Narrative

Building and using a portfolio

Narrative Workshop Series

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The purpose of a portfolio

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The purpose of a portfolio

A portfolio is an honest representation of your abilities, and a persuasive representation of your aspirations.

A portfolio shows what you've done in the past, and why it's valuable

The skills, process, and methods you show in your portfolio should accurately reflect what you can do and how you work. It should show:

- What you have done
- What you can do
- How you think
- That you *have* value
- That you *produce* value

The strategic design of a portfolio hints at what you want to do in the future

Your curation and presentation of your work is strategic, and you can use your portfolio to guide your career. You can:

- Remove projects that don't reflect what you actually want to do
- Describe projects in a persuasive, non-objective manner
- Assign yourself new projects to emphasize the skills you didn't learn in school

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The purpose of a portfolio

A portfolio shows what you can do, and how you do it.

Show your skills

Your portfolio is a showcase of your abilities. A reviewer should be able to answer the questions:

What does this person do, and are they good at it?

Show your process

The work you include in your portfolio is usually shown as a project—as an end-to-end, complete creative experience. This shows your process: how you solve creative problems.

By showing your process, an audience can:

- View how you tell stories, and judge if you can present complex ideas, simply
- See how your ideas evolve and change over time, based on new or changing project constraints and external criticism
- Gain a view into your approach to decision making, at a detailed level
- Decide if your approach will mesh cohesively with their approach

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The purpose of a portfolio

A portfolio shows how you think about design, creative problem solving, and craft.

Show that you are thoughtful and detailed

When you show your work, you are also showing the amount of care and thought you put into it.

- How much consideration and time do you put into the things you make?
- What does “finished” mean to you?
- What drives you to make things?

Emphasize that you are user-centered

User-centeredness is a core tenant of design: the things we make impact *people*.

- During your creative process, do you engage with the people that will use your creations?
- How much, and how often, do you include people in your design process?
- What balance do you have between your ideas and philosophies, what your “users” want, need, and desire, and what a business demands?

Show what design means to you

Design is many things. Do you view it as:

- A creative discipline?
- A set of methods that you apply?
- A process that you follow?
- An approach to solving a problem?
- A way of making the world better?
- A way of making the world beautiful?
- A form of communication?
- A job?

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Thinking like a hiring manager

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Thinking like a hiring manager

A hiring manager feels that they need some kind of help, and that hiring will provide that help.

Think about why they need to hire

- Is the company growing? Have they recently acquired other companies? Did they recently receive investments?
- Are they being promoted?
- Did they just sign a new contract?
- Are they at a company that's loudly switching from hybrid to in-person?

