

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

UX Writing Guide

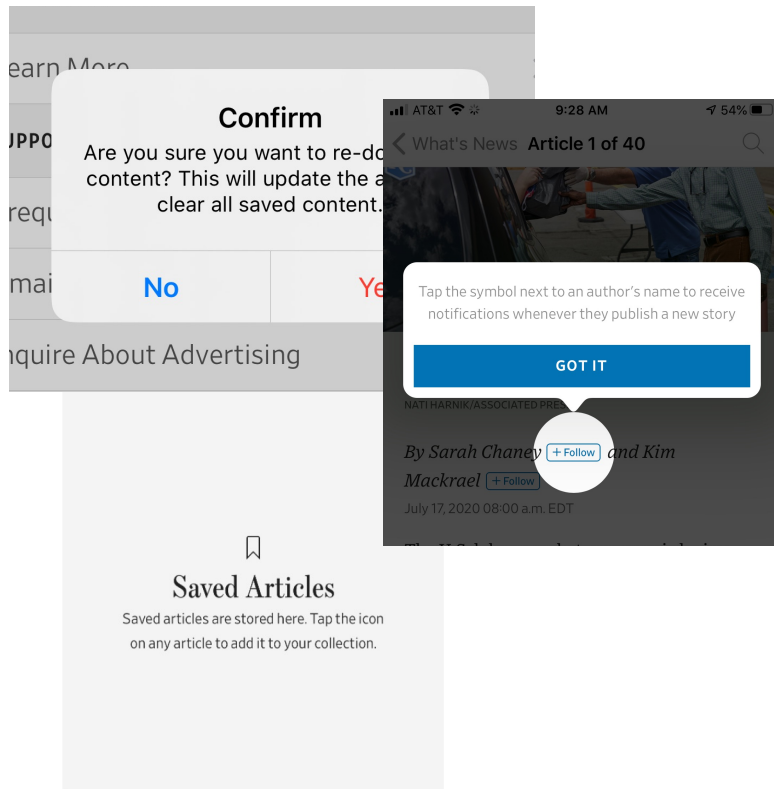
Project Objectives

- Create a guideline for **UX writing standards and principles** specific to WSJ digital experiences
- Base content decisions on input from key **stakeholders** to ensure UX writing guidelines speak to business and brand goals
- Establish a **tone of voice** rooted in contemporary UX best practices and aligned with the WSJ brand credibility
- Foster **consistency** by unifying an approach to UX copy across all WSJ digital products

Opportunity

At the outset of the project, WSJ's product copy was by no means problematic across the experience. In fact, friendly, helpful UX copy was already being implemented at key touchpoints. That said, there was no single source of truth for the approach.

As a remedy, the guideline would contain fundamental definitions of what UX writing is, why it's important and how to execute it for WSJ products. It would also contain proprietary methods for deploying a style that's *specific* to the WSJ brand. This would serve to reinforce the publication's credibility and sophistication even as we contemporize some of the writing.



Opportunity

Often, language was clear, but could benefit from simplification for in-flow readability. Content choices implemented to solve UI or marketing challenges needed to be identified to ensure guidelines would serve the needs of different departments, while also serving the user.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

YOUR MEMBERSHIP ENTITLES YOU TO THIS CONTENT

NEXT →

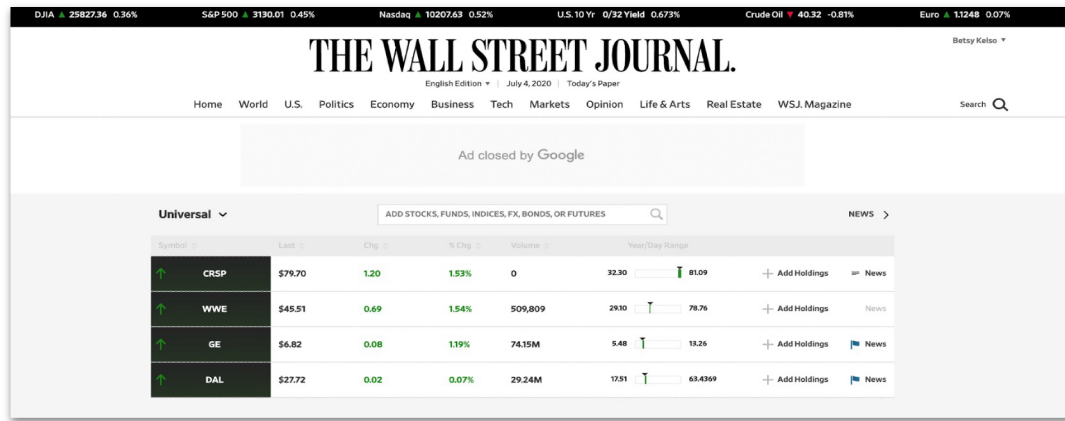
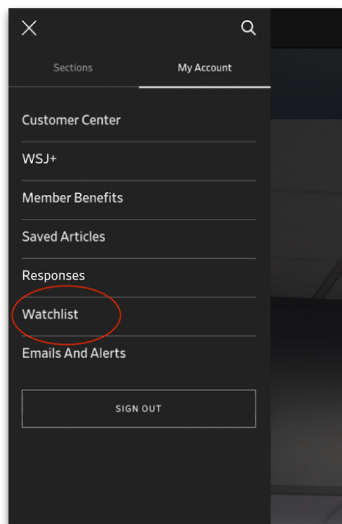
Your Interests

