Wrong answers only?

Why people lie on forms and surveys, and what to do about that

#UXScotland

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Do you know your “university matriculation number”?

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This online form is asking for my university matriculation number. I graduated in 1996. I've immediately spotted the difference between *keeping* enormous amounts of paperwork, and actually being able to find a 30 year old piece of information.

17:38 · 30 Apr 2026 Everybody can reply

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https://bsky.app/profile/sophiacollins.bsky.social/post/3mkq2gkr4sc2w

Agenda

Consider why people lie or give wrong answers

- Don’t force me into a wrong answer
- Protect my privacy
- Be the best I can be
- Make this happen

Design for realistic behaviours

Think about what we might do differently

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Share your ideas as we go

Thoughts, comments, suggestions

bit.ly/wrong-answer

1 minute

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I’ve observed that people “fudge” through forms

To fudge a form:
answer one or more questions
in a way that’s not entirely truthful

Photo by Phil Hearing on Unsplash

FUDGE | definition in the Cambridge Learner’s Dictionary

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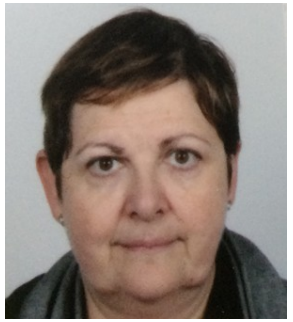
I admit that I fudged my bus pass photo

The application form said that I had to submit a passport photo



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I chose one that doesn’t comply with passport rules

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If you've fudged a form, write a sticky

Write a sticky note with an example of fudging a form.
If you have spare time, write more.

1 minute

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Compare your fudge with your neighbour

Share with your neighbour.

Maybe that will inspire you to write more examples, too.

2 minutes

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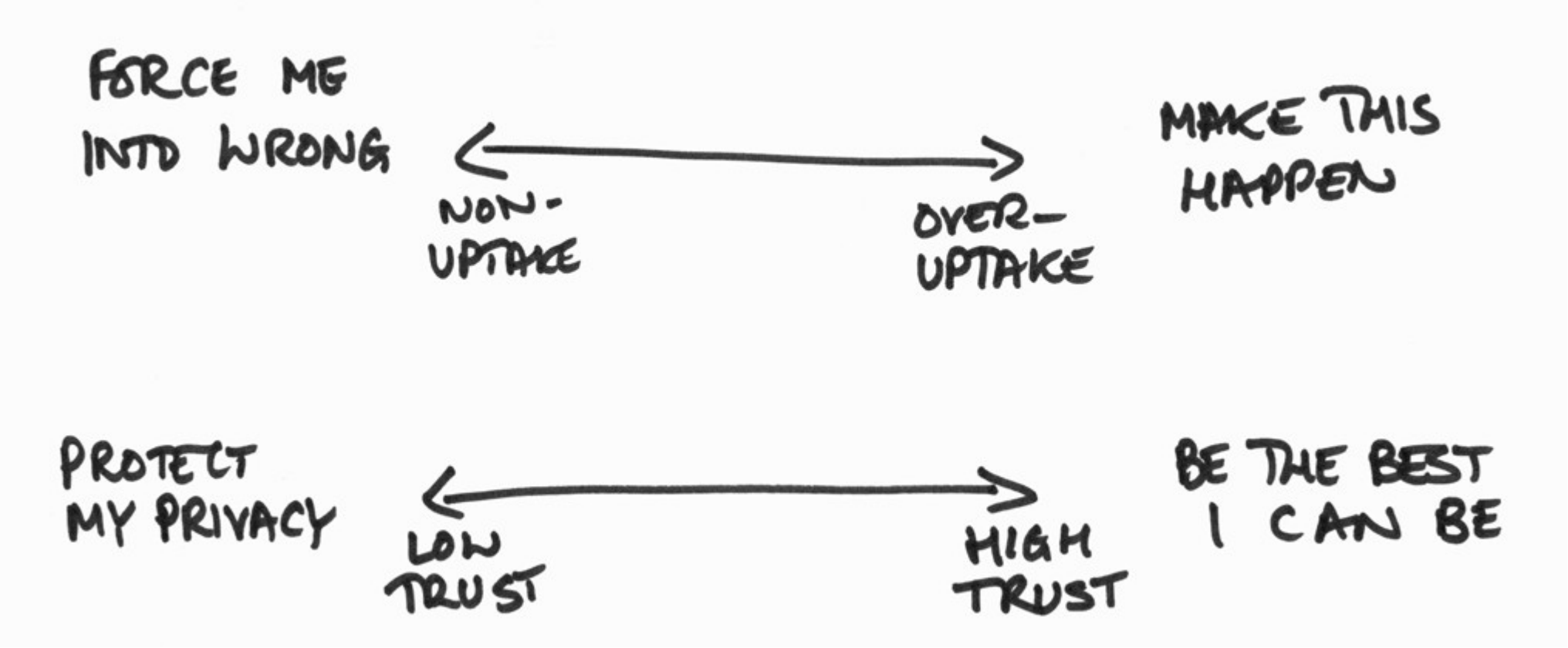
I’m thinking about why questions get wrong answers