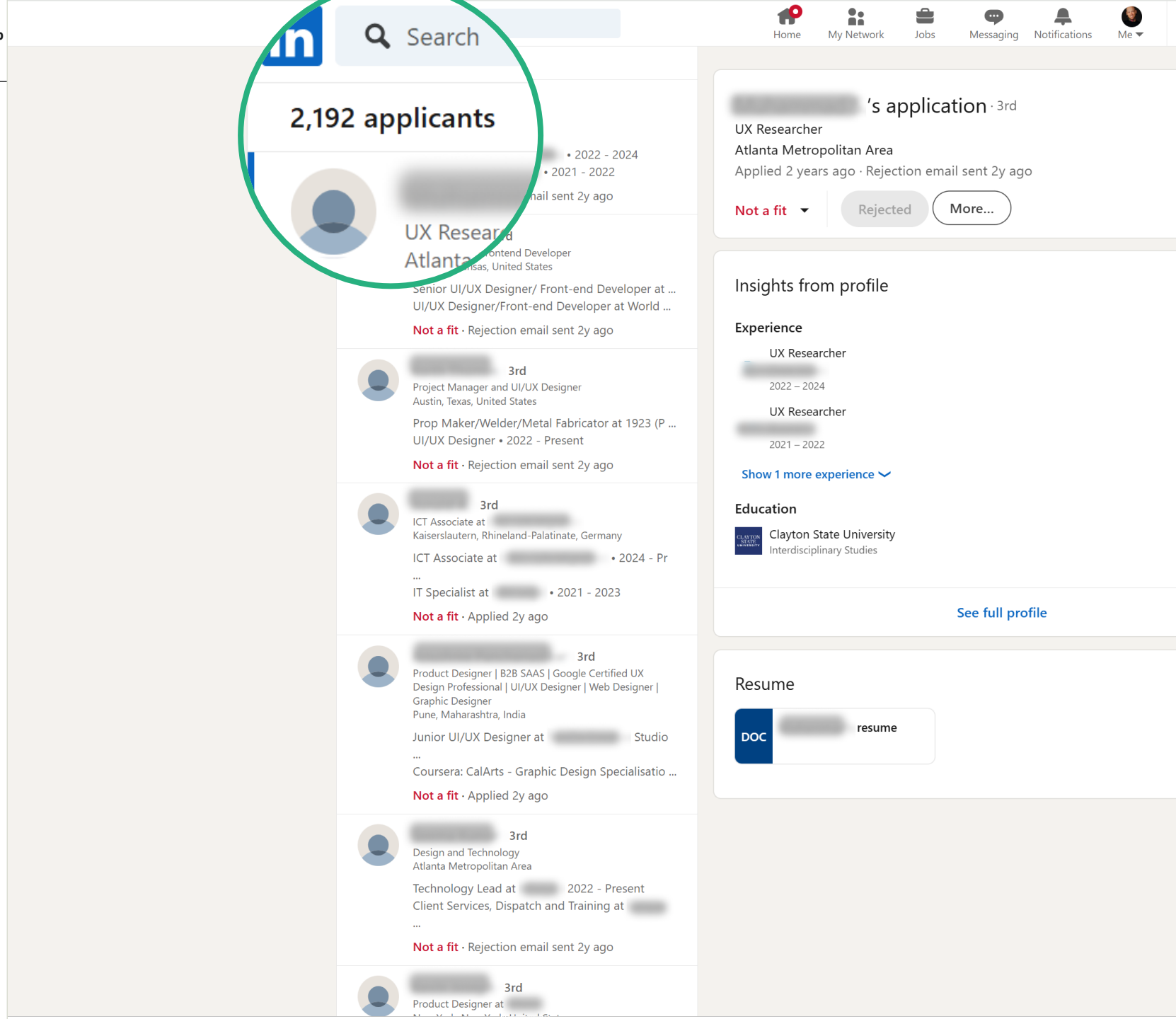
You may not know the answers, but consider a posted position from this perspective, and think like a hiring manager.

Thinking like a hiring manager

A hiring manager still has their main job to do.

Hiring may be a priority, but that doesn't mean it gets done quickly

- Even though they have best intentions, a hiring manager may post a job, and not have time to manage candidates until weeks or months later.
- The number of candidates responding to a job is overwhelming for someone with limited hiring time.
- Recruiters are often used as a tool for making a process manageable; but a recruiter typically isn't a designer.



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Start from the job, and work backwards