Select your interests below to help us recommend the most relevant WSJ features to you.

☐ Arts and Culture	☒ Career Management	☐ Economics	☒ Investing
☒ Opinion	☒ Personal Finance	☒ Personal Health	☒ Politics
☐ Reading	☒ Real Estate	☒ Technology	☐ Travel

Opportunity

It was also important to build an awareness of how micro-copy and terminology reads within non-linear contexts. For example, inside the video experience, the menu item “Watchlist” may signal a video watchlist, instead of the stock watchlist, which takes the user to a different section of the website.



Opportunity

There were also places where legacy components could benefit from a contemporized approach, but with thoughtful justification. For example, a strictly binary gender dropdown menu within Accounts may (subtly) work against the idea of a news publication being current or “plugged in.” At the same time, the WSJ brand doesn’t pander or chase trends – something to keep in mind for decisions like these.

Personal

This information will help us tailor our products to you.

Gender

Select

Select

Male

Female

Select

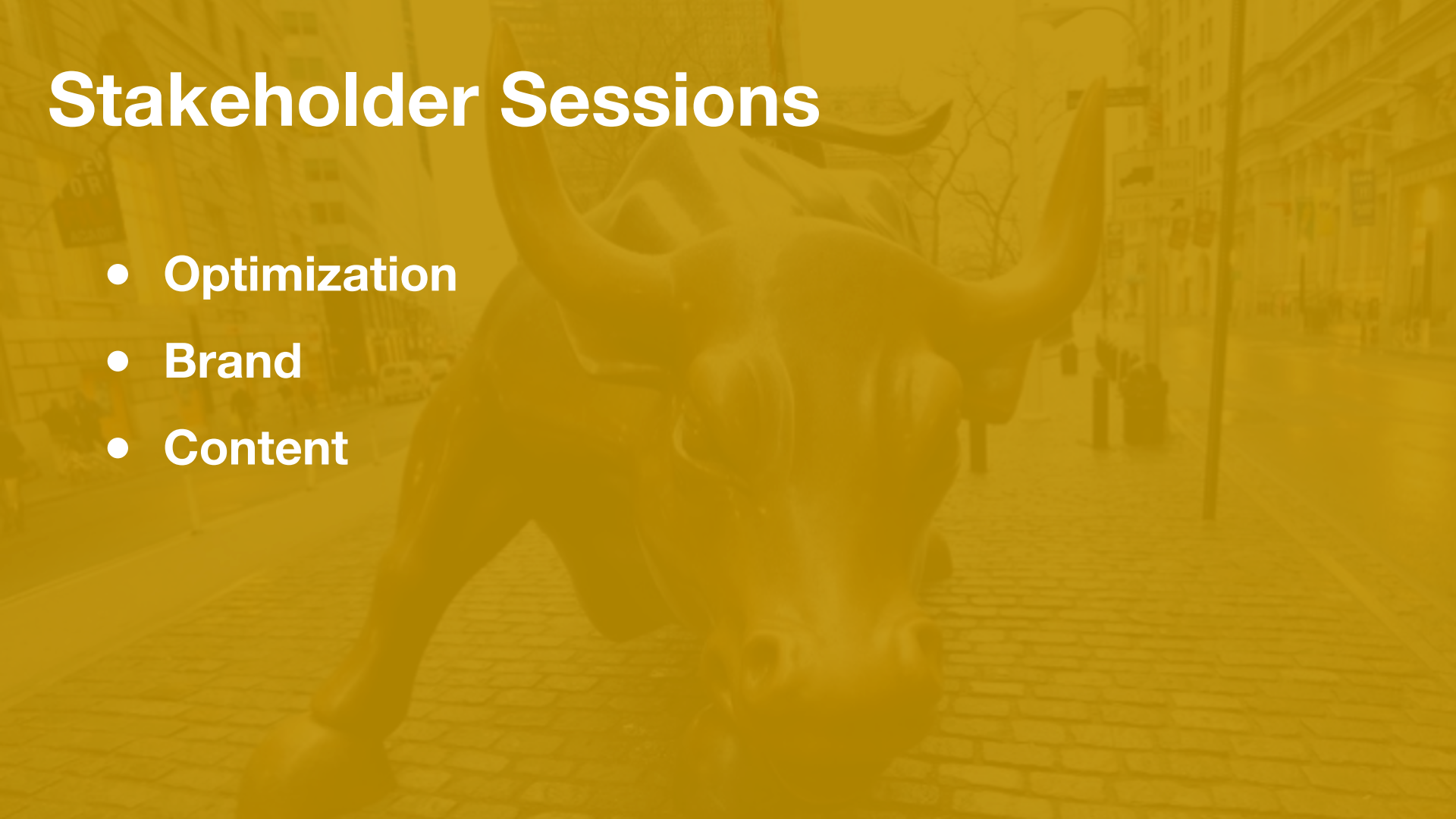
Proposition

UX writing style can differ from marketing content by focusing on the user within specific contexts. This makes a positive impact on the overall brand impression, which may serve greater company goals.

Established principles for product copy and a distinct UX voice and tone can help:

- **Broaden the audience** for paid memberships by way of a more positive, clear UX
- **Reduce user anxiety** during a subscription flow, leading to greater conversion
- **Empower users** to maximize their membership benefits, which may increase retention
- **Build awareness** of new and existing features to encourage engagement
- **Reinforce WSJ brand value** in ways that reflect brand promises at every step of the user journey

Stakeholder Sessions

