

# Microcopy: a taxonomy and synthesis of best practices

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## ABSTRACT

UPDATED—7 June 2017. Microcopy is the small groups of words – copy – of a user interface that motivates a user to action, helps guide the user, and provides feedback on the actions taken. Microcopy is a powerful part of effective user experiences, and takes many forms, such as buttons, instructions, placeholders, and error messages. Many designers have proposed best practices based on personal experiences, some of which lack contiguity with other studies. Since microcopy is a relatively new term and concept, there has been very little formal academic research on the topic. In this paper, we propose a taxonomy of 12 types of microcopy and a synthesis of 15 best practices when designing microcopy. It is our goal that this taxonomy and synthesis act as a framework from which future research can be performed, as well as a guide for designers to follow when creating microcopy.

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.2 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: User Interfaces – *Evaluation/methodology, user-centered design, theory and methods, natural language, screen design*

## Author Keywords

Microcopy, copy, user interface, best practices

## INTRODUCTION

*Microcopy* is a relatively new term and concept that was coined by Joshua Porter in 2009 [8]. In his blog post [8], he wrote about his experience of adding a short sentence to a checkout form to help alleviate an issue where customers were entering incorrect billing addresses. Immediately after adding the copy, the issues went away. He found that the entire user experience could be changed by adding a few words in the right place at the right time [12]. The name he gave this type of copy: *microcopy*.

Microcopy is defined as "the words or phrases in the user interface that are directly related to the actions a user takes: the motivation before the action, instructions that accompany the action, and the feedback after the user has taken the action" [12]. Microcopy can take many forms, such as button labels, instructions, placeholders, error messages, and confirmation messages.

## Benefits of Microcopy

Throughout the design industry, microcopy has become an integral part of guiding user experiences [6,8]. Microcopy might be seen by some people as insignificant when a design is taken as a whole, but the small pieces of copy have an enormous impact [1]. Industry experts have found that microcopy alleviates the user's worries, provides helpful error messages, supplies unambiguous language, and helps provide context to user actions [1]. It can also help marketing authorities make cost-efficient decisions to increase conversions by focusing on the small details, rather than large elements of a website [6].

## Literature Review

There are currently many different proposed best practices of microcopy [2,3,4]. Although many researchers and experts have defined their own set of guidelines, there exists gaps and unsubstantiated claims. Very little formal academic discussion exists in the HCI community. Some industry professionals have developed high-level principles based on limited studies in specific scenarios [4]. Other sources [6] also make claims on generic "feel good" approaches without quantifying effectiveness.

## Purpose

We believe it is important that the HCI community conduct meaningful formal research on microcopy. It is our goal of this study to (1) define a taxonomy of the types of microcopy and (2) compile a synthesis of the best practices of designing microcopy. A taxonomy and synthesis of best practices can help give future research a framework to which to build upon.

## METHOD

During our review of previous related work, we documented the key points as they relate to types and best practices of microcopy. We then performed an open coding exercise to distill the common categories and topics, allowing us to further consolidate our findings based on how frequently they appeared across the sources we evaluated. These findings led to the development of our taxonomy of the types of microcopy, as well as a synthesis of industry best practices for microcopy.

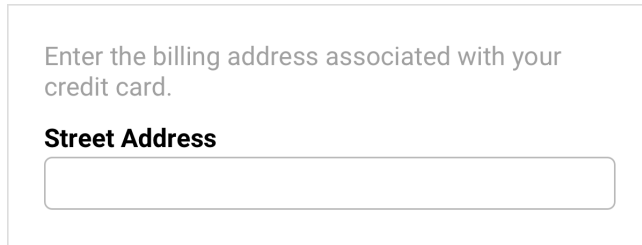
## TAXONOMY

We have developed a taxonomy describing the following 12 categories – types – of microcopy:

1. Instructions
2. Error messages
3. Confirmation messages
4. Button labels
5. Form labels
6. Form placeholders
7. Empty states
8. Concern alleviators
9. Branding
10. Page titles and headings
11. Loading and progress messages
12. Delight moments

### 1. Instructions

The most common form of microcopy is instructional copy. This encompasses additional text that has been placed on the page to help guide the user to perform an action [6]. It is commonly implemented in forms (see Figure 1) to explain what the user should do next.