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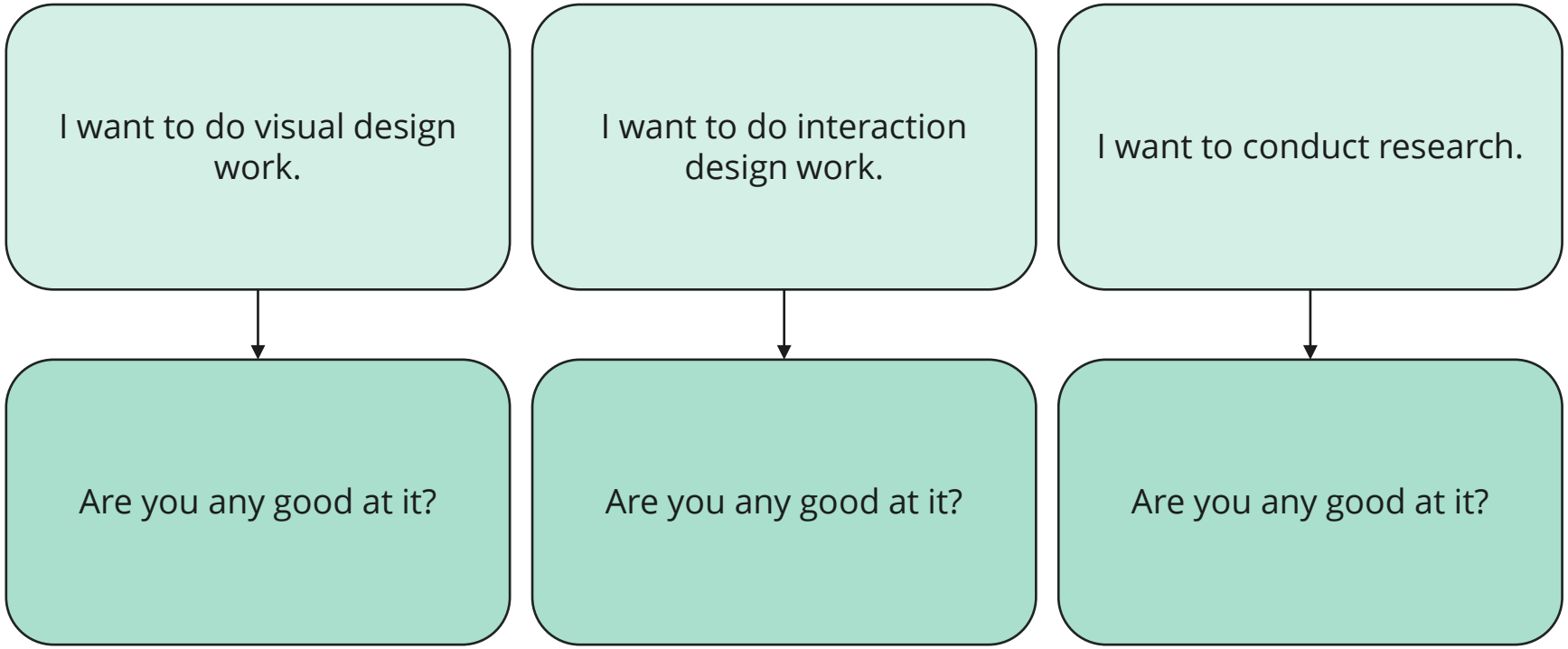
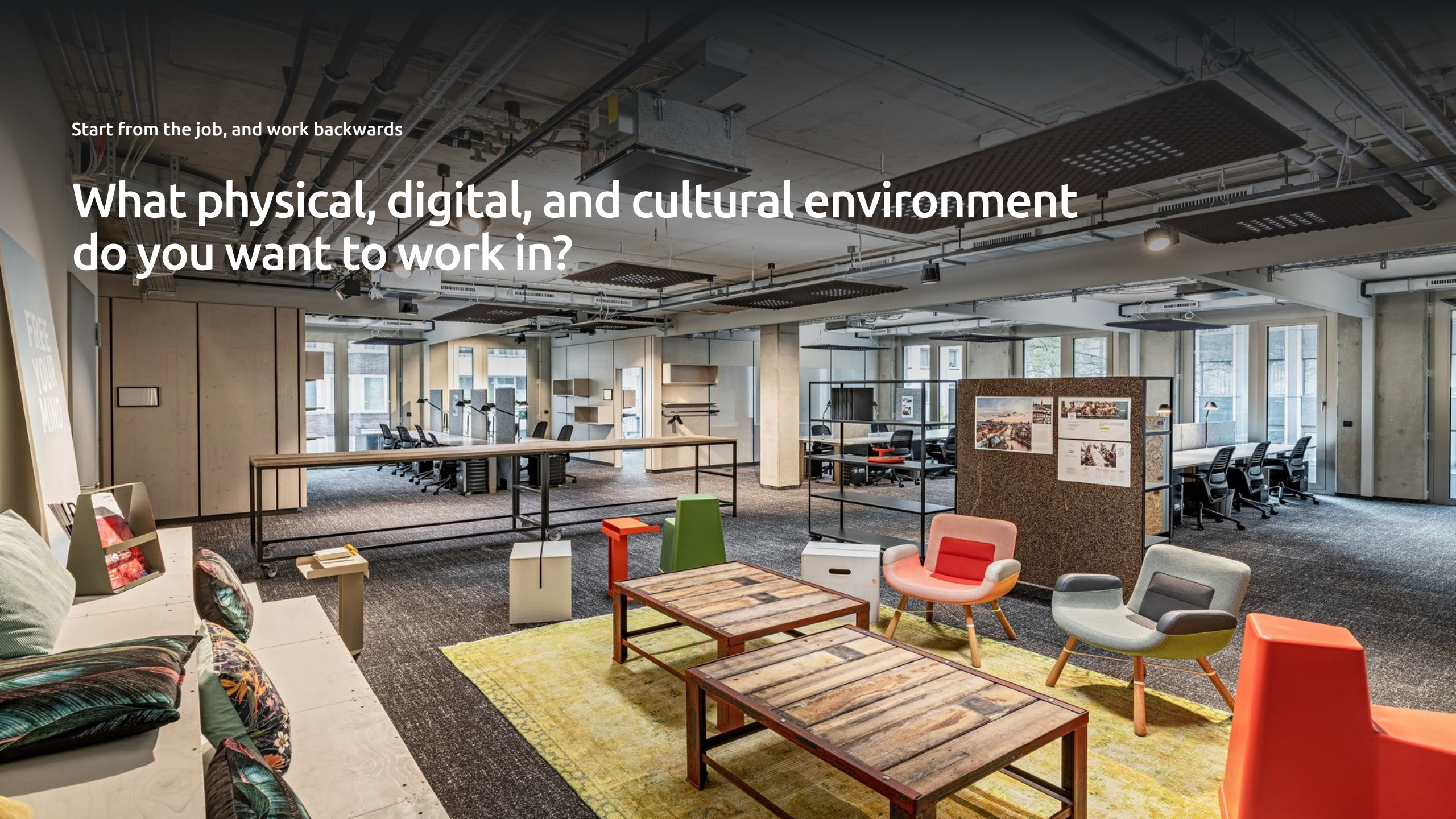
Start from the job, and work backwards