A large bull sculpture, likely the 'El Toru' in Madrid, stands on a cobblestone street. The entire image is covered with a semi-transparent orange filter. The bull is facing forward, slightly to the right, with its head lowered. The background shows a city street with buildings and a few people in the distance.

- Optimization
- Brand
- Content

Stakeholder Sessions

- **Optimization**
- Brand
- Content

Stakeholder Sessions | Optimization

Onboarding challenges

- How do we make the user feel comfortable with what they're purchasing?
- How do we reduce anxiety that causes abandonment in the checkout flow?
- How do we improve upon what we test?

Stakeholder Sessions

- Optimization
- **Brand**
- Content

Stakeholder Sessions | Brand

Subscription language challenges

- “Subscription” vs. “Membership”
- “Join” vs. “Subscribe”
- “View Options” vs. “Subscribe Now” vs. “Act Now”
- Difference in tone of voice for acquisition (sales/new subscribers) vs. engagement (members/existing subscribers)

Stakeholder Sessions | Brand

10 minutes

Brand Values

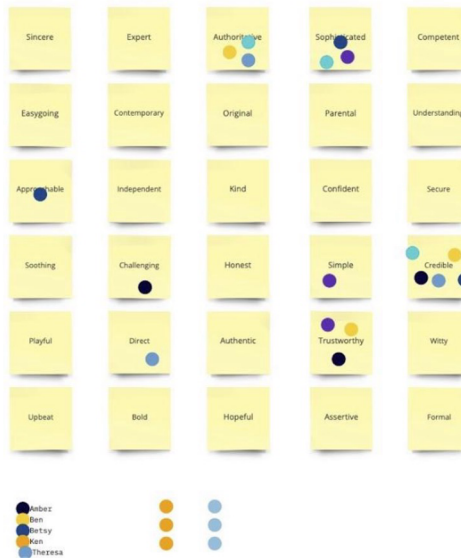
What values are important to WSJ? What are we (or do we want to be) known for?



10 minutes

Tone & Voice

What is our Brand voice? This guides the tone we use at certain points of the journey



10 minutes

Objectives

With every piece of content we publish, we aim to:



Stakeholder Sessions

- Optimization
- Brand
- **Content**

Stakeholder Sessions | Content

Habits and discovery challenges

- How do we build better habits?
- How can users find and engage in membership features?
- How can language and labels help?

Stakeholder Sessions | Content

News-based language challenges

- “Breaking” vs. “Developing” news
- Transparency with content corrections and timestamps
- How to best label sponsor-generated content?
- “Subscription” vs. “Membership”

Stakeholder Sessions | Content

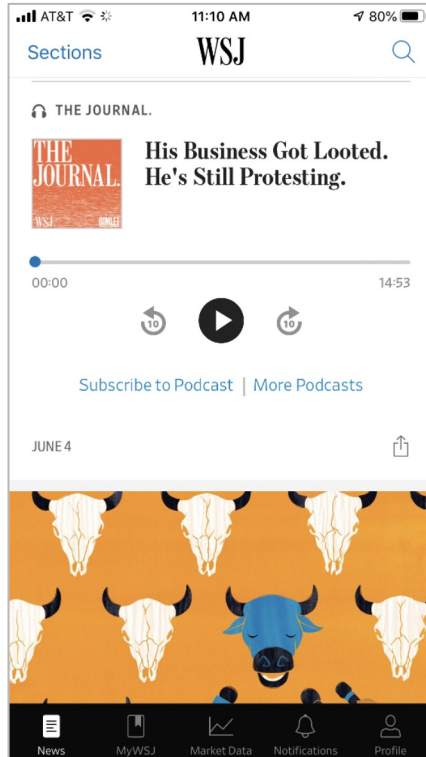
Voice inputs

- We don't dumb it down.
- We are an “expert guide that is also human.”