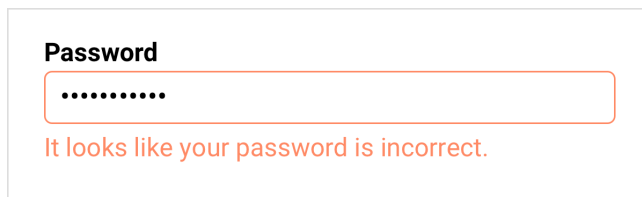
Enter the billing address associated with your credit card.

**Street Address**

Figure 1. Instructions in a form to explain what street address to enter.

### 2. Error Messages

When a system raises an error, the message displayed to the user is considered to be microcopy. Errors can appear in context to the section of the page that caused the error (see Figure 2), or they can be in the form of a "404 page" [11] that encompasses the full screen (see Figure 3).



**Password**

It looks like your password is incorrect.

Figure 2. Inline error message when password is incorrectly entered.

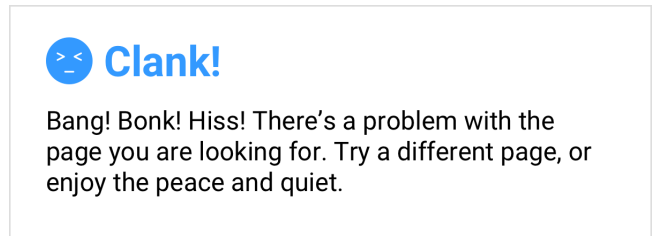


Figure 3. 404 page when the requested page was not found.

### 3. Confirmation Messages

In contrast to an error message, microcopy can also act as a confirmation message when operations are successfully completed (see Figure 4). This can encompass any type of feedback from the system. Confirmation messages can ensure the user that the system is performing properly and their actions were correct. It can also be used to promote the next step for the user [12].

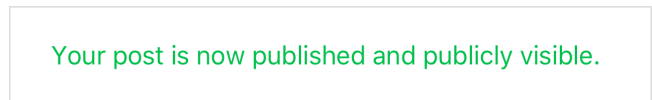


Figure 4. Confirmation message that a post was successfully published and is now visible to the public.

### 4. Button Labels

Buttons within an interface are decision points that the user can take an action [12]. The label on the button is extremely important in ensuring that the action matches the expected outcome (see Figure 5). Menu and navigation items should also be considered labeled appropriately.

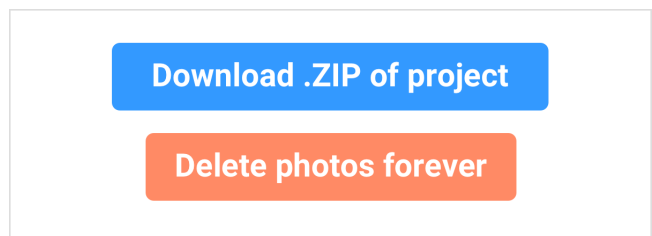


Figure 5. Two buttons with descriptive action labels.

### 5. Form Labels

Another common type of microcopy is located within forms as labels attached to individual form elements. Form labels define what is to be entered into field (see Figure 6), or what is to be selected for checkboxes and radio buttons.

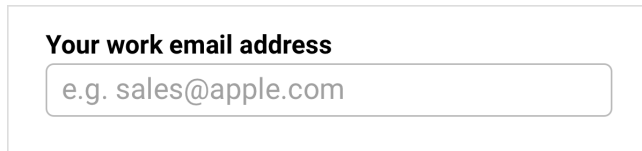


**Your work email address**

Figure 6. Text box form element with label.

## 6. Form Placeholders

In addition to form labels, form placeholders are microcopy that is located inside of a text box [3]. Placeholders appear as text that conveys instructions or provides sample data formatted in a way that is expected by the system (see Figure 7).



**Your work email address**

Figure 7. Text box form element with placeholder label inside.

## 7. Empty States

An empty state is the placeholder for page elements that contain no data or have not yet loaded with data. Empty states can contain microcopy with sample data, suggestions, instructions of what actions to take next (see Figure 8), structure a page before it loads with content [12], or inform the user when no results are found with a search.

