

Writing Microcopy

by [Joshua Porter](#) | June 9th, 2009 | shortlink: <http://bokardo.com/p/1168>

The fastest way to improve your interface is to improve your copywriting.

I remember the first time I realized how much even the smallest copy can matter in an interface. It was on an e-commerce project at [UIE](#) for which I had created a checkout form asking for billing information. I had coded up a system to notify me when an error occurred (even if people can overcome the error it was very helpful to know when one occurred). I kept getting notifications of billing address errors...it turns out that transactions were failing because the address people were entering didn't match the one on their credit card.

About

Our world is made of interfaces! Interface and product design is my passion and that's what I write about here at Bokardo. My goal is to share practical knowledge with designers, product folks, copywriters, and entrepreneurs. Check out the [archives](#) for a list of popular posts.

Published by [Joshua Porter](#).

Enter Billing Information

Card Type:

Card Number:

Expiration date:

Security Code: [How to find this on your card](#)

(Be sure to enter the billing address associated with your credit card)

First Name:

Last Name:

So I ended up adding the copy “Be sure to enter the billing address associated with your credit card” at the top of the form. And just like that, the errors went away. It was clear the right copy meant I didn’t have to worry about that problem anymore, thus saving support time and increasing revenue on the improved conversion.

Ironically, the smallest bits of copy, *microcopy*, can have the biggest impact.

Microcopy is small yet powerful copy. It’s fast, light, and deadly. It’s a short sentence, a phrase, a few words. A single word. It’s the small copy that has the biggest impact. Don’t judge it on its size...judge it on

its effectiveness.

Five Simple Steps

ayPal®

Transactions are handled through paypal but you don't need a paypal account to buy this book. Any credit or debit card will do! (If at any stage in the ordering process you encounter a problem please [contact us](#))



Designing for the Web



A Practical Guide to Design... explanations of the core principles in relation to the web, and the... illustrations, full colour photographs going in the right direction... studies where appropriate... theory has been put into practice

Here's another example. On the purchase page of Mark Boulton's wonderful book [Designing for the Web](#), he's written a bit of microcopy that is crucial for people considering purchase. The copy is "Transactions are handled through paypal but *you don't need a paypal account to buy this book*". This turns out to be a huge question of would-be purchasers (I've seen it in several projects). People see the Paypal logo and they assume that they need to have

an account...and everyone knows how annoying it is to create an account simply to purchase a single item. Actually, for a long time you did need an account to purchase something with Paypal. Only more recently did they change that. In this example, Mark has written half a sentence that communicates this fact and eases the fears of would-be customers.

Update Reader

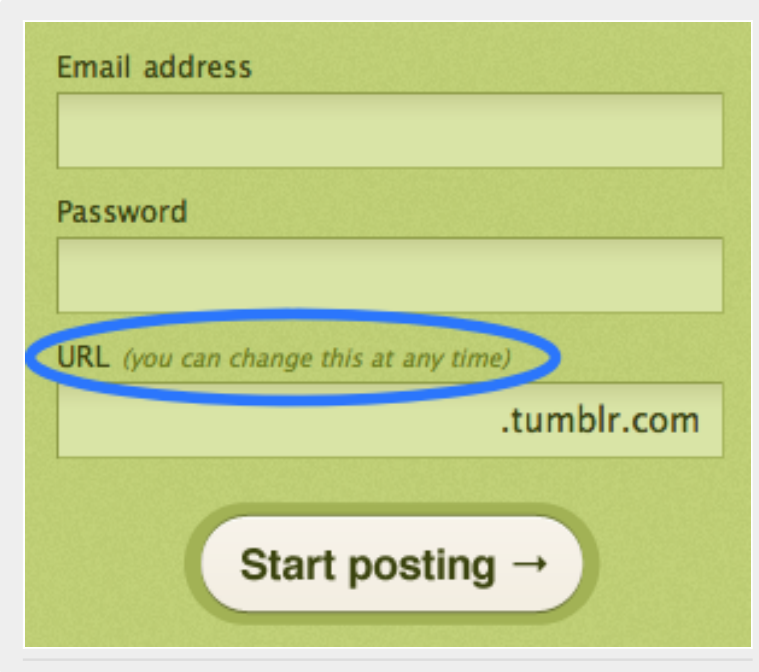
David Yeiser

points out another good example of microcopy on

Tumblr. When

users are about to sign up, they're asked to choose a sub-domain name for their site. This seems like a big deal, as you're