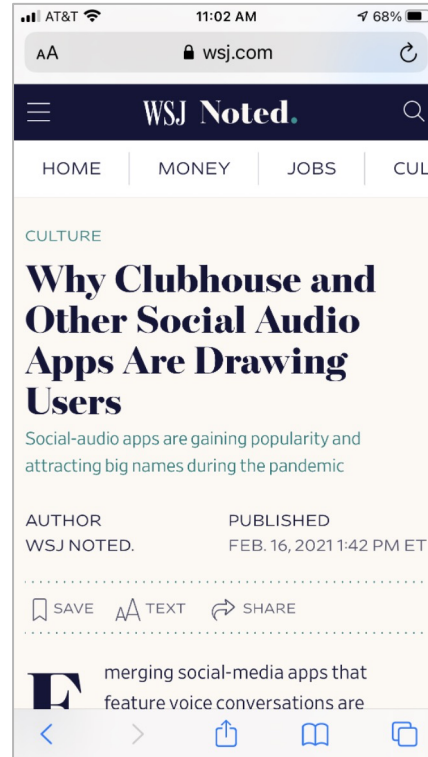
Stakeholder Sessions | Content



social media



podcast UI



digital magazine

“We don’t have different faces for different audiences.”

Voice and Tone

- **Intelligent**
- **Authoritative**
- **Approachable**



Principles

- **Clear in our communication**

We strive to be uncomplicated. Our users should be able to accomplish tasks with little-to-no friction or confusion.



Principles

- **Credible in our output**

Our buttons and links take users where those buttons and links indicate. Our headers accurately describe the content that follows.



Principles

- **Transparent with our intentions**

We are up front about how we use different types of personal information, and we make sure users understand what they will receive with their membership commitments.



Principles

- **Consistent with our terminology**

Users can learn our product language quickly.
We use similar tenses, terms and formatting
throughout our experiences.



Principles

- **Respectful of our users' intelligence**

We don't talk down to users. Even when our users are in error, we are always helpful and never condescending.



Principles

- **Encouraging in our approach**

We invite users to take advantage of their membership benefits by making those benefits easy to find and exciting to use. We positively affirm when our users get it right.



WSJ

UX WRITING GUIDE

FOR DIGITAL PRODUCTS

WSJ/DXS

VERSION 1.0

JULY 2020

Introduction

Practical Guide

1.0

INTRODUCTION

1.1

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE?

UX writing adds value to a product in meaningful ways. Clear, consistent product language can:

- Make users aware of new or existing product features
- Empower users to maximize their membership/subscription benefits
- Encourage memberships/subscriptions for a broader audience
- Reduce user anxiety during a subscription journey
- Positively impact a company's brand value

As a best-practices resource designed especially for *WSJ* products, this UX writing guide should:

- Provide guidance for formatting
- Highlight ways to edit and test existing copy for your product goals
- Inspire new ways to organize and improve product content
- Clarify *WSJ*'s tone of voice as it applies to product copy
- Apply broadly to all *WSJ* products, environments and platforms

As *WSJ* digital products and objectives evolve, this guide will also evolve.

1.2

WHAT IS UX WRITING?

UX writing is the "language" or "words" component of User Experience Design. If User Experience Design puts the user's needs and interests at the center of product development, UX writing addresses those needs and interests through copy.

UX copy can show up as helpful hints, instructions, error messages, headers, onboarding - any piece of text that helps a user navigate a product and accomplish a task.

With this in mind, strive for UX copy that is:

Minimalist

- Use short phrases as opposed to full sentences for commands ("Undo changes?" instead of "Undo the changes you made?")

Un-fussy

- Omit jargon and complicated language
- Choose a conversational tone with straightforward directives ("Show more" on an expandable list instead of "Expand" or just "More")

Universal

- Avoid jokes or nuances that are distinct to a specific culture or region.
- Remember that users access our products on different devices and platforms

Introduction | Why?