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Do your fudges fit into my categories?

As a group, see whether your examples fit

- Don’t force me into a wrong answer
- Protect my privacy
- Make this happen
- Be the best I can be
- Something else?

5 minutes

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Let’s look at the products and services we work on

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Does any of the four problems happen in your product or service?

Back to the sticky notes, on your own

Think about whether there might be any of these happening in a product or service that you work on:

- Don’t force me into a wrong answer
- Protect my privacy
- Make this happen
- Be the best I can be
- Something else?

3 minutes

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Compare as a group

Discuss your new stickies and try allocating them again:

- Don’t force me into a wrong answer
- Protect my privacy
- Make this happen
- Be the best I can be
- Something else?

8 minutes

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Agenda

- ✓ Consider why people lie or give wrong answers
  - ✓ Don’t force me into a wrong answer
  - ✓ Protect my privacy
  - ✓ Be the best I can be
  - ✓ Make this happen

Design for realistic behaviours

Think about what we might do differently

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I have some ideas for doing something about it

And I’m also looking for your suggestions

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We know a form when we see it

Looks like a form and
works like a form

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It has to have some questions

Looks like a form and works like a form

Asks questions and expects answers

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And nobody apart from me tackles forms for fun

Looks like a form and works like a form

Asks questions and expects answers

Allows someone to achieve a goal

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I think a lot about three layers

Appearance

Conversation

Relationship

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A good form needs a lot of design

Interaction design

Content design

Service design

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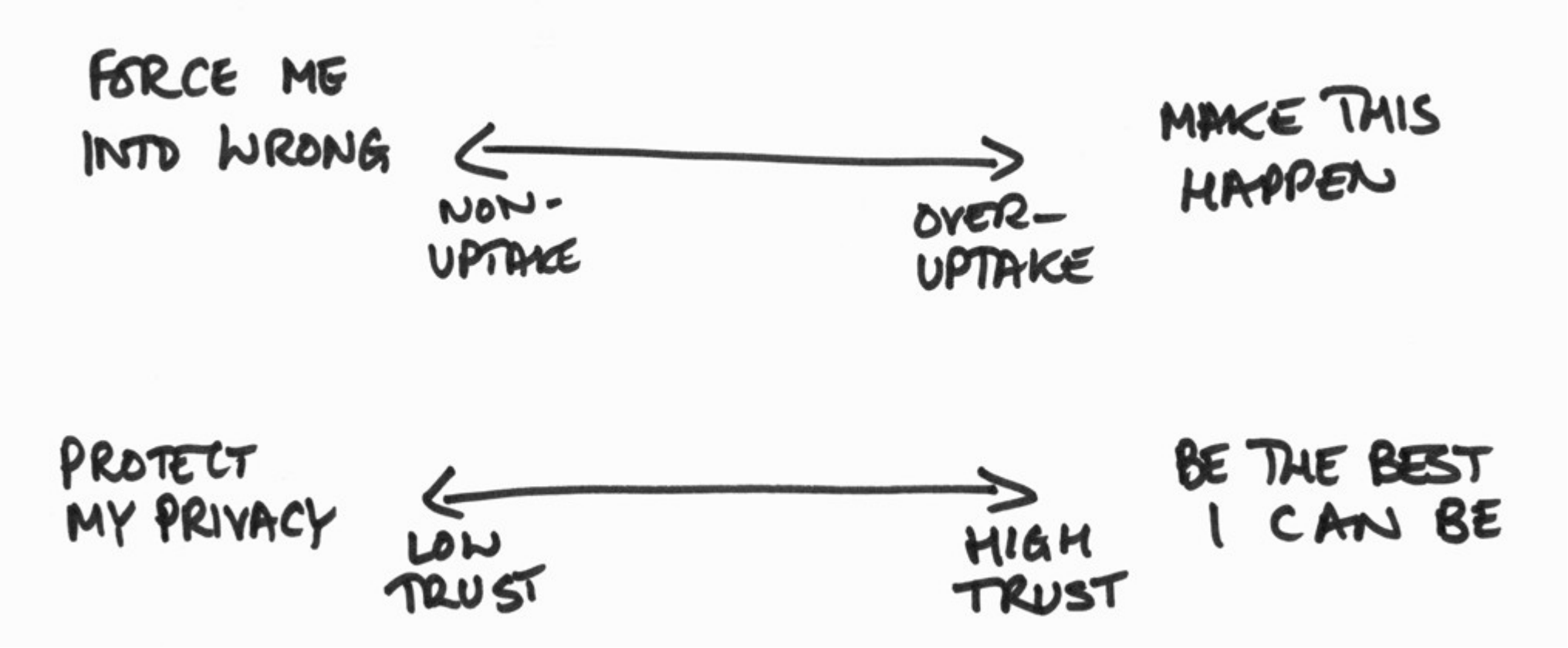
I think there’s an easier end and a harder end