defining the URL at which you'll be found by others. In order to reduce the stress of making a big decision that could affect the future of your blog, Tumblr gently reminds you that "You can change this at any time". Done. No more worries about choosing the wrong sub-domain name...just choose one and start posting.



The image shows a sign-up form for Tumblr with a light green background. It contains the following elements from top to bottom: an "Email address" label above a text input field; a "Password" label above another text input field; a "URL" label above a text input field, with the text "(you can change this at any time)" in italics below it; a ".tumblr.com" label to the right of the URL input field; and a "Start posting →" button at the bottom. A blue oval highlights the "URL" label and its associated microcopy.

Microcopy is extremely contextual...that's why it's so valuable. It answers a very specific question people have and speaks to their concerns right on the spot. And because its so contextual, microcopy isn't always obvious. Sometimes you have to hunt to find the right words. (or create an error notification service like I did) How to discover these hurdles? Talk to people! Why aren't they adopting your software? What concerns do they have? What are they worried about? Successful salesmen know the power of these small turns of phrase. They have an arsenal of them for every situation.


Here are some other examples:

- When signing up for a newsletter, say “this low-volume newsletter”
- When people add their emails, say “we hate spam as much as you do”
- When subscribing for something free, say “you can always unsubscribe at any time”
- When selling an paid-for web application, be sure to let people know if you have a free trial.
- When storing customer's information, say “You can export your information at any time”
- If offering optional account creation, say “If you create an account,

you'll be able to track your package”

All of these microcopy examples have one thing in common: they help to alleviate concerns of would-be customers. They help to reduce commitment by speaking directly to the thoughts in people's heads. That's why this copy can be so short yet so powerful.

Don't be deceived by the size of microcopy. It can make or break an interface.



Make them Care! - Struggling to communicate the value of your product or service? I'm writing a new book that shows you how to make people care about your product or service by clearly communicating the most important bits. For designers and marketers creating product web sites. [Find out more.](#)

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Comments

1. [Alan Bristow](#) 9:28am, Tue 9th, 2009

Glad to read this Joshua since I agonize over copy, trying to read it aloud in my head and imagine I don't yet know what the copy needs to tell me to see if it clearly informs.



A by-product of Twitter's 140 char cap is that it's helping me keep succinct.

2. [Tim](#) 10:09am, Tue 9th, 2009

I know Flickr is always mentioned in this sort of context, but the majority of their microcopy is really good. Ditto Hunch's microcopy which was picked up in the review on UX Hero



<http://uxhero.com/user-experience-reviews/ux-review-hunch-dot-com/>

3. [Martin Wake](#) 10:16am, Tue 9th, 2009

Well said Joshua. We're online copywriters and we love it when clients ask us to do this, because they tend to be the clients who get what we do and understand that it can give them real business benefits.



These examples are great but I'd add another point too: **make damn sure the form (or app, or whatever) can back up what you say in the microcontent.** It's no good saying "we hate spam as much as you do" if you then turn round and sell your database to an email marketer. That's maybe an extreme example but it's easy to overpromise on things like response times and delivery dates, especially if you're not the one directly responsible for keeping those promises.

(Something we wrote a while back about form copy might be interesting for a bit more detail: feel free to chop this if you think not, though: <http://www.stickycontent.co.uk/blog/2008/12/15/online-forms-how-to-get-the-copy-right/>)

Cheers
Martin

4. [Ian Waugh](#) 10:34am, Tue 9th, 2009

Absolutely true, I've been arguing this for ages!