How UX writing can help WSJ initiatives

UX writing Overview

2.0

WSJ VALUES

2.1

WSJ UX WRITING OBJECTIVES

As with broader *WSJ* copy initiatives, we do not “dumb down” or over-modulate our writing style for different audiences or tasks. By establishing and adhering to UX writing principles and guidelines, we empower every *WSJ* user to make the most of their *WSJ* products.

This approach to product copy will reinforce *WSJ*’s rigorous commitment to reliability and accuracy. Through UX writing best practices, we will continue to convey *WSJ*’s credibility, while also communicating our ability to innovate and modernize.

2.2

WSJ UX WRITING PRINCIPLES

To create a positive, brand-friendly environment for our products, we are:

- **Clear in our communication**
We strive to be uncomplicated. Our users should be able to accomplish tasks with little-to-no friction or confusion.
- **Credible in our output**
Our buttons and links take users where those buttons and links indicate. Our headers accurately describe the content that follows.
- **Transparent with our intentions**
We are up front about how we use different types of personal information. We assure users understand what they will receive with membership commitments.
- **Consistent with our terminology**
Users can learn our product language quickly. We use similar tenses, terms and formatting throughout our product experiences.
- **Respectful of our users’ intelligence**
We don’t talk down to users. Even when our users are in error, we are always helpful and never condescending.
- **Encouraging in our approach**
We invite our users to take advantage of their membership benefits by making those benefits easy to find and exciting to use. We positively affirm when our users get it right.

Introduction | Why?

Objectives

Principles

2.3

TONE & VOICE

If **voice** is how a product wants to “sound” or “seem,” then **tone** is how that voice adjusts to different situations. For example, our tone when communicating an error message can differ from our tone when communicating the benefits of *WSJ* membership.

A well-defined tone and voice can:

- Facilitate a smooth and cohesive product journey
- Encourage users to engage with our products
- Assure plain language comes across as sophisticated
- Convey a brand's personality

Through this application of tone and voice, *WSJ* will remain:

- Intelligent
- Authoritative
- Approachable

We are an expert guide that is also human.

2.4

RESPONSIVE DESIGN & “MOBILE-FIRST” THINKING

With responsive design, content automatically adapts to mobile, tablet and desktop viewing without the need to create separate versions of a website.

To ensure content is digestible and impactful no matter where it appears, take a “mobile first” approach to UX writing. Think about how your content will appear on a smaller screen and prioritize this environment. What might seem concise and readable on desktop can appear quite lengthy in mobile, so brevity is key - particularly in [headers](#) and [body copy](#).

Also, consider how certain commands come across in different environments. “Click” is more appropriate for buttons on desktop, while “tap” is more applicable to buttons on mobile/tablet.

Since product copy often appears in both environments, consider words like “select” or “choose” for your [Call to Action](#).

Introduction | Why?

Tone and Voice

Mobile-First Thinking

HEADERS

Headers are informative titles for different types of content. Not to be confused with news article headlines, headers can appear at the top of pages, paragraphs, forms, onboarding screens, dialogs - just about anywhere content appears to users.

A good header immediately communicates where the user has landed in their product journey and what to expect from the content that follows:

- "Saved Articles"
- "How To Report a Delivery Issue"
- "Sign In"

Headers can also entice users to engage with more content and features:

- "What to Read Next"
- "Most Popular Articles"
- "Recommended Videos"

UX Best Practices for Headers

Do: Be specific and accurate

- "Retrieve Your Username"

Don't: Be vague, coy or mysterious:

- "Retrieval"
- "Want To Get Back In?"

Don't: Be aggressive, flashy or desperate:

- "What You Need" (presumptuous/aggressive)
- "Don't Get Left Behind!" (overly urgent)

Do: Be inviting and friendly:

- "Join the Conversation"

Do: Avoid full sentences in headers:

- "Included With Your Membership" (instead of: "Your Membership Entitles You To This Content")

Do: Take an optimistic approach:

- **Good:** "Not a member?"
- **Better:** "Not a member yet?"

Practical Guide

Individual Elements

Examples

MICROCOPY

Microcopy represents a large portion of product copy. Field labels, error messages, helpful hints and menu items are all examples of microcopy. Microcopy is where our [UX writing principles](#) can make a big difference in encouraging users to stay engaged and accomplish their product goals.

UX Best Practices for Microcopy

The smallest details in microcopy can make the biggest impact. Timing and placement are as important as the content itself. An example of this is how microcopy works within a subscription journey.

When asking a user for payment, timely information about what is needed and how payment will remain secure is a must for reducing user anxiety. Added messages like “You’ll be able to review your order on the next screen before completing your purchase” reduce user anxiety further and help build trust in a brand.

CALL TO ACTION (CTA)

CTA stands for “Call to Action.” In WSJ products, this content typically appears as button labels.