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What is your answer to this question?

2. Work and education

About how many miles is it between your home and your work?

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Image credit: Simon Morgan-Wilson from a UK government service

Radio button questions often miss some answers

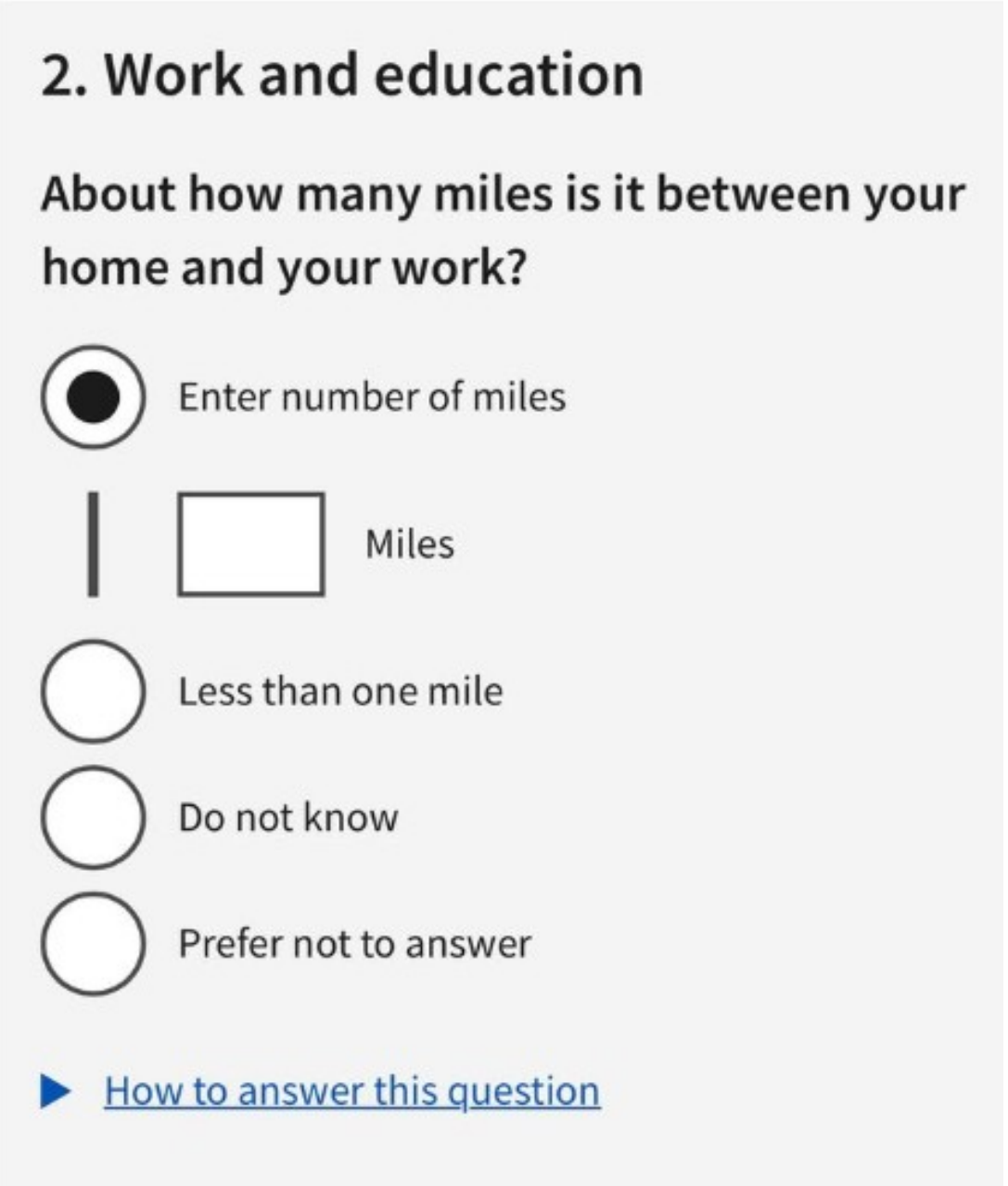

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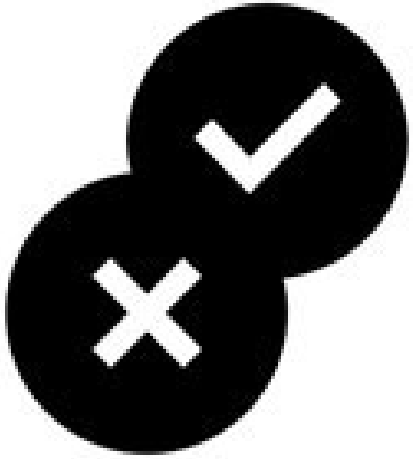
Image credit: Simon Morgan-Wilson from a UK government service

I’m constantly saying “No yes/no”

- The real world is analogue
- There are nearly always other answers
- Try spelling out what “yes” and “no” mean

No yes/no questions - Effortmark



Created by HideMaru
from Noun Project

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Don’t force me into wrong answers: Create space for all the answers

To create space for all the answers:

- Provide an extra option such as ‘something else’ or ‘other’
- Preferably, give people a box for their actual answer
- Observe whether anyone chooses the extra option
- Analyse the extra answers that you get
- Refine your content design and interaction design
- Repeat

Keep the extra option throughout beta.

If nobody has used the extra option after (say) 6 months in live, consider removing it.

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Don’t force me into wrong answers: Find all the answers when you do usability testing

- Pause before each question page
- Ask your participant what questions they expect to see on the next page