And with this microcopy, what we don't say is often as important as what we do.

For example, don't call a field "username" when you really mean "email address", or anything wacky like that!

5. **Lisa Rex** 12:47pm, Tue 9th, 2009

Yes, agree, the smallest details make a huge difference.
Advanced search pages and search results often lack decent microcopy.



Another example that I wish I saw more often:

“Your password must contain a minimum of 8 characters. At least one character must be a number” (Don’t wait for the user to discover this in an error message)

If this level of detail makes your head hurt, outsource it to a UX/QA person or copywriter. Your customers won’t necessarily thank you directly, but they’ll be happier for it.

6. **Stephen** 1:12pm, Tue 9th, 2009

Excellent article and great points. Thanks!



7. **Brian Berg** 1:19pm, Tue 9th, 2009

Couldn’t agree more! (Short enough for ya?)



8. **Jackson** 2:01pm, Tue 9th, 2009

Too true. I ran into this with a custom CMS I developed a while



back. The client was fairly computer illiterate. After getting call after call with the same questions, I decided to take action. I added little hints above each form field that was a potential stumbling point for my client. As I wrote the hints, I tried to channel my client and think like someone who feels intimidated and clumsy. I pushed the changes onto the server quietly and waited. I didn't get called for three weeks after that. Eventually, she called me to say thanks for adding that stuff and that it saved her lots of time, which made me chuckle since, honestly, I only did it to save myself trouble. Double lesson learned.



9. [Okke](#) 2:31pm, Tue 9th, 2009

Great stuff Joshua!

I run large internet projects myself and don't write copy. I am always amazed that copy tends to be forgotten. Clients ask trainees to write articles on their websites or allow anybody to put content up since it is 'free' and anyone can write so 'how hard can it be'.



Micro content is often written by designers or developers and at best reviewed by a marketer. Truly amazing since it can indeed make or break an application or worse an entire business or business case for a new product or launch.

However most editors do an extremely poor job at explaining what they are worth. Most don't like micro content. They would rather write major pieces. Almost no editor likes their work to be researched and improved based on data or user feedback.

It would be a great help both for me and for themselves if they would put at least a minimal effort in proving the value of their work based on hard data. They don't have to turn into account managers but should at least make a minimal effort to look at user data/attend usability research and connect with users.

At the moment it is way easier to get budget approval for an impressive CMS or a serverpark than it is to get approval for 1 FTE Editor.

10. Raphael 2:58pm, Tue 9th, 2009

If in doubt, try running your copy through a style checker. A style checker will bring complex phrases, redundant expressions, and confusing terms to your attention. On Windows, there is StyleWriter and GNU Style/Dict for UNIX Users. I also wrote one you can use at <http://www.polishmywriting.com>



11. Ric 4:03pm, Tue 9th, 2009

I can't agree with you enough on the importance of microcopy. I am co-designing a social network currently and find I agonize over it everybit as much as I ever did creating full length content. I find all the editing tricks apply and particularly the write it place it and sleep on it. Its amazing how it will sound just as right the next day or way more wrong then when you first wrote it. Try it if you deal in Microcopy



12. Val Nelson 4:06pm, Tue 9th, 2009

Yes, yes, I have seen it make a difference so many times. We think people don't read them, but the little instruction lines do help people build trust and take the next step.



Thank you for this reminder and for something I can show my copywriting clients when they are reluctant to take the extra time on microcopy.

13. [Carly](#) 5:52pm, Tue 9th, 2009

Fantastic article, I am going to save this article to show people at work tomorrow. I'd written down today a load of tasks to do tomorrow, and a lot of them were 'rewrite copy on X tab in the control panel' – they're small things but I have a rule – the first time I look at it, I have to instantly know what it's saying. Anything too long that isn't direct and instructional or helpful is being chopped tomorrow... and now I have the support of your article is my boss asks why! Not that you'd think I could write short, clear and direct messages from this rambled comment (I'm soooo sleepy!!) Good night, and thank you.



