GUI Bloopers

Navigation and Text Bloopers

Navigation

• The most pervasive problem software users encounter is navigation: finding their way to what they are seeking.

• People should know
  – Where they are
  – Where they’ve been
  – Where they can go
  – Whether the goal is near or far
Blooper 13: Window or page not identified

• Some applications or websites fail to provide any sign of where the user is. One failure is to provide a window title:

![Image of a dialog box with an empty title bar.](image1)

*Fetch: Delete File dialog box has no window title in titlebar.*

Blooper 13

![Image of a Firefox preferences window.](image2)

Firefox Preferences window titlebar identifies current preference category, not window.
Avoiding Blooper 13

• Title all windows, including dialog boxes. Use the format:
  <AppName>:<WindowTitle>

Blooper 14: Same title on different windows

• Sometimes different windows or web pages have the exact same title; this can mislead users about where they are.
Unique Window Names

Blooper 15: Window title doesn’t match command or link

- Users need reassurance that they got what they wanted to get. Avoid haphazard mappings between commands or links and the windows or pages they display.
- Mismatched titles can mislead users into thinking they selected the wrong command.
Blooper 15 Example

Microsoft Excel: Insert ⇒ Function... command displays Paste Function dialog box.

Blooper 15 on the Web

mac.com WebMail: clicking "Add a folder" displays a window titled "Manage Folders."
Related Problem: Mystery Meat Navigation

• This is when you have to click on something to figure out what it is.
• Examples:
  – http://www.flatpakhouse.com/
  – http://www.juliegarwood.com/
  – http://www.daltonmailingservice.com
  – http://www.shmarketing.co.uk/

Avoiding Blooper 15

• Make titles of windows or web pages match the command that displays them
• Inexact matches are OK if they work for users
  – As long as users see the connection
  – E.g. “Show Order Status” and “Status of Order #52” would be minor enough not to confuse anyone
Blooper 16 : Distracting off-path buttons and links

• People follow an “information scent” to their goals based on cues in the interface. Software should help provide proper “scents” to guide users and not lead them astray.

Blooper 16 Example

• Too many distracting links for IEEE renewal page

Renew Membership

We've made changes to the online renewal experience for 2008. Review this quick reference guide for step by step instructions.

Begin Renewal Now >>

Instructions for IEEE Student Members
For 2008 all student members must renew or add new services online (join IEEE societies or add publication subscriptions). For more information, refer to the IEEE Student Concource

For all IEEE Members
You will need your IEEE Web Account to access the secure online renewal application. Accepted online payment methods: IEEE MasterCard or Visa, MasterCard, Visa, American Express, Diners Club

• Consider adding the IEEE Member Digital Library to your membership when you renew for 2008.
• Download or print PDF versions of the 2008 IEEE Special Interest Memberships & Subscriptions catalog, for detailed descriptions and pricing information for all offerings. (Requires Adobe Acrobat Reader®, available from the Adobe web site.)
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### Blooper 16 : Lured Off Track, No Return

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flight</th>
<th>Depart</th>
<th>Arrive</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Time (.depart)</th>
<th>Time (arrive)</th>
<th>Depart Date</th>
<th>Fare</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>221252</td>
<td>10:54</td>
<td>12:54</td>
<td>1 hr</td>
<td>11:05</td>
<td>13:05</td>
<td>Monday, Jan 7</td>
<td>$122.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2372</td>
<td>2:30</td>
<td>5:10</td>
<td>3 hrs</td>
<td>3:30</td>
<td>6:10</td>
<td>Monday, Jan 7</td>
<td>$220.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SWA.com: fare-explanation page replaces flight-results page, but provides no route back.

### Blooper 16 : Confusing Links

Users may skip to “continue” and click it instead of “Submit Information”
Avoiding Blooper 16

- Don’t distract the customer from their task, let them finish the primary task first
- Create a “process funnel” that guides users toward their goal
- Make sure off-path button or link labels don’t trick users into thinking they are on the same path.
  - Could use pop-up or tooltip windows to show explanations

Blooper 17: Self-links

- Some web pages have links to themselves
  - Disorienting as users may not recognize the redisplayed page as the one they are on
Avoiding Blooper 17

• Don’t include active links to the current page on the current page
• Don’t forget about the navigation bar
  – Don’t include a link to the current page
  – Helps illustrate the current page as well
  – In breadcrumb, avoid link to “here”

![Personal Miles](image)

United.com: last item (for current page) in breadcrumb path is not a link.