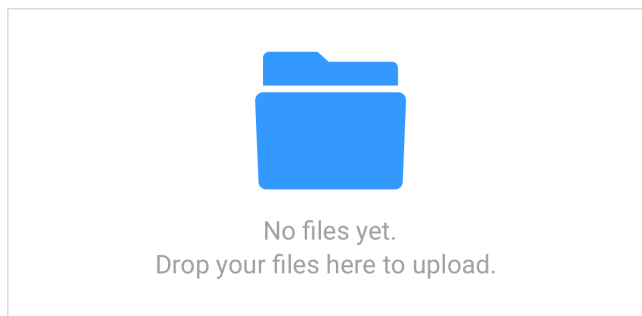
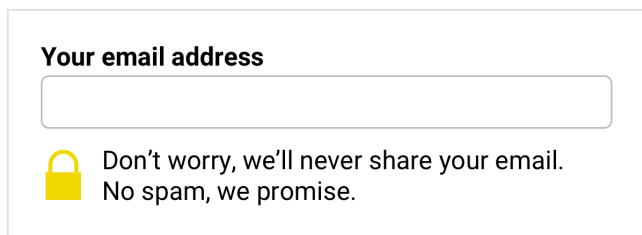


Figure 8. Empty state prompting the user that no files have been uploaded and what action to take next.

## 8. Concern Alleviators

Microcopy can alleviate a user's potential concerns [1]. Like instructional microcopy, concern alleviators can be used to give background information of how a system works, explain security precautions, or what the system will do with the user's data (see Figure 9).



**Your email address**



Don't worry, we'll never share your email.  
No spam, we promise.

Figure 9. Form with microcopy to help alleviate concerns of how the data (email address) will be used.

## 9. Branding

Microcopy can reinforce the brand by providing branding moments (see Figure 10). To use microcopy branding, voice and tone are injected purposefully into the user's interactions [2].

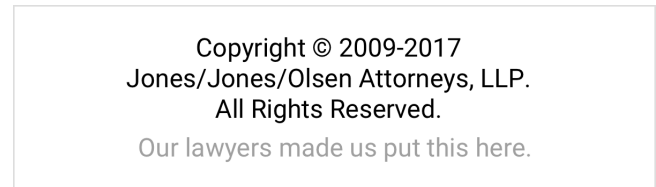
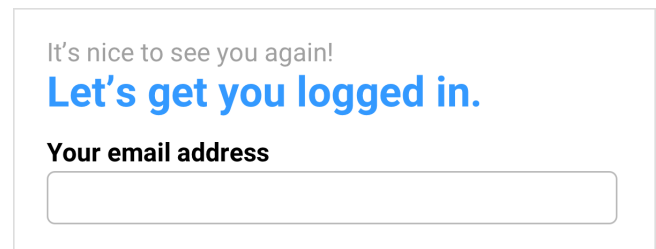


Figure 10. Footer of a law practice's website. "Our lawyers made us put this here" is an example of microcopy that plays upon the brand.

## 10. Page Titles and Headings

Titles and headings act as microcopy to tie together content and build context [3, 12]. They are also opportunities to reflect the brand's voice and tone. For example, instead of titling a login page as "Login," a more personalized title can be used (see Figure 11).



It's nice to see you again!

**Let's get you logged in.**

**Your email address**

Figure 11. Improved title of a login form.

## 11. Loading and Progress Messages

Loading and progress messages can communicate the current state of the system to the user [4, 12]. These messages are also opportunities to engage the user in the brand (see Figure 12).

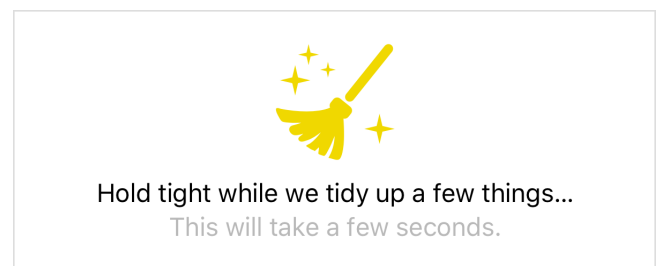


Figure 12. Loading screen with microcopy that engages the user in the system.

