From Image to Text: An Insight into the Writing Genres of a UX Designer

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Introduction:

It is no secret that user experience (UX) design is a booming field. Encompassing design, psychology, business, market research, and technology, it focuses on the interaction between people and the products and services we use in our everyday lives. The term "designer" tends to suggest the visual aspect of a project, but for UX designers, their role is much larger. Rather, UX focuses on the user's journey as they navigate through a product. Is it easy to use? Can I complete my desired task with minimal effort? Does the design make sense? It is the job of the UX designer to check all of these boxes and make sure that they are understanding and fulfilling the needs of the customer.

In other words, UX designers humanize technology; they are making products usable and enjoyable for their clients (Chandler&Unger, 2009). And to make this possible, they are the bridge between the user, development team, and business stakeholders. The UX designer must consider what is best for the user and the overall experience, but at the same time, make sure that the product or service is consistent with the needs of the company. The success of the design relies on how effectively you can communicate between all these groups. A thorough design keeps stakeholders patient during the implementation process, while a clear blueprint enables an effective transition from design to a finished product. During the developer handoff, the designer must clearly communicate how the final version should look, work, and feel in the form of design specifications (Goodwin, 2011). Specifications are detailed documents describing the product, from colors to measurements, to flow and functionality. This enables developers to envision and accurately depict the information provided (Goodwin, 2011). In short, a UX designer is essentially writing for design, to make it so that the experience can be understood through words and help guide the individual within a product.
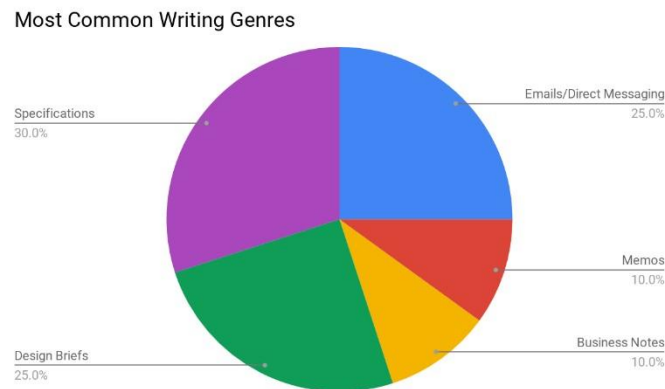
The purpose of this research is to take a deeper look into the writing habits of UX designers and how they communicate with their team in order to bring their project to life. Being a visual-heavy, creative field, UXUI design is not typically seen as a writing-centric career. However, it is vital that all members working on the project have a clear understanding of every single pixel. Frequent collaboration is the key to communicating and evolving a design to a finished product. There is an absolute need for precision and clarity. This paper aims to highlight how UX designers translate the abstract images in their heads to effectively convey a fleshed-out design in words to different audiences. In addition, this study examines the types of genres written, audiences addressed, and the writing process through interviews, books, and articles. In this paper, I will examine; I) the genres of writing done by UX designers, II) the types of audiences UX designers often write to, and III) the importance of specifications.

Method:

To gain a deeper understanding of the behind the scenes of UX design, I interviewed Ziwen Yu, a User Experience Designer at a small startup-up located in San Francisco, California. After getting his undergraduate degree in Business, he pursued a Master's degree in UX Design before landing his current position. On the morning of Saturday, September 5th, 2020, I was able to schedule a 30-minute interview with him through Skype and asked him a series of 10 prewritten questions. For reference, the interview questions are attached below as Appendix A and a genre sample provided by Yu as Appendix B. Secondary sources were primarily gathered through the UC Davis library and Google search engine.

Results:

What types of writing is most common for UX designers?

Most Common Writing Genres

Specifications
30.0%

Emails/Direct Messaging
25.0%

Memos
10.0%

Business Notes
10.0%

Design Briefs
25.0%

Figure 1. Common types of writing.

UX Designers write emails, memos, business notes, design briefs, and specifications. Of all these, specifications are the most common genre and carry the most significance, as they are essentially the blueprint of the entire project (Figure 1). They undergo several revisions from the team and are written precisely so that anyone who reads it understands its objective.

Direct messaging on Slack, a business communication platform, is the second most common genre of writing used by UX designers (Figure 1). Through this service, UX designers can communicate with their team members, supervisors, and various other departments. Here, they can find notes, updates, documentation, and more. Electronic documentation has also helped make sure that all team members are looking at the most recent version of the product.

Nonetheless, in addition to reading and writing emails, reports, and the like, UX designers verbally communicate their ideas through presentations, meetings, and phone calls to ensure everyone is on the same page and get real-time feedback. Designers can take this feedback and use the notes from the meetings to improve their designs. These live presentations, or design deliveries, also ensure that stakeholders at least see the detailed designs, as they

sometimes do not even bother to look at the specification, and publicly agree and confirm that it is good to use (Yu, personal communication, September 5, 2020).

How do UX designers adjust their writing for different audiences?