- For radio button or check box questions, ask them what their actual answer is before they choose from the answers on offer
- Consider making a version for test purposes that has the radio button/check box controls but no description so that you can ask them what options they expect

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Protect my privacy:
Some “easy” questions have a high abandon rate

Question	Mean abandon rate
Name	6%
Email	6%
Password	11%
Phone	6%
Postcode	5%
Address	5%

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https://www.zuko.io/blog/which-form-fields-cause-the-biggest-ux-problems

Users want to know why you want to know

“Users hate giving you their phone number - It’s a sad truth but users are very suspicious of you asking for their number. They fear being spammed by sales calls so would rather drop out of the process than hand it over …

If you really must ask then explain why you need it. A simple line saying that you need their number in case there are any issues with delivery will do wonders for the completion rate on your phone field.”

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https://www.zuko.io/blog/which-form-fields-cause-the-biggest-ux-problems

A question protocol is a list of all the questions

The question protocol: how to make sure every form field is necessary
https://www.effortmark.co.uk/question-protocol-make-sure-every-form-field-necessary/

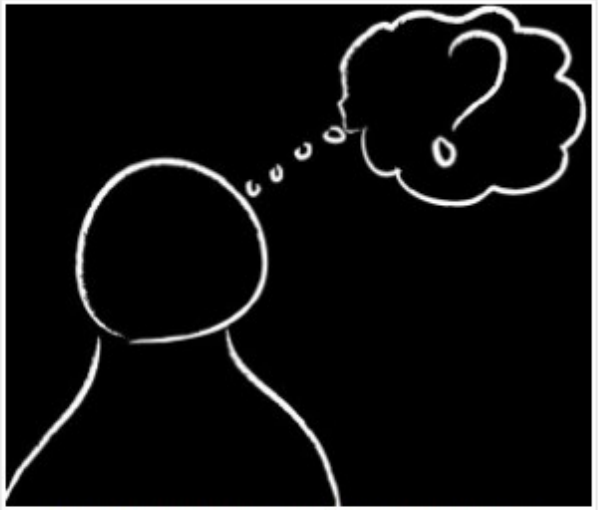
The question protocol: how to make sure every form field is necessary

Caroline Jarrett 7 June 2010

What is a question protocol?

