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VP of Product Marketing, Amazon.com



FOR BEGINNERS

*A Crash Course in 100 Short Lessons*

JOEL MARS

# UX FOR BEGINNERS

So, you want to get started in User Experience (UX) design? Good. You came to the right place.

Whether you want to design apps, websites, or sound like you know a bit about design, these quick-and-dirty lessons are for you. This book follows the real-life UX process from start to finish, so you can apply the skills as you learn or refresh your memory before the next meeting.

Based on the popular UX Crash Course—read over a million times—from Joel Marsh's blog The Hipper Element, this book is also perfect for managers, programmers, salespeople, and marketers who want to know more.

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- Researching the weird and wonderful things users do
- The process and science of making anything user-friendly
- Using size, color, and layout to help and influence users
- Planning and making wireframes
- Making your designs feel engaging and persuasive
- Measuring how your design works in the real world
- What does a UX designer do all day?

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UX



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"There are many books about UX, but few dare to take on the entire spectrum of UX work. *UX for Beginners* does that and does it well. It gives the beginner a broad view into the field encouraging them to go deeper into the areas where they are most passionate."

—Jeff

author of *Lean UX* (C

**Joel Marsh** (@HipperElement) has been a professional designer for more than a decade. He has worked for disruptive startups and famous global brands, including Absolut Vodka, Samsung, and McDonald's.

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# Praise for *UX for Beginners*

*"There are many books about UX but few dare to take on the entire spectrum of UX work. UX for Beginners does that and does it well. With digestible chunks of insight into the many facets of UX and design, it gives the beginner a broad view into the field encouraging them to dig deeper into the areas where they are most passionate"*

-Jeff Goethe  
Author of *Lean UX*

*"The UX field is a vast field with so much to learn. If you're just getting started, the learning curve seems daunting. In this practical book, Joel Marsh bends the UX learning curve back to earth providing practical lessons that will give you a solid start in the UX field"*

-Aaron Walter  
VP of R&D at MailChimp, author of *Designing for Emotion*

*"There are a lot of methods, materials and myths about the field of User Experience. UX for Beginners offers an approachable format and plenty of pointers to start making sense of it all"*

-Jeff Saur  
Principal UX Researcher & Statistical Analyst, MeasuringU

*"The UX Crash Course is the most amazing thing in the history of amazing things. No hyperbole. Thanks, Joel"*

-Silvestre Tanenbaum  
Aspiring UX designer



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# UX for Beginners

Joel Mars

Illustrations by Jose Marzan, J

Beijing • Boston • Farnham • Sebastopol • Tokyo

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## UX for Beginners

by Joel Marsh

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# Preface

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# This Book Truly Practices What It Preaches

It started as an email newsletter, grew into a blog, became viral, and now you have it. The format of the book is based on science and research with real readers. It was then reviewed by some of the industry's leading UXers—all to make it as engaging and useful as possible. We even gathered feedback from the Internet while we were writing it!

## This Book Exists Because It Is Needed

(i.e., My “user research” uncovered a problem.)

Originally, these lessons were an email newsletter. Throughout my time working with startups, famous global brands, and in-house product teams, I was asked the same basic UX questions over and over, everywhere I worked. So, I decided to start a newsletter of *UX ProTips*, for my coworkers.

Once a week, I would write a short, funny lesson about one simple UX thing and email it to the company. These people were busy, and not experts, and they needed to be entertained if I expected them to learn about *someone else's job (mine)*.

In other words, they were beginners.

At first, I was worried about seeming arrogant or annoying, but everybody loved it! They even started sending me questions to answer. It didn't take long before I started hearing my answers being repeated to clients in meetings, and people outside of our company would reply, asking how they could subscribe!

Soon after that, I noticed that the most popular question in UX forums was “What should I read to get started in UX?” And thus, my ProTips became a blog: [www.TheHipperElement.com](http://www.TheHipperElement.com). My first big project for the blog was the *UX Crash Course*. Thirty-one daily lessons about the most fundamental things in UX, which I posted every day in January, 2014. It was a huge success. Much bigger than expected. That Crash Course has now been read over a million times without paying a cent for promotion.

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That blog is the motivation for this book. And if you want even more proof that there was a need, consider this: we were able to use the title *UX for Beginners* because it had never been used! And we're talking about a job that was ranked fourteenth on a list of the most in-demand jobs in America in 2015!

## Who Is This Book For?

(i.e., My "user profiles")

Even if you still don't understand what I mean by "UX"—it's short for User eXperience, by the way—you're in the right place. This book is written for *three types of people*: non-designers who want to become designers, managers of UX designers, and experienced people from other jobs who want to learn more about UX.