Do: Use active verbs as much as possible:

- “Follow”
- “Subscribe”
- “Add to Watchlist”
- “Save Changes”

Do: Try to limit the number of words on a button to 2, but use 3 if they help the user better understand the action’s commitment level:

- **Short:** “Save”
- **Better:** “Save and Continue”
- **Short:** “Upgrade”
- **Better:** “Explore Upgrade Options”
- **Short:** “Submit Order”
- **Better:** “Submit Secure Order”

Do: Be consistent with certain action labels within a section or journey:

- “Share” vs. “Post” vs. “Comment”
- “Join” vs. “Subscribe” vs. “Become a Member”
- “Listen Now” vs. “Play” vs. “Tune In”

Headers

Body Copy

Microcopy

Call to Action

Instructions and Tooltips

Menus and Navigation

Directionals

Form Fields

Empty States

Error Messages

Do: Use friendlier touches where appropriate:

- "No thanks" (instead of "No")

Do: Take an optimistic approach:

- "Maybe later" (instead of: "Not now")

A Call to Action can also appear as a live link or a directive toward a menu item. Avoid adding unnecessary words by including the directive inside the link wording itself:

- "Explore your membership options" or "Learn more now" (instead of: "Follow the link below" + the additional link)
- Use "choose" when informing users which menu or list item to use for a task (as opposed to "click" or "tap," which are environment-specific)
- Use "select" when options are fewer and/or when a variety of terminology is needed for copy flow

INSTRUCTIONS AND TOOLTIPS

Microcopy instructions can appear in pop-up form, as helpful hints or alongside form fields. Instructions should be explicitly clear without being brusque.

Do: Begin with the user's objective, then keep it simple:

- **Good:** "Activate alerts to receive an email notification when a new crossword is available."
- **Better:** "To receive notifications about new crosswords, turn on email alerts."
- Note use of "turn on" instead of "activate" - clear and conversational

Do: Take extra care to provide chatbots and virtual assistants with a human voice:

- **Good:** "Hello, I am a chatbot assistant. I will be able to handle some of your requests. If I'm unable to do that, I will direct you to the right person on my team who can assist you. What can I help you with today?"
- **Better:** "Hi there, I'm your chatbot assistant. If I can't answer your questions, I'll direct you to a person who can. How can I help?"
- Brevity makes the message readable; use of contractions humanizes the voice

Do: Take proximity into account

- When a tooltip or instruction is placed in proximity to a form field, for example, the user can more readily take action with that information

Mirrors best practices with a positive approach and encouraging tone

3.45

FORM FIELDS

Form fields are boxes or spaces where users enter requested data (username and password or shipping information, for example). An asterisk next to a field label typically indicates that a field is required as opposed to requested.

WSJ form field labels should be:

- Brief
- Clear
- Formatted in title case ("Email or Username" instead of "Email or username")

Do: Start with simplicity for fields that are inherently intuitive:

- "First Name" (instead of: "Enter Your Name")

Do: Apply the UX writing principles of consistency and informality:

- "Last Name" (instead of: "Surname")

Do: Consider which fields need added clarity:

- "Street Address or P.O. Box" (instead of: "Address 1")
- "Apartment/Suite or Building/Floor" (instead of: "Address 2")

3.46

IN-LINE VALIDATION

In-line validations are instructional messages that appear in close proximity to specific form fields. In-line validations can appear alongside, inside, on top of or beneath a field for the utmost clarity on where the information applies.

Do: Consider which fields might cause anxiety, and add helpful links:

- "Why do we ask for this?" (expandable tooltip)
- Note that "ask" respectfully empowers the user, whereas "need" or "require" would empower the product/brand

Do: Know which fields need explicit instruction or visual aids

- This could be a "What is this?" link that pops open to show where to find a credit card security code or a survey code on a postcard/receipt

Longer field labels and inline validations should be placed judiciously to avoid cluttering a form or overwhelming the user.

Covers nuances that empower the user - the difference between "We need..." and "We ask..."

WSJ FORMATTING DO'S & DON'TS (UX WRITERS)

Sometimes [UX writing principles](#) conflict with newsroom guidelines (for example, when we elect not to spell out numerals under "10" or use state abbreviations sans periods).

Unless specifically noted in this guide (or when in doubt) consult the [WSJ Stylebook](#)^{*} and adhere to those guidelines.

^{*} When working remotely, log on to the VPN to access the [WSJ Stylebook](#). The *WSJ Stylebook* is also accessible through your Slackbot - type: /style [topic of query] in the message field.

CAPITALIZATION, PUNCTUATION

Capitalization of proper names (people, places, companies)

- *Tiffany Haddish*
- *Portland*
- *Google*

Sentence case for bulleted/numbered lists (sans end punctuation)

- *Benefits*
- *Member benefits*
- *Explore membership benefits* (instead of: "Explore Membership Benefits" or "Explore membership benefits.")