A *question protocol* is a tool for finding out which form fields are required. It lists:

- every question you ask
- who within your organisation uses the answers to each question
- what they use them for
- whether an answer is required or optional
- if an answer is required, what happens if a user enters any old thing just to get through the form.



Question, by Noella, creative commons

The question protocol is different from the form itself, because it's about *how* you use the answers.

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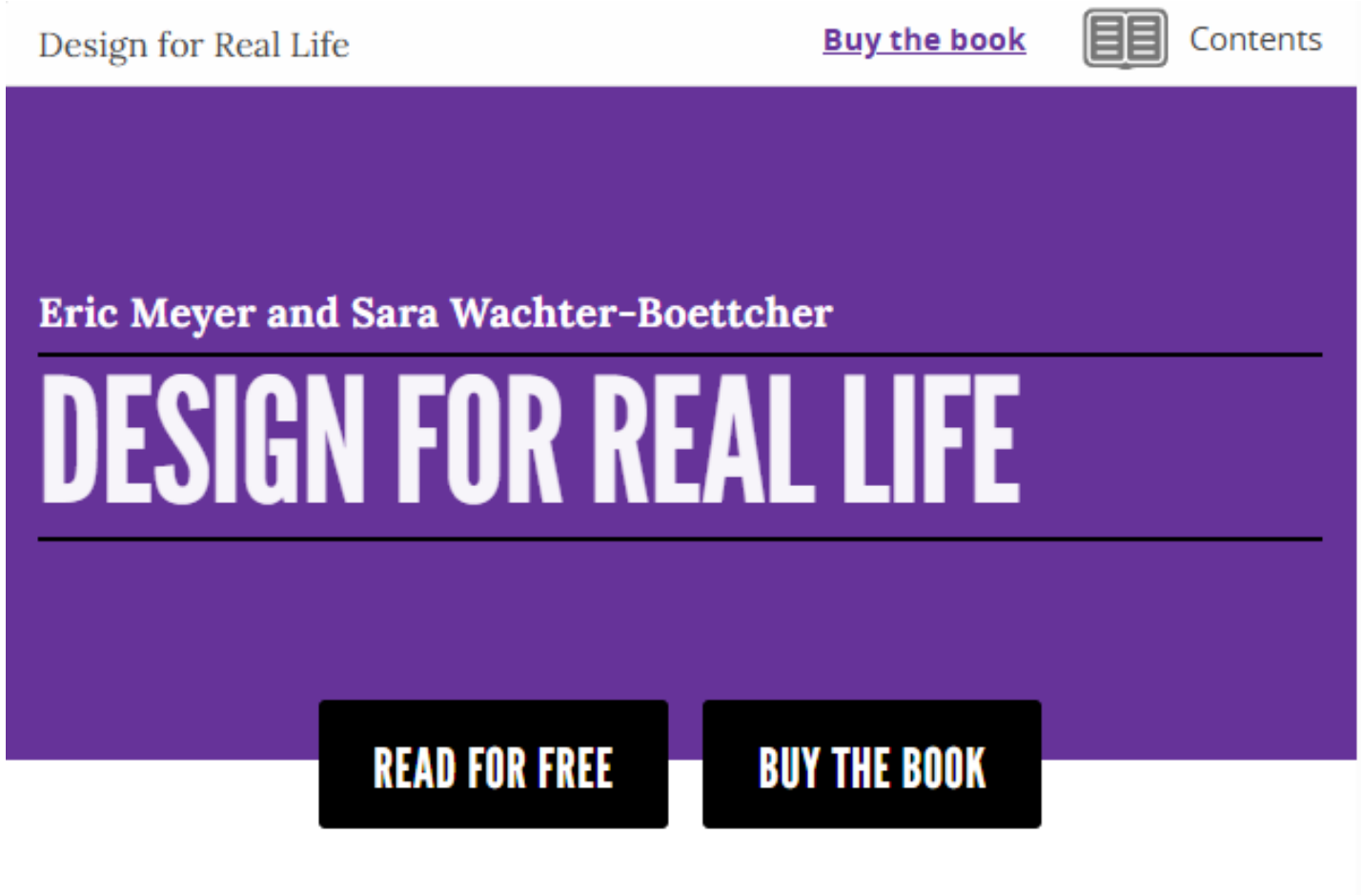
Read “Design for Real Life”