If you're a non-designer, this book is specifically for you. My mission is to create more designers by teaching the fundamentals in a simple way—something that is surprisingly hard to find. This isn't just a book about "thinking like a designer" or "the UX mentality," it is a practical set of lessons that teach what to *do*; *how to be a UX designer* on the first day of your first job. If you're a student, or an intern, or a recent graduate that feels intimidated by doing UX "for real," welcome. We need you.

If you manage UX designers, you're either a designer yourself or you have the authority to enable or disable the designers on your team. Either way, the more time you spend *managing* design, the less time you spend *doing* design, so a refresher

is always useful, especially an easy, funny one like this. But, more important, being a manager also means that you are in a position to *teach UX*, and this book has been created for that reason, too. Use it as a reference or as a way to kick-start conversations with your team. Sometimes the most valuable thing is a good book that backs you up.

And finally, you might have experience in something relevant like programming, or project management, or sales, but now you need to know more about UX design. Thanks for realizing that UX is a core element in all digital products and services! This book is a great place for you to initiate yourself and learn to "talk the talk" while building a solid understanding of the people who "walk the walk." And if you aspire to go *sideways* into a design position in the future, fantastic!

## How the Book Is Structured

(i.e., The "Information Architecture" of this book)

There are 100 lessons, grouped into sections, and they roughly follow the real process of doing UX on a real project. So if you are sitting at your first UX job right now, just start reading and it will feel like we're working on it together. Also, try not to laugh too loud at my jokes, people will think you're a weirdo.

You won't find any long case studies, or complex diagrams, or chapters that do a "deep dive" on a specific topic. This book is designed to be a quick-and-dirty introduction to User Experience design. The lessons are short, and did I mention how funny and modest I am?

This Book Truly Practices What It Preaches

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Although it's quick, this book covers *a lot*. It may not be every UX-related topic in the world, but it introduces plenty. I have specifically focused on things that a *beginner* needs, so more advanced ideas like *iteration* or "lean" and "agile" processes, or *contextual* design, or *design critiques*, or *accessibility* and stuff like that are not covered in detail. That's for designers with more experience. You can Google those things or read one of the other fine books that O'Reilly offers on those subjects.

All of the 100 lessons are self-contained: you don't have to read them in order if you don't want to. If there is something special you want to learn or if you want to keep it on your desk as a reference, do it! It's also great to just have "around" for people to read on a coffee break.

The lessons are grouped into 14 sections:

- First, in the section called *Key Ideas*, you will learn some basic concepts. UX design can be counterintuitive sometimes, and a lot of your "common sense" will lead you in the wrong direction. If you have never designed anything before, take the time to read each of those lessons and think about them before continuing.
- In the section called *Before You Start*, you'll learn some practical stuff that will prepare you for conversations later in the process. If you work in a big company, those parts will bite you in the ass if you skip them.

- In *Behavior Basics*, *User Research*, and *The Limits of Our Minds*, you will learn the fundamentals of understanding how and why humans do what they do, and how to investigate when your users do something you don't expect.
- The sections *Information Architecture* and *Designing Behavior* start to combine the basic ideas from the previous sections into your *craft*. The process and science of User Experience design. For a lot of people that might be a whole new way of thinking about design in general.

Then you start to actually design things:

- *Visual Design Principles* come *before* the *Wireframing & Prototypes* in this book, because *making good wireframes*—your main document as a UX designer—requires an understanding of how design *works*, not just what it looks like. After you understand how the size, color, and layout of your design can influence the user, you will learn how to make wireframes, and how *not* to make wireframes.
- In *Psychology of Usability* and *Content*, you will learn how to make your designs *feel* easier and more persuasive, so more people will use them.
- *The Moment of Truth* is critical: the launch.
- After the launch, any good UX designer will *measure* how their design works in the real world, with real users. You learn about that in the section called *Data for Designers*. Don't worry, there are no equations or anything... it's mostly pictures. ;)

- 
- And finally, in *Get A Job You Dirty Hippy*, you'll learn a few things about what UX role is right for you, what should be in your portfolio, and what you might actually *do* all day at your first design job.

We even threw in some amazing illustrations to make it more visual, easier to understand, more fun, and because every great author needs a few rubber ducks to get their point across. Obviously.

*"I always include rubber ducks. Always."*—Ernest Hemingway

## The Main Goals of this Book

Like any good UX project, this book has two goals:

- To make more UX designers
- To make me a millionaire

In other words, a *user* goal and a *business* goal.