## 12. Delight Moments

Microcopy can spark moments of delight for the user. Personality and humor can be injected to support emotions a user might be experiencing at a particular moment in their journey (see Figure 13). Emojis, if effectively used, can convey emotions more efficiently than text [7].

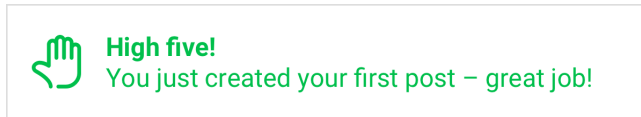


Figure 13. Microcopy that is delightful and supportive of the user's journey.

## BEST PRACTICES

Based on the related work which was evaluated for this study, we synthesized the following 15 categorical recommendations of industry best practices of microcopy:

1. Good microcopy *is contextual*.
2. Good microcopy *is conversational*.
3. Good microcopy *is coherent*.
4. Good microcopy *alleviates concerns*.
5. Good microcopy *guides the journey*.
6. Good microcopy *is helpful*.
7. Good microcopy *is simple*.
8. Good microcopy *supports the job*.
9. Good microcopy *considers the audience*.
10. Good microcopy *is tested*.
11. Good microcopy *isn't a design bandage*.
12. Good microcopy *supports the brand*.
13. Good microcopy *considers emotions*.
14. Good microcopy *is consistent*.
15. Good microcopy *is delightful*.

### 1. Good Microcopy is Contextual

Microcopy should always be contextual to the user's internal and external journey and only be shown when necessary [1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12] (see Figure 14). The user's device should also be considered when using microcopy (e.g. "click here" vs. "tap here").

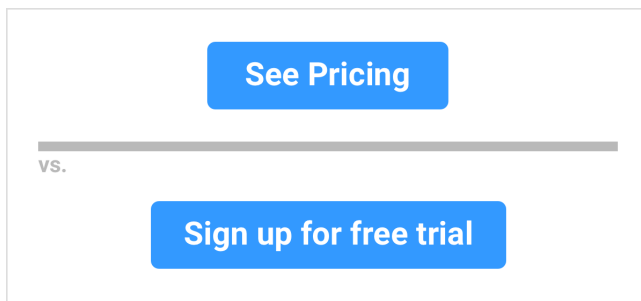


Figure 14. Microcopy on buttons that changes depending on the position in the user's journey.

### 2. Good Microcopy is Conversational

Microcopy should be written in a natural human tone and voice that is simple and easy to understand (see Figure 15). Jargon and technical system details (errors codes) should not be used [4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12]. The user should feel like they are communicating with a human, not a machine.

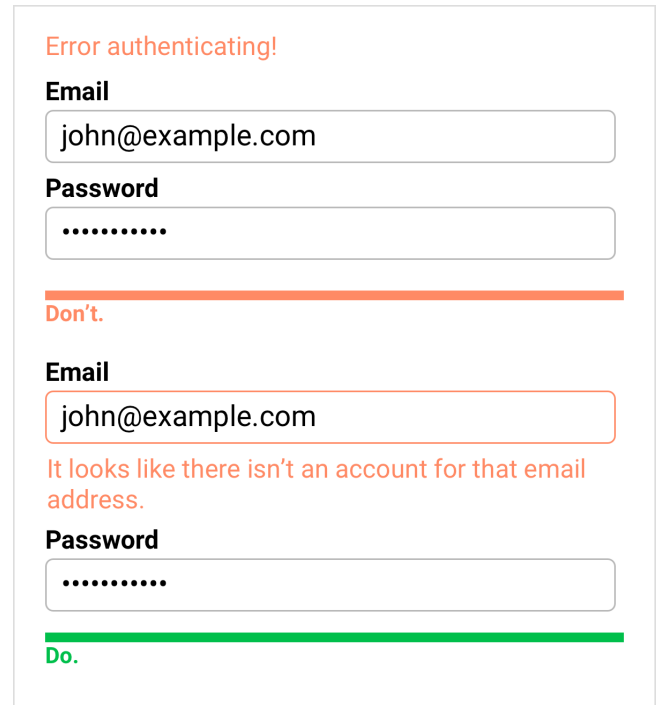


Figure 15. Error message that plainly explains what part of the form is wrong.