Design for Real Life

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Protect my privacy: Prune, postpone, tune, explain

When you have your question protocol, it's time to:

Prune	remove questions you don't really need at all
Postpone	save asking the question until you need the answer
Tune	refine the content design of the question
Explain	tell people how you will use this answer

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https://www.effortmark.co.uk/prune-tune-postpone-explain/

And now onto the harder end

I’m also looking for your suggestions

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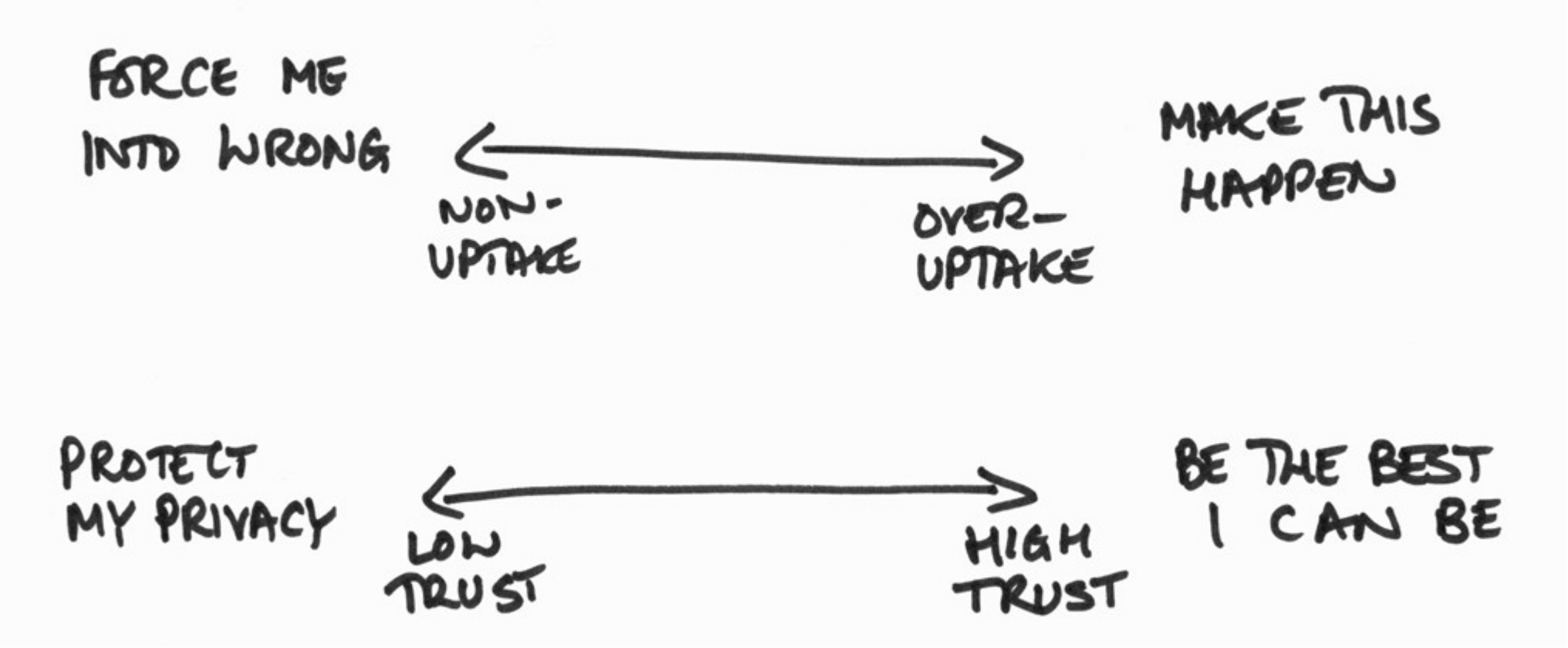
I think there's an easier end and a harder end



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Make this happen:
Experiences with mobile phone and car insurance

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Rachel Coldicott loves forms

Forms don't love you back • Buttondown

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Here is one point from Rachel's essay.