BUT:

I only achieve goal #2 if I achieve goal #1 in a spectacular way. The better I am at turning you into a great UX designer, the more you will share and discuss this book with others, making even more UX designers, and giving me the funds I need to finally have a llama farm in my backyard.

Every designer's dream, am I right?

So I needed to make this book a great experience for *you* if I really want to start my million-dollar llama empire. If I succeed, we both win. If I fail, we both lose. That's the way

UX should be. Some people call that "empathy." I just think it's how good product design works.

If you think the book could be better in any way, or if you have a story about how it helped you be a better designer, please tell me on Twitter: [@HipperElement](#)

And seriously, share this book with someone if you like it. Those llamas aren't going to feed themselves.

Enjoy!

## Acknowledgements

This book could not have been made without the UX community itself, my most curious students, my most talented interns, and every colleague I have had over the past decade or so. Their questions, feedback, interest, and general lack of attention span (haha) have all come together in this book and the work related to it.

Thanks to my girlfriend, Camilla, for dealing with all the mornings when I got up to write a daily UX Crash Course lesson (and therefore barely spoke to her), and to my friends for not rolling their eyes when I begin a sentence with "On my blog..." or "In my book..."

I would also like to acknowledge anyone and everyone who actually takes the time to be a really good UX designer, whether you start here or not.

We, my friends, are defining the future in real time.





Key Ideas

# What Is UX?

The best place to start any education is at the beginning.

**Everything has a user experience. Your job is not to create the user experience. Your job is to make it good.**

And what do I mean by “good” user experience? It is common to think that a good user experience is one that makes users happy.

*Not true!*

If happiness was your only goal, you could just throw in some [Lolcats](#) and random [compliments](#) and go home. But—although that’s not the worst universe I can imagine—your boss may not be satisfied with the results. The goal of a UX designer is to make users effective.

**A user’s experience is just the tip of the iceberg:**

Many people mistakenly think that “UX” means a *user’s experience*, but it is actually about “doing” the process of User Experience Design. A user’s individual experience is their conscious, subjective opinion of your app or site. User feedback is important—sometimes—but UX designers need to do a lot more than that.



## “Doing” UX

UX Design (also sometimes called UXD) involves a process very [similar to doing science](#): you do research to understand the users, you develop ideas to solve the users’ needs—and the needs of the business—and you build and measure those solutions in the real world to see if they work.

You will learn about all of that in this book. Or if that’s not your deal, Lolcats are still an option.

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## LESSON 2

# The Five Main Ingredients of UX

User Experience design is a process, and these lessons roughly follow that process, but you should always keep these five things in mind: *Psychology, Usability, Design, Copywriting, and Analysis.*

Any one of these five ingredients could be a book of its own, so I will be oversimplifying a bit. This is supposed to be a crash course, not Wikipedia.

Although, to be fair, I'm pretty sure [Wikipedia's UX page](#) was written by a guy who heard about UX once... at that thing... that time...

### 1. Psychology

A user's mind is complex. You should know; you have one, (I assume). UXers work with subjective thoughts and feelings a lot; they can make or break your results. And the designer must ignore their own psychology sometimes, too, and that's hard!

Ask yourself:

- What is the user's motivation to be here in the first place?
- How does this make them feel?
- How much work does the user have to do to get what they want?
- What habits are created if they do this over and over?
- What do they expect when they click this?
- Are you assuming they know something that they haven't learned yet?
- Is this something they want to do again? Why? How often?
- Are you thinking of the user's wants and needs, or your own?
- How are you rewarding good behavior?

---

## 2. Usability

If user psychology is mostly subconscious, usability is mostly conscious. You know when something is confusing. There are cases where it is more fun if something is hard—like a game—but for everything else, we want it to be so easy that even a (moron) could use it.

Ask yourself:

- Could you get the job done with less input from the user?
- Are there any user mistakes you could prevent? (Hint: Yes, there are.)
- Are you being clear and direct, or is this a little too clever?
- Is it easy to find (good), hard to miss (better), or subconsciously expected (best)?
- Are you working with the user's assumptions or against them?
- Have you provided everything the user needs to know?
- Could you solve this just as well by doing something more common?
- Are you basing your decisions on your own logic or categories, or the user's intuition? How do you know?
- If the user doesn't read the fine print, does it still work/make sense?

## 3. Design

As the UX designer, your definition of "design" will be much less artistic than a lot of designers. Whether you "like it" is irrelevant. In UX, design is how it works, and it's something you can prove; it's not a matter of style.