14. [Bander](#) 7:05pm, Tue 9th, 2009

Facebook seems to be having some trouble with their micro copy at the moment. I think they are trying to tell me they'll start using personal URL's soon (/myname) but they communicate it as follows: "Soon you will be able to have a username"



15. [Michael](#) 8:08pm, Tue 9th, 2009

Very good tips! It's the small things that matter the most sometimes.



16. [Guy Arceneaux](#) 8:43pm, Tue 9th, 2009

This is living proof that direct mail techniques are a viable source for web design strategy. We always never assume that people know what they are expected to do and much less do it correctly. "Mice" type is powerful copy! Sometimes the most important in getting an action. Like the suggestions for how to use "micro" copy for different situations. Thanks good article.



17. [Randy](#) 9:23pm, Tue 9th, 2009

Yes, it's true that small bits make a difference, especially today when we are so overwhelmed with a flood of information. Small changes all add up.



18. [Glenn Gutierrez](#) 11:47pm, Tue 9th, 2009

Sweet. Will definitely use the advice here. Working on microcopy right now. Good points to remember.



19. [Suffian](#) 2:39am, Wed 10th, 2009

Spot on, Joshua. I try to add microcopy wherever I can. It's also a great way to add character and reinforce the overall tone of the copy; if the body copy is quirky and conversational, the microcopy should be, too. Small gesture, but it all adds up to the brand identity.



20. [David Yeiser](#) 12:51pm, Wed 10th, 2009

Like those above me said, great article and great points.



Tumblr uses microcopy effectively on their [signup form](#). When choosing a URL for your blog there's a helpful sentence that reads "(you can change this at any time)." Great for those of us who would sit there and agonize over the perfect blog name.

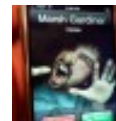
21. [Jens Swelson](#) 2:09pm, Wed 10th, 2009

Nice article and very usefull. I think I might need to use this on my blog for the e-mailupdates function.



22. [Marsh](#) 10:41am, Fri 12th, 2009

I heartily agree, but



“Be sure to enter the billing address associated with your credit card”

could be tightened to “Must match the billing address for your card.” And since the name comes first, “address” might be “information” instead.

Another example is the

(not published)

microcopy note for the “Mail” field of this comment form.

23. Alex Wu 1:35pm, Sun 28th, 2009

Joshua, you are absolutely right. Even the tiniest change in microcopy text can have a huge impact on business. For example, on my site signup screen, we used to have a line, separating what is required versus option fields. But most people just ignores that line, so we had additional text telling people what is required. The day we did that, our signup rate went from 1.3% of visitors to over 5%. Then we realized what we did wrong.



24. Rhonda 11:23pm, Wed 22nd, 2009

Technical writers and communicators use the term ‘user assistance’ for what you term ‘microcopy’. The end result is the same — making the experience better for the user. But it would be nice and less confusing for searchers and researchers if the technical and marketing writing communities could use a common term for these small pieces of text on user interfaces.



25. David 6:24am, Tue 11th, 2009

Great post, thanks! Reading the comments I’d also call microcopy on forms an “affordance”, in usability terms. But microcopy applies to navigation and tooltips as well, I think.



26. Phil 8:43pm, Wed 12th, 2009

This is good stuff (I esp liked the tumblr example) but you have to be careful that you do not use microcopy as a crutch. Sometimes, when you see microcopy, it should really be zero-copy. For example, in the first example I would have just made a header/title on the billing address area called something like “Credit Card Billing Address:”



And in the 2nd example, I would just not show the Paypal logo at all— just “Pay with your credit/debit card now!” and be done with it. You don’t need a crutch when the leg (the user experience) is not broken.

27. Rahul 11:39am, Fri 30th, 2009

Came back to read this again and wanted to mention that it’s still so true. Thanks again!



Offtopic: dates for comments are missing the month. It says “Wed 12th, 2009”.