### 3. Good Microcopy is Coherent

Microcopy should explicitly define what actions are being performed [1, 4, 6, 10]. There should be coherence between button labels and what action will happen when clicked (see Figure 16).

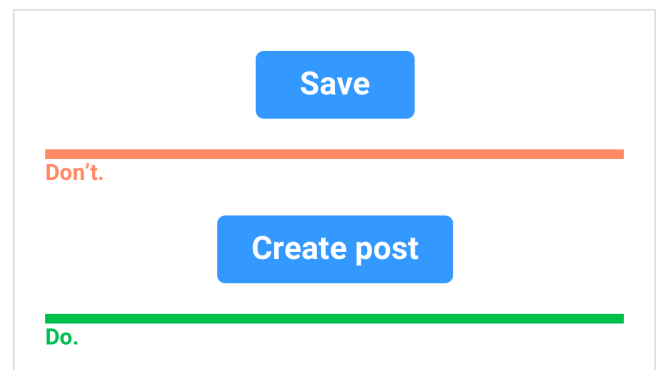


Figure 16. Button for creating a new post. "Save" is not descriptive enough for the action of creating the post.

#### 4. Good Microcopy Alleviates Concerns

Microcopy should be used to alleviate the user's potential concerns, such as privacy, security, trust, pricing, and frequency of emails [1, 4, 6, 12]. It should be clear and concise and answer any questions in context to the user (see Figure 17). Social proof [4] (e.g. "Last week 2,370 companies signed up") can also help alleviate legitimacy concerns.

**Sign up for newsletter**

Email

**Don't.**

**Sign up for newsletter**

We'll send you exactly one email per week.  
You can stop at any time.

Email

**Do.**

Figure 17. Microcopy can help alleviate the concern of receiving too many emails.

#### 5. Good Microcopy Guides the Journey

Microcopy should guide the user through their journey [6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12] and enable interactions for progression (see Figure 18). It should provide motivation before taking an action and reduce friction during the action [12]. There should always be a way for the user to move through the system at their own pace.

No posts

**Don't.**

You haven't created a post yet.

**Create first post**

**Do.**

Figure 18. Empty states can help guide the user through their journey and provide the next steps.

#### 6. Good Microcopy is Helpful

Microcopy should be helpful by providing specific information about an interaction and what action(s) can be taken next [3, 4] (see Figure 19).

Email

Error

**Don't.**

Email

Please enter a valid email address.

**Do.**

Figure 19. Microcopy should be helpful by explaining the details.

#### 7. Good Microcopy is Simple

Microcopy should be simple in its intent and implementation [1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 12]. It should use plain language and consist of the least number of words (see Figure 20). Buttons should not include "Click here" in the label [11] – "clicking here" is the method and not the action the button performs. Instructional microcopy should not be used when a form label can accomplish the purpose [9].

Username

Username length should be between 4 to 20 characters long.

**Don't.**

Username

4-20 characters

**Do.**

Figure 20. Microcopy should be simplified to the least number of words, but also remain understandable.

### 8. Good Microcopy Supports the Job

Microcopy should support and mirror the user in the job they are trying to accomplish by using the system [4, 6, 12] (see Figure 21).

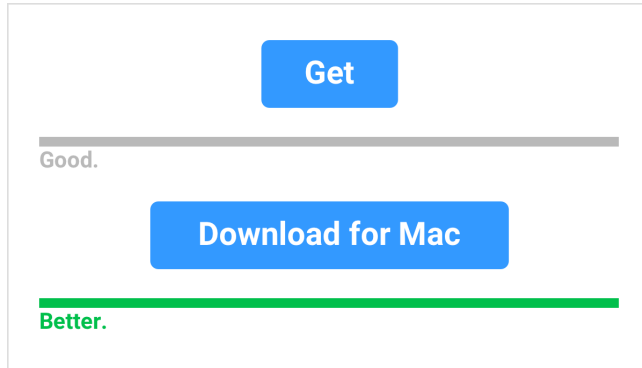


Figure 21. Since users don't "get" a download, using "download" in the label would align with the job.

### 9. Good Microcopy Considers the Audience

Microcopy should consider the audience in its content, voice, and tone [2, 4, 7] by using the correct language. Jargon should not be used (see Figure 22), unless it is applicable to the audience. "Knowing thy audience" is crucial to ensure the message is relevant and easy to understand by the user.