Ask yourself:

- Do users think it looks good? Do they trust it immediately?
- Does it communicate the purpose and function without words?
- Does it represent the brand? Does it all feel like the same site?
- Does the design lead the user's eyes to the right places? How do you know?
- Do the colors, shapes, and typography help people find what they want and improve usability of the details?
- Do clickable things look different than nonclickable things?

---

#### 4. Copywriting

There is a huge difference between writing brand copy (text) and writing UX copy. Brand copy supports the image and values of the company. UX copy gets shit done as directly and simply as possible.

Ask yourself:

- Does it sound confident and tell the user what to do?
- Does it motivate the user to complete their goal? Is that what we want?
- Is the biggest text the most important text? Why not?
- Does it inform the user or does it assume that they already understand?
- Does it reduce anxiety?
- Is it clear, direct, simple, and functional?

#### 5. Analysis

In my opinion, most designers' weak spot is analysis. But we can fix that! Analysis is the main thing that separates UX from other types of design, and it makes you extremely valuable. It literally pays to be good at it.

So, ask yourself:

- Are you using data to prove that you are right, or to learn the truth?
- Are you looking for subjective opinions or objective facts?
- Have you collected information that can give you those types of answers?
- Do you know why users do that, or are you interpreting their behavior?
- Are you looking at absolute numbers, or relative improvements?
- How will you measure this? Are you measuring the right things?
- Are you looking for bad results, too? Why not?
- How can you use this analysis to make improvements?

# Your Perspective

In User Experience design, the way you look at a problem can make or break your work. Your own desires and experience can even work against the users.

## Know Thyself

There are two things you need to be aware of, about yourself, before you can start understanding users well:

- You want things that don't matter to users.
- You know things that don't matter to users.

Meditate on that for a minute.

Namasté.

## Empathy: Want What They Want

If there is one word that is over-sold in UX, it's "[empathy](#)". It is important though. It is. In general, and in UX.

**But here's a secret:** unless you are a serial killer, you have empathy. If you are a serial killer, UX design might not be for you. What we want by nature might not be what the users want. And that's a big deal. It means your intuition about the users might be wrong!

Do research. Talk to users. Study the data. Cuddle some puppies. When you truly understand a problem, it becomes your problem, emotionally. That's empathy. You will feel it. A good solution will excite you. Not because you're an emotional superhero, but because you relate to the users.

You're one of them now.

\*single tear\*

### Ask yourself:

- If you have to choose between a feature for your users or having this design in your portfolio, what will you choose?
- If users don't like your design, what would probably be the reason?
- Have you actually tried the software, or are you just clicking "next" to get through it?

## You Know Too Much

Designing for people who know less than you is a core part of UX.

Not people who are dumber than you. People who *know less*.

You know that your site gets more powerful if you customize it, but users don't. You know that your menu categories match the teams in your company, but users don't. And you know your prices are high because licensing fees make your content expensive to make, but users don't.

If users don't know, users don't care. And sometimes even when they *do* know, they don't care! Licensing fees? That's your problem. They can get a pirated copy for free.

### Ask yourself:

- If you didn't read the text, would you understand?
- If a user only had a few clicks to find what they want, would this design be *your* best bet?

- Are you judging a feature based on the time it will take to build it or the value to the user?
- Are you assuming users will click it just because it exists? (They won't.)



# The Three “Whats” of User Perspective

Ah, finally! It’s time to discuss the user’s mind, and it’s always good to start with the basics and build from there.

A good design communicates three things:

1. What is this?
2. What is the benefit for the user?
3. What should they do next?

## “What Is This?”

It’s always a good idea to have a title or an image for content that answers the question: “What is this?” Seems pretty basic, right? But it’s amazing how many websites forget to do it. *Why?* Because *we* already know. But the user doesn’t. Is it an article? A registration form? A party for people who love lemons? A place to see goats? Your gerbil’s secret YouTube channel?

List them. Directly. And use simple words. Nobody is excited when you pull out the dictionary at a party. Especially not a lemon party.

## “What’s in It for Me?”

This is the “why” of User experience. What can the user gain? It is better to show users what they will get, rather than to tell them. You can use a video, demo, example images, free trial sample content, testimonials, or several of these things!

The best answers to “what is it?” also tell you a little about what you get. For example, “A global network of megalomaniacs cooperating to conquer the world and share funny cat pics.” That tells you what it is, and what you get (assuming you’re a megalomaniac who loves cats).

### REMEMBER

You’re selling widgets. It’s a Fun Net where you win them at [register/buy/03](#).

User motivation is a thousand times more valuable than beauty or usability—for the company—but how much time do you spend thinking about that work?



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