Blooper 18: Diabolical Dialog Boxes

• Too Many Levels
  – Deep hierarchies divert users from original goals, lose track of which OK, Apply, Cancel buttons are before them
  – Most people lose track more than a few levels down a hierarchy

![Dialog Boxes](image)

Apple Final Cut Pro exporting image from video, optimized for streaming, requires (A), (B), (C), (D), and (E).
Avoiding Blooper 18

• General rule: avoid more than two levels of dialog boxes
  – Rule only applies to dialog boxes
  – Some dialog boxes don’t count
    • E.g. a File chooser or error messages

• Ways to cut excess levels
  – Chart the window hierarchy
  – Use a “details” pane instead of a separate window

Blooper 19: Competing search boxes

• When users are faced with multiple search boxes they often “Which one should I use?”

Canterbury.ac.nz: two search boxes on page. Which one searches for courses?
Multiple Search

Which search to use and why is one better than another?

Avoiding Blooper 19

• Less is more – usually one search box is sufficient

• If you need to provide different search functions for searching different types of structured data then design each search box to look completely different and specific to its search domain

Search boxes for different purposes look different. (A) Main site search. (B) Stock quote lookup.
Blooper 20: Poor search results browsing

- Users should be able to browse search results efficiently
- IBM search result for "tablet computers"
  – Only "Back" and "Next" buttons for 1438 results

Blooper 20 Example

- Search from [www.buyreliant.com](http://www.buyreliant.com) has only Back/Next with 20 hits per page and no Totals
Avoiding Blooper 20

• Search results should remind users what the search terms were, indicate number of hits, and make it easy to browse through the hits.

![Example of search results](image)

CompUSA.com links for all pages of hits support easy search results browsing.

Blooper 21: Noisy Search Results

• How easy is it to spot relevant hits amid all the others?
  – Humans scan the list quickly for those that look promising
  – To thwart humans, an evil web designer could:
    • Bury differences in noise: Add junk to each result so items are hard to distinguish
    • Force users to click on hits: Make hits look exactly alike
Blooper 21 Example

Many hits are identical or look similar.

Avoiding Blooper 21

- Show and stress important data in search results. Minimize repetition and show information that lets people distinguish hits.
- Minimize the need to click. People should have to click on hits only to actually get the item, not find out what it is.
- Main Yale site search:

  ![Yale Chemistry Department Search Results](image-url)
Textual Bloopers

Blooper 22 : Inconsistent Terminology

• One of the most common textual bloopers is to be haphazard and inconsistent about which terms are used for what concepts
• Exercise: List all terms
• Variations:
  – Different term for same concept
    • Folder, Directory
    • Properties, attributes, settings
    • Task, step
  – Same term for different concepts
    • View
Avoiding Blooper 22

• One name per concept
• Create a product lexicon
  – Test the lexicon on users
• Use industry standard terms for common concepts
  – E.g. “select” means clicking on an object to mark it for future action, not for other purposes like “default”

Blooper 23 : Unclear terminology

• Ambiguous terms, e.g. “enter”
• Terms for different concepts overlap in meaning
• Concepts too similar

Eudora for Mac: users must learn arbitrary distinction between Find and Search.
Avoiding Blooper 23

• Avoid synonyms
• Avoid ambiguous terms
• Test the terminology on users

• If users misinterpret the terminology used in your software, it’s your problem. They’ll use something else that doesn’t mislead or confuse them.

Blooper 24: Bad writing

• Makes software look amateurish even if it doesn’t hurt usability
• Inconsistent writing style
  – Terse in some places, verbose in others
  – Commands named after verbs in some places and named after nouns in others
  – Different capitalization
  – Ending some but not all sentences with periods
Blooper 24 Example

FinancialEngines.com. (A) Inconsistent form labels. (B) Consistent.

Blooper 24

- Variation: Poor diction, grammar, spelling, punctuation
Blooper 25: Too much text

• Needless text is bad anytime, but especially in software when it can distract users from their goals

Blooper 25 Example

• Wordy and repetitious text from dmv.ca.gov

Driver License Information for New Drivers

Driver License Information for Persons Over 18

- How to apply for a driver license if you are over 18
- How to apply for a commercial driver license (CDL)
- How to apply for a motorcycle or moped driver license if you are over 18

Provisional Driver Permit and License Information for Persons Under 18

- How to apply for a provisional permit if you are under 18
- Parent or guardian signatures - Accepting liability for a minor
- Driver Education and Driver Training Information
- Provisional driver license restrictions during the first year
- Teen Driver Information
- How to apply for a motorcycle or moped driver license if you are under 18