The information boxes on structured forms offer a very partial view of what is important and how things should be described, but they can quickly become authoritative, definitive, and normalised.

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Forms don't love you back • Buttondown

This is my current best shot at “Make this happen”

Look at ‘whole of lifecycle’ outcomes for your product or service.

Include what happens when an error occurs.

Find out what happens across the full user experience including:

- returns,
- failures,
- rejections,
- and the user making a voluntary or involuntary decision to leave your service or stop using it.

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What are your suggestions for “Make this happen”?

How would you minimise fudging around “Make this happen”?

Such as:

- Research with users?
- Investigate with stakeholders?
- Check through data analysis?
- Change in your design?
- Something else?

5 minutes

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Be the best I can be: RNIB and PIP

RNIB is the Royal National Institute of Blind People, is the UK's leading sight loss charity.

They advise people with visual impairments or sight loss on how to apply for Personal Independence Payments (PIP)

Image credit: Going out – planning and following journeys | RNIB

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RNIB quotes the legal language

Questions relevant to sight loss

The descriptor (legal tests) are:

Cannot follow the route of an unfamiliar journey without another person, assistance dog or orientation aid.

Points: 10

Cannot follow the route of a familiar journey without another person, an assistance dog or an orientation aid.

Points: 12

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Going out – planning and following journeys | RNIB

And asks people to think about “orientation aid”

Do you need aids to go out?

- What aids do you use? A long cane? A guide dog? A monocular? A talking navigation app on your mobile? Anything else? If a long cane would be helpful to you when outdoors but do not use it because you do not want to be identified as visually impaired, explain this on the form.
- Do you need help to know how to enter and exit buildings e.g. when steps begin and end? Do you need assistance to read road signs?
- Can you visually identify and avoid hazards such as lamp posts, bollards, or A-boards? State if you have walked into obstacles such as these before.
- Do you ever trip over, for example on even ground, or due to you misjudging the depth of a kerb or step?

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Going out – planning and following journeys | RNIB

This is my current best shot at “Be the best I can be”

Do interviews to understand power relationships and trust.

Try to find out:

- How they perceive your organisation and your brand
- Whether that changes in the context of this specific set of questions
- What questions they expect to answer and why

Try hard to include less-heard-from and other excluded groups.

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What are your suggestions for “Be the best I can be”?

How would you minimise fudging around “Be the best I can be”?

Such as:

- Research with users?
- Investigate with stakeholders?
- Check through data analysis?
- Change in your design?
- Something else?

5 minutes

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Agenda

- ✓ Consider why people lie or give wrong answers on forms
  - ✓ Don’t force me into a wrong answer
  - ✓ Protect my privacy
  - ✓ Be the best I can be
  - ✓ Make this happen
- ✓ Design for realistic behaviours

Think about what we might do differently

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Add ideas for doing something

There’s a column for next steps.

Please add your suggestions and ideas.

bit.ly/wrong-answer

5 minutes

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Takeaway

Try to avoid forcing people into lies, on the whole

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Keep up the conversation: Caroline Jarrett

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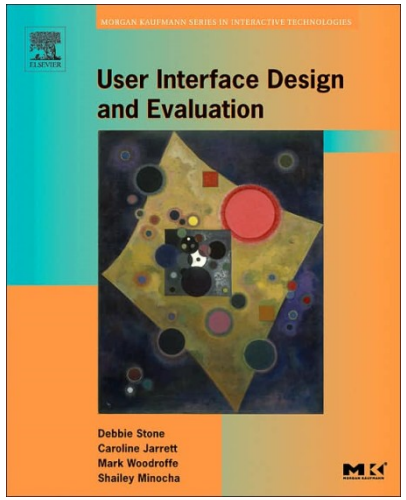

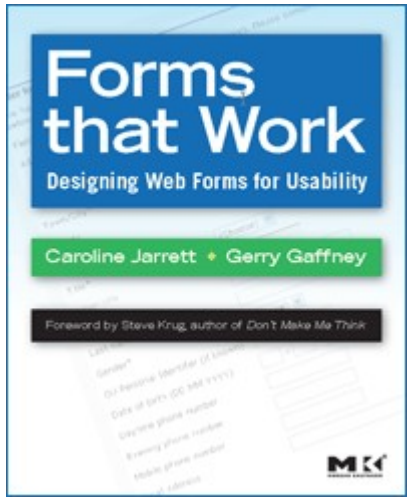

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