Your Design's Experience](#)" by Des Traynor (and [slides](#) on SlideShare)
- "[All the Small Things](#)" by Relly Annett-Baker
- [Microcopy Flickr group](#)