Title case for menus and headers

- *Included With Your Membership* (instead of: "Included with your membership")
- Lowercase: "a," "an," "and," "the," "to," "but" (except when it's the 1st word of your header - then capitalize)
- Capitalize: Prepositions with 4 or more letters ("With," "Over," "From," "Among")

Lowercase for content length indicators

- *12 minutes* (instead of: 12 Minutes)
- *1 hour* (instead of: 1 Hour or One Hour/One hour)
- *20-minute read* (instead of: 20-Minute read or 20 minute read - sans hyphen)

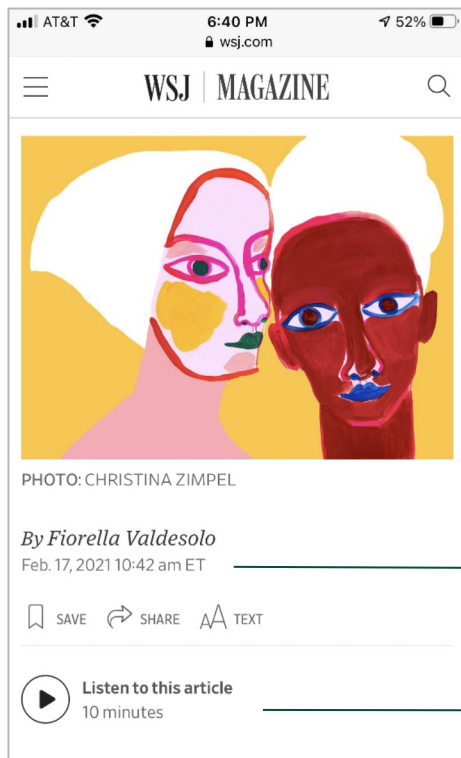
No Oxford/Serial comma before "and" in lists of three or more

- *lions, tigers and bears* (instead of: "lions, tigers, and bears")

Grammar and Style

Outcomes



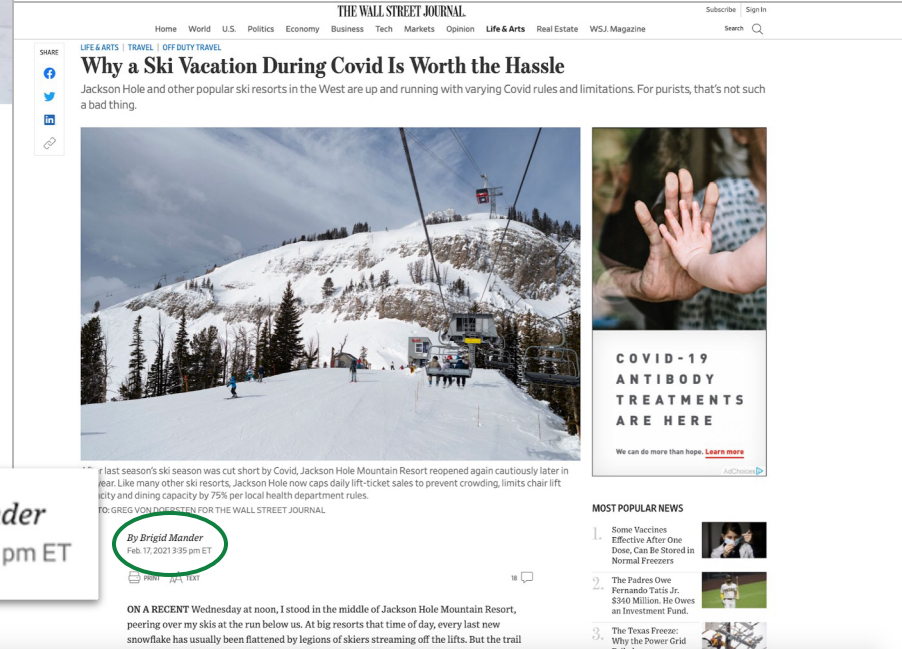
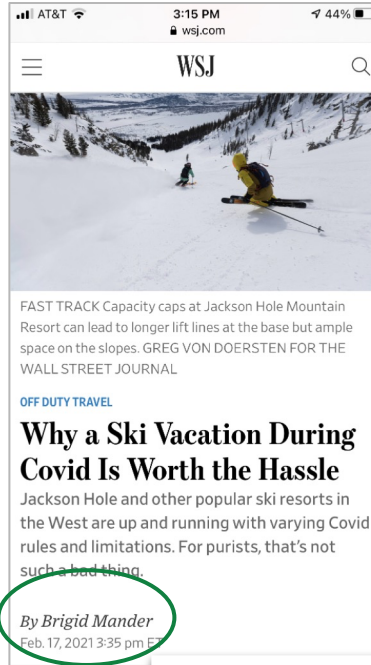
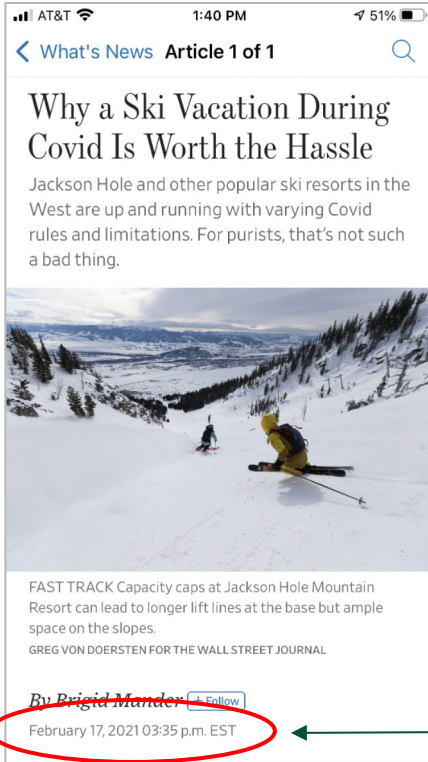