When writing specifications, UX designers could be writing from anyone from their team to people in other departments in other companies. Such a wide variety of audiences means varying levels of knowledge of the industry. To address such a broad spectrum, it is important to make sure that the language is clear and understandable to every reader. Simplifying technical terms to everyday speech enables the text to be easily understood.

Depending on who they are writing to, UX designers will modify their word choice accordingly. When writing to people outside of their field, one would typically leave out the technical terms and speak more casually. "You don't want to insult the other party's intelligence, so you don't want to speak too simplistically, but at the same time, you don't want to throw random terms at their face," explains Yu (Yu, personal communication, September 5, 2020). On the other hand, when communicating with people in the same field, it is more efficient using the proper terminology. When messaging his coworkers on Slack, "there are so many messages that it is easy to get lost," says Yu. "It is easier to sort through the information when you write concisely or in bullet-point format" (Yu, personal communication, September 5, 2020).

Why do design specifications matter?

A good specification simplifies and accelerates the process of creating a tangible product, as it bridges the gap between the prototype and final version (Yu, personal communication,

September 5, 2020). It contains all of the information and assets needed for the engineers, minimizing any sort of misunderstanding between the designer and developer. However, designs are constantly changing and even the most minute change requires the designer to revise the specification. Automated tools allow for specifications to become a living document, constantly being updated and revised in real time, so that communication and collaboration can be at its best at all times (Chandler&Unger, 2009). Without these documents, designers and engineers could spend hours or even days going back and forth smoothing out the visual inconsistencies.

Discussion:

What types of writing is most common for UX designers?

It is evident that writing plays a crucial yet often overlooked role in the job of a UX designer; rather, it is no exaggeration to say that the fate of the design relies on clear communication. Yu demonstrated that most of his writing as a UX designer is done for communicative purposes, citing email, direct messages, or specifications as highest in both frequency and value (Figure 1). A designer's choices are made for a reason and the specifications are what tells the developer why choosing Font A over Font B matters. Small details and decisions like these can easily be worked out through email or direct messages. In addition to accurately translating aesthetics, specifications also outline the logic the engineers must craft so that the user can effortlessly move through the product. Explaining the flow and helping other team members visualize the experience helps improve clarity and makes the designer to developer handoff more efficient.

Although the writing done in this field seems simple at first glance, there is still a hurdle between academic writing and UX writing that has to be overcome. A study conducted by The

National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges (2004) found that companies are unhappy with the writing skills brought by recent graduates, for academic writing has trained them to be too "verbose and wandering." This sort of writing is not suitable for the workplace, including the field of UX. "This might not be what a student wants to hear, but what academic writing taught me is how to sound smart by adding a lot of extra, flowery words. I had to unlearn my bad habits from school when I started working in the real world," states Yu. A college education does not guarantee the skill-set needed to succeed in the realworld; in fact, many companies expressed that they felt that students were deficient in basic writing (The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, & The Society for Human Resource Management, 2006).It is vital to have a strong understanding of the design that you are bringing forth, and how can you convince others that this is an effective design if you do not have a solid grasp of the inner workings behind it? Exemplifying clear writing is a form of clear thinking (The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, 2004). From the annotations in the margins of the designs to the arguments brought forth in presentations and meanings, the voice and word choice in those small passages can either make or break the design.

How do UX designers adjust their writing for different audiences?

It was not surprising that engineers would be looking at the specifications, as they are the blueprints for creating the product, but it was surprising to learn that although people like stakeholders and production managers who do not know as much about design would be reading this, it is still expected to include technical terms rather than make it so that any reader could understand. Rather, a formal presentation or casual skim through the documents is sufficient for

those readers, but the primary audience are the engineers, quality assurance team, and business analysts (Goodwin, 2011). They will be constantly referencing the specifications, so it is more efficient to use the correct terminology. Audience members like stakeholders may not even take the time to look at the specifications; at most, they may just preview the background points outlining the overall approach to the project and timeline (Yu, personal communication, September 5, 2020). Thus, it is not necessary to change the wording just for them. However, it should also be kept in mind that "specs also have an invisible audience. They may not be reading it now, but people are always coming and going, so new designers, engineers, or managers may be joining the team later on and they'll need to understand the project through the spec" (Yu, personal communication, September 5, 2020).

The specification is not just for other departments, but also for the designers themselves. It is a reflection and tool to look for shortcomings in the design. In other words, a vague specification potentially means discovering flaws after it has been coded, which is far more work than writing a few pages. It is important to be detailed but does not mean the documents should be overflowing with unnecessary filler words. A UX designer should include just enough so that their image shines through in their writing and smoothly transfers into the mind of another.

Why do design specifications matter?