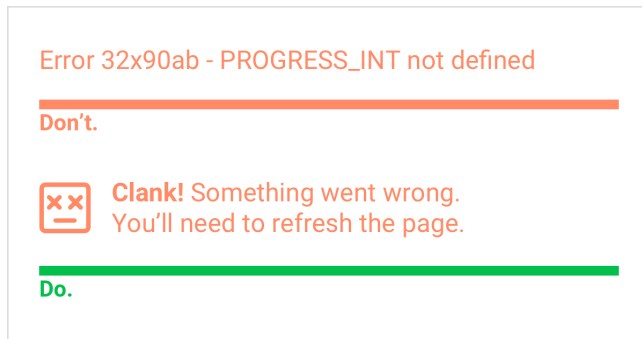


Figure 22. Avoid technical jargon. Help the user recover.

### 10. Good Microcopy is Tested

Microcopy should be tested to ensure it is having the desired effects [1, 2, 4, 5, 10, 11]. Usability testing can determine if the microcopy is appropriate in context of the user's actions and matches the audience. A/B testing (see Figure 23) can determine which variations of microcopy have the greatest effect (e.g. conversion rate).

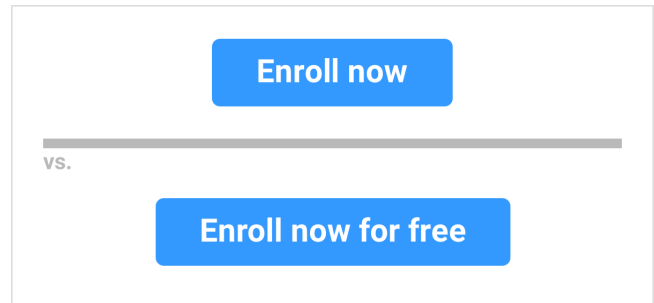


Figure 23. Two button labels that can be A/B tested to determine the most effective microcopy.

### 11. Good Microcopy Isn't a Design Bandage

Microcopy should not be an afterthought used to attempt to fix poor system design [1, 2, 3, 4, 10, 11] (see Figure 24). It should be used as a guide, not a crutch for the user to rely upon. Bill Beard [2] states: "The best experiences have minimal copy because they're intuitive. ... If you can't explain what a user needs to do in eight words or fewer, then reconsider the design."

Using microcopy to explain how the system works can be beneficial. However, microcopy can be avoided in the first place by modifying and improving how the system works.

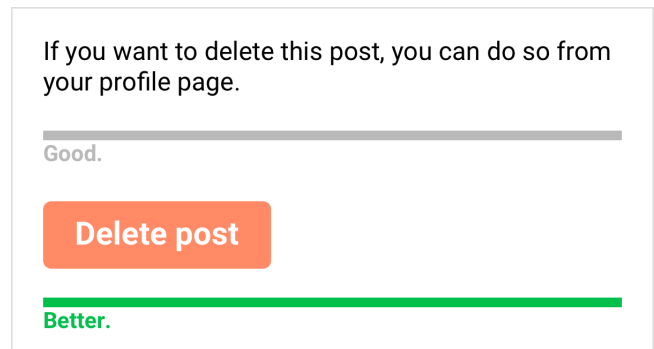


Figure 24. Instead of explaining where to find the delete feature, the system can be redesigned to include the delete button in context to the user.

## 12. Good Microcopy Supports the Brand

Microcopy should communicate and support the brand by integrating a consistent voice and tone [2, 6, 10, 11, 12] (see Figure 25). Avoid over-branding the navigation, forms, instructions, buttons, and error messages [2].