Application Requirements and Acceptable Forms of Payment

- What documents can I use to verify my birth date and legal presence?
- Do I need my social security number (SSN)?
- How does DMV check my status?
- What are the alternative methods for completing the driver license written examination?
- What other languages is the written or oral test available in?
- Who can sign for my permit or license if I’m under 18?
- What shows it means when they sign for me?
- What medical report do I need for a Commercial License?
- What methods of payment are acceptable by DMV services?
Avoiding Blooper 25

• Use no more text than is necessary
  – Avoid long prose paragraphs
  – Use headings, short phrases, bullet points
  – Keep links short, one to three words; explain with non-link text
  – Avoid repetition in link lists; cut repeated text or move into headings

• Goals:
  – Scannability, clarity, simplicity

Example cutting needless text

Jeep.com website from early 2002 to late 2002 to 2007
Blooper 26: Geek Speak

• Easy to allow programmer jargon to seep into the end product (assuming non-tech end user)
  – Error while checking mail
    TCP/IP Error 706; {37:1253}
  – Interface Hall of Shame:
    • A caller to Compuserve customer support said that even though he did what the software told him to do, it didn’t work.

Blooper 27: Calling users “user” to their face

• “Users” is what software developers call people who use our systems. It’s a fine term when talking to other developers, but it is not what users call themselves.
• Only two industries call their customers “users.” One is computer software. Do you know what the other industry is?
Blooper 27 Examples

What you get when you join Nancy’s network on LinkedIn

Once you join, you will be able to access Nancy’s network of 816,000+ professionals to:
- hire employees or locate industry experts
- find jobs, clients or business partners
- reconnect with former colleagues

LinkedIn accelerates your career and advances your business by allowing you to receive and seek out opportunities through the people you know and the people your connections know.

Are you already a LinkedIn user, maybe with a different email address?

Yes, I am already a user  No, I am not a user

Reject this invitation
Avoiding Blooper 27

• Use a non-developer term like “visitor”, “customer”, or “member” instead of “user”.

Blooper 28 : Vague error messages

• Related to geek-speak are error messages that give vague, generic errors instead of being helpful to the user.

• Variations
  – Messages displayed by low-level code
  – Reason for error not given to higher level code
  – Generic message components
Blooper 28 Examples

• Some examples:
  – “Nesting level too dip.”
    • Burned into ROM and shipped tens of thousands
  – “Error 500 HTTP Web Server”
  – “Excuse me, but Eudora could use some help.”
  – “File missing or you don’t have access.”
  – “Name contains invalid characters.”
  – “Value of field exceeds limit.”

The Winner of Vague Error Messages
Avoiding Blooper 28

- Express the error in terms of the task
- Don’t just identify the problem; suggest a solution
  - Messages should contain:
    - Error symbol; Problem: Solution
- Pass errors up to code that can translate them for users.
- Design messages and message-bearing components to accept details at runtime
  - As opposed to a static error message with no runtime details
- Different types of messages have different audiences
  - User errors: end users
  - Logs: system admin
  - Debugging/tracing: developers

Blooper 29: Erroneous Messages

- Messages that are just plain wrong
- United Air:
  - User tries to review activity with a “TO” date in the future
Blooper 29 Examples

Microsoft Pocket PC Windows: false error message. Nothing is wrong.

Blooper 29 Examples

TrueDesk: Anti-Spam tab has labels that are wrong.
Avoiding Blooper 29

• It is very bad for software to lie to its users
• Error messages that scold users for the wrong error or for errors they did not commit, and instructions that are false, are software flaws – consider them bugs
  – Give high priority to fix

Blooper 30 : Text makes sense in isolation but is misleading in the GUI

• Labels, headings, descriptions, etc. may make sense in isolation, but in the context of real-world use may not be clear
• Example:
  – Printer described as “perfect for small business” but then all printers on the site end up with the same description
  – Page of software patches that can be downloaded to fix bugs titled “These patches have been tested and will keep your workstation running smoothly” implies other patches on the site are not tested
• Avoiding Blooper 30
  – Consider text in the context of where it will appear, not in isolation
Blooper 31: Misuse (or nonuse) of “…” on command labels

- Commands that need more information had “…” on the end, such as “Save As…” which brings up a file dialog box
- Don’t violate this standard (omitting or overusing)

Blooper 31 Example

Adobe Reader: About Adobe Reader 7.0... command wrongly includes “…”
Avoiding Blooper 31

• Know the rule for “…”
  – Standard in Java, Vista, Apple interface guidelines

• Not for any command that opens a window
  – Only when further information is needed to complete the command

• For graphical buttons, could include “…” on tooltip text