Current Issue | WSJ Magazine

→ Date and timestamps align with new guidelines

→ Simple sentences without end punctuation; lowercase labels

Current Content | WSJ



Some formatting still not 100% consistent between WSJ app and site experiences

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

YOUR MEMBERSHIP ENTITLES YOU TO THIS CONTENT

NEXT



Your Interests

Select your interests below to help us recommend the most relevant WSJ features to you.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

← BACK

NEXT →

Tailor Your WSJ Experience

Select your interests below to help us recommend the most relevant WSJ features to you.

Question 4 of 4

What are your interests? (Select all that apply)

Next Steps



Next Steps

Though my role and commitment culminated in the UX Writing Guideline deliverable, I chose to provide an additional roadmap for implementing the new standards and best practices moving forward.

This document included some key opportunities for improvement, gathered throughout my research. These next steps could be remedied at a pace and with resources determined by the WSJ team.

UX Writing - To Do

Recommendations for WSJ Digital Product Initiatives

1.0 UX WRITING INITIATIVES

Coordinated efforts across different WSJ teams to edit copy, improve content, and implement UX writing principles can:

- Help users accomplish their WSJ product goals with greater efficiency
- Draw the user's attention to new products and features
- Amplify existing features
- Distinguish between features that are free to all users and those accessible to members only
- Clarify product attributes, such as "live" vs. "recorded" for videos
- Broaden WSJ's audience by infusing product copy with a more inviting contemporary [voice and tone](#)

Timing: With agreed-upon strategies, some of these adjustments can be remedied with implementation to follow. Others will be ongoing strategies.

1.1 Onboarding Experience

The current onboarding experience - accessed through "Member Benefits" - is as content-heavy and somewhat restrictive. The experience of moving through might fatigue rather than inspire users to engage with membership benefits. It offers no clear exit, effectively "trapping" the user in the interface - an experience that compromises trust in the WSJ brand.

Striving for an onboarding experience of "discovery" can inspire the user to move forward at their own pace. WSJ can complement this experience by alerting users to the benefits throughout their product experience in an ongoing onboarding experience.

1.2 Voice & Tone

An thoughtfully defined voice and tone can enhance WSJ's brand perception by reinforcing WSJ's commitment to reliability and accuracy. Subtle nuances to voice and tone also communicate a level of sophistication.

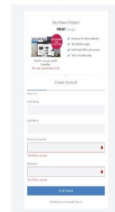
1.2.1 Product Copy (Example)

How WSJ communicates opportunities for users to engage with content should, ideally, place the user in the center of that communication. The example below is thoughtfully and thoroughly written, but empowers the product more than the user.

WSJ opens select articles to reader conversation to promote thoughtful dialogue. See the "Join the Conversation" area to the right for stories open to conversation. For more information, please reference our community guidelines. Email feedback and questions to readers@wsj.com.

1.2.2 Error Messaging (Example)

Error messages are an example of how WSJ can apply voice and tone to encourage users to continue along their product journey. The following in-line messaging can be softened as "Please enter your email address" and "Please enter your password," which are more courteous and empowering for the user.

A screenshot of a login form with two input fields. The first field, labeled 'Email', has a red error message above it: 'Please enter your email address'. The second field, labeled 'Password', has a red error message above it: 'Please enter your password'. Below the fields is a blue 'Log In' button. The form is part of a larger interface with a header and footer.

Questions?