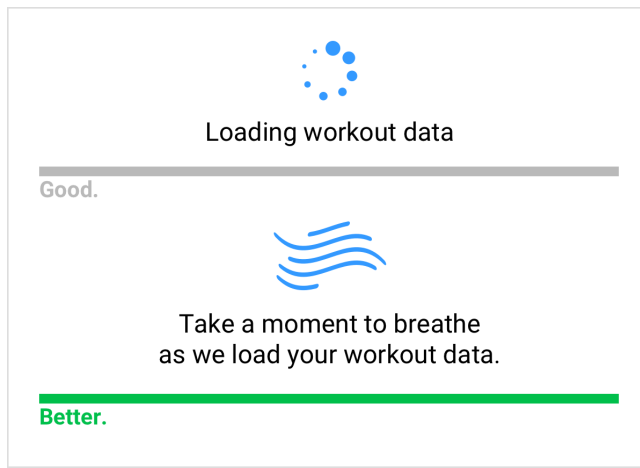


Figure 25. While a workout app is loading, the brand can involve the user in workout-like activities (e.g. deep breaths).

## 13. Good Microcopy Considers Emotions

Microcopy should consider emotions of the user in context to actions being taken [7, 10, 11, 12]. Personality and humor can inject emotions into the user's journey. However, a mood should not be forced upon the user – error messages can have personality, but should not be humorous [7] or force a feeling of failure (see Figure 26).

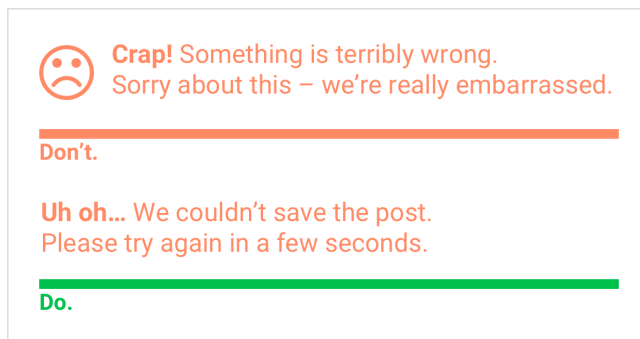


Figure 26. A humorous error message may frustrate the user even more than encountering the error itself. Instead, microcopy should be helpful and supportive of the user's emotions.

## 14. Good Microcopy is Consistent

Microcopy should remain consistent in its point of view, tone, and voice across the entire system, and maintain the brand [2] (see Figure 27). If tone and voice are introduced early in the user's journey, their experience will feel more consistent and the verbal elements of the interface won't look like a patchwork [12].

**It's nice to see you again, John!**

**Congrats on reaching 100 likes!**

**Almost 200 likes! We can't wait!**

Good.

Figure 27. When using microcopy throughout a system, ensure that the tone and voice are consistent.

## 15. Good Microcopy is Delightful

Microcopy should be delightful, but only after it is functional and useful [3, 7, 11, 12]. Delight can support the user through use of personality and humor. User successes should be celebrated, when appropriate.

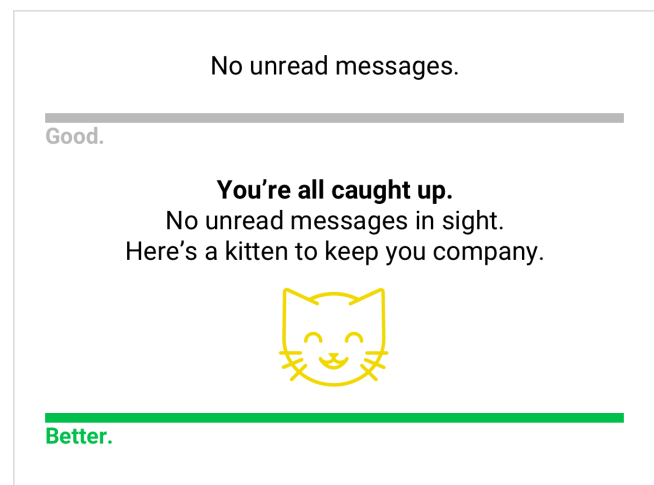


Figure 28. Personality and humor can be added to a stale empty state page to celebrate success.

## DISCUSSION

This study was largely based on our review of related and previous work performed by industry professionals and their experiences with microcopy. Due to the unique nature and new terminology of microcopy, there has been very little formal academic research on the topic, as well as a standardized definition. It is our belief that this study can further the research of microcopy by giving it a framework in which to work from. It is also our goal that this study can act as a resource for designers who are implementing microcopy.

### Further Research

We propose that further research should be conducted to evaluate the validity and effectiveness of our proposed taxonomy and best practices of microcopy. A potential open card sort study could be used to validate the relative categories.

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