At this point of the design process, the design is ready for production and the designer is ready to hand off the design for coding. Specifications depicts the layers of information and thought behind the design and allow for everyone to be on the same page. With newer programs being introduced into the industry, many designers are asked to provide light documentation with just a few sketches and a few notes. Yu speculates that this could potentially work if you have an

engineering team working closely with you and an established visual concept, but chances are,

most engineering teams are not available to work directly with you. The company could be

outsourcing development or you have not yet had the chance to form a close bond with the

engineers. Furthermore, the bigger the project, the bigger the team. The greater the team, the

greater the likelihood of varying skill levels, judgment, and interpretations. A vague specification

gives less-skilled engineers the chance to take shortcuts and code whatever is easiest for them

(Goodwin, 2011). Thus, more details and notes allow for the design to be brought to life in the

way it was intended to. Effective documentation includes both images and text to illustrate the

anatomy and physiology of a product: "If you supply only drawings with minimal text, engineers

have to guess at behavior. If you supply only an animated or clickable prototype, they have to

deconstruct its form and behavior for themselves" (Goodwin, 2011). In examining the genre

sample provided by Yu, it is evident that the document is every pixeled is detailed – where the

search bar is to how the sign up screen generates, along with what typeface and colors to use,

everything can be found in the specification (See Appendix B).

Conclusion:

　　　　Working as a designer may not typically be associated with writing, but as seen in this

study, skills in written communication strengthen not only the design but the ties of the people

working together to make the project into a reality. Most of the writing done in this field is for

communicative purposes; they write so that others will understand their ideas. Everyone should

be on the same page despite their varying skill-sets, making it crucial for UX designers to make

their language understandable and accessible to all audiences. People aiming to be or are

considering the path of UX designers should practice early on clarity and brevity in their writing

so that they will be better equipped when they begin their careers.

Works Cited:

Chandler, C., & Unger, R. (2009). *A Project Guide to UX Design: For User Experience Designers in the Field or in the Making*. New Riders.

Goodwin, K. (2011). *Designing for the Digital Age: How to Create Human-Centered Products and Services*. Wiley.

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The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges. (2004). *Writing: A Ticket to Work . . . Or a Ticket Out*. College Board.

Yu, Z. Personal Interview. Sept. 5, 2020.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How did you become interested in this field and what steps did you take to be where you are now? Are there any credentials or licenses required?

    - Graduated with a chemistry degree

    - Attracted to the field for its money and chance to be creative but logical

    - Took a UX bootcamp, built portfolio, sent out resumes

    - Credentials/license not required, but could potentially help

2. Are there any major college experiences or courses that related to or that prepared you for this job?

    - Took some business classes that helped him understand both goals of the company and needs of the target audience

    - Understanding both makes it easier to come up with design solutions

3. What are some of your day-to-day duties and responsibilities?

    - Conduct user research

    - Personas and information

    - User flows and wireframes

    - Prototyping and user testing

    - Visual design

    - Meetings with engineers

4. What are the most common writing mediums do you use in your profession?

    - Emails/Slack

    - Meeting/business notes and memos
    - Specifications

5. What types of writing are expected in your profession?

- Specifications, design briefs, presentations

6. What do you need to include when writing in your profession? (ex: visuals, data, works cited, etc)

- Lots and lots of visuals with notes detailing why everything is where
- Low/high-fidelity versions (depending on audience)

7. Who sees these documents?

- Business stakeholders, engineers, other team members

8. What is the process like when you are taking your ideas and shaping them into words and diagrams?

- What am I trying to convey and what does the audience need
- What are the company goals
- Reference other people's designs
- Have to make it clear and understood by the reader (simplify terms, shorter terms, casual terms)

9. How has writing changed in the last five years in your workplace?

- More online communication

10. How would you compare the writings you do at work to the writings you did in school?

- Less wordy, more direct
- Detailed yet simple
- Don't try to sound smart

Appendix B: Writing Samples

	User Name Examples	toC Amanda's mom	TOKI Staff Sue-san	SaaS (toB) Local Foreigner	TOKI Admin/System Provider Sasha-san	Supplier/Guide MK
Customer Info	Customer Form	X	X	X		
	Customer Info (simple)					X
	Customer info (detailed)	X	X	X	X	
	End Customer List		X	X	X	
	Agency List		X	X	X	
Trip Info	Trip Request Form Tool	X	X	X		
	Itineraries (simple)	X	X	X	X	
	Itineraries (detailed)	X	X	X	X	X
	Invoices (simple)	X	X	X	X	
	Invoices (detailed)		X	X	X	
Payment	Make Travel Payment	X				
	Receive Travel Payment		X	X	X	
	Make SaaS Payment			X		
	Receive SaaS Payment				X	
	Make Supplier Payment					X
	Receive Supplier Payment				X	
	Database (see, can't edit)		X	X		
	Database (see, editable)		X	X	X	
	Travel Financial Dashboard		X	X	X	
	SaaS Financial Dashboard				X	
"Nice to Have" Options	Map					
	Weather					

Conditional format rules

123	Text is exactly "Success" A1:AB1000
123	Text is exactly "Failure" A1:AB1000

Typography

headers - Varela Round

Montserrat	Open Sans	Roboto
TITLE	**TITLE**	**TITLE**
title	**title**	**title**
body	body	body
secondary	secondary	secondary

Color Palette