Think about what kind of work you *want to do*, and what kind of work you *are good at doing*.



Start from the job, and work backwards

What physical, digital, and cultural environment do you want to work in?



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Start from the job, and work backwards

How much influence, impact and reward do you want to have?

You are the only designer

- You'll make lots of things
- You'll touch everything, including the tedium (social media!)
- You'll be important
- You'll be misunderstood
- You may be lonely ☹

You are a contributor on one of many product teams

- You'll ship things that people will use
- You won't see the forest from the trees
- You'll have a crew of collaborators
- You may find yourself in a grind

You are a director in a large company

- You won't make things (except PowerPoint)
- You may mentor and teach designers
- You'll Know What's Going On, but you may not like it
- You'll get paid

You are a consultant

- You'll impact a lot of projects, a little
- You may work with other designers
- You'll hand off your work and hope for the best

You are working in a non-profit

- You'll make lots of things
- You'll touch everything, including the tedium (social media!)
- You'll have deep, meaningful impact
- You may get paid less and worry more

You are working in government

- You could have deep, meaningful impact
- You'll work slowly
- You'll have little-to-no top-down influence
- You'll get frustrated

You are working at a startup

- You'll run very, very fast
- You'll compromise all of the time
- You'll be important

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Start from the job, and work backwards

Even though you may feel suitable for a senior role, think about aiming lower.

\+ 1 year in graduate school = ? ? I'll be First Chair!

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Start from the job, and work backwards

When you know what you want, write a job search mission statement for your ideal job.

My ideal job is working at a small software consultancy, where I can work closely with developers and focus on educational products for high-school students. I want to be in-person in a cozy office up to three days a week, and I'll sacrifice comp and title for the ability to learn from a strong mentor.

A job search mission statement is just for you

- Identify companies that match your mission statement and add them to your to-contact list—even if they aren't hiring
- Focus your job search so you aren't overwhelmed by the number of opportunities
- Cater your portfolio to that specific job (potentially at the expense of other jobs)

Print it and put it on the wall

When job searching gets tedious or frustrating, revisit your job search mission statement.

- Are you looking in the right places for your perfect job?
- Is it still accurate? Are you willing to adjust?
- Are you looking for a needle in a haystack?

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What goes in a portfolio?

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The most important part of a portfolio:

The work needs to be good.

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What goes in a qualitative design research portfolio?

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Showing qualitative design research

If you are showing design research, emphasize your ability to identify valuable insights from research data.

For a mid-level role:

Baseline abilities to show

- Create a first-draft of a design research plan, including focus, goals, method, and discussion guide
- Conduct in-person or digital research
- Gather artifacts to support a story
- Communicate research findings through stories, both in-person and through stand-alone artifacts
- Synthesize research findings into key points
- Use key points to make recommendations related to product, service, or business decisions

Bonus points for...

- Manage a project schedule and timeline
- Build a screener, and manage a recruiting effort (or work with an outside recruiter)
- Coordinate research sessions (scheduling and timing)
- Visualize recommendations at a sketch-level of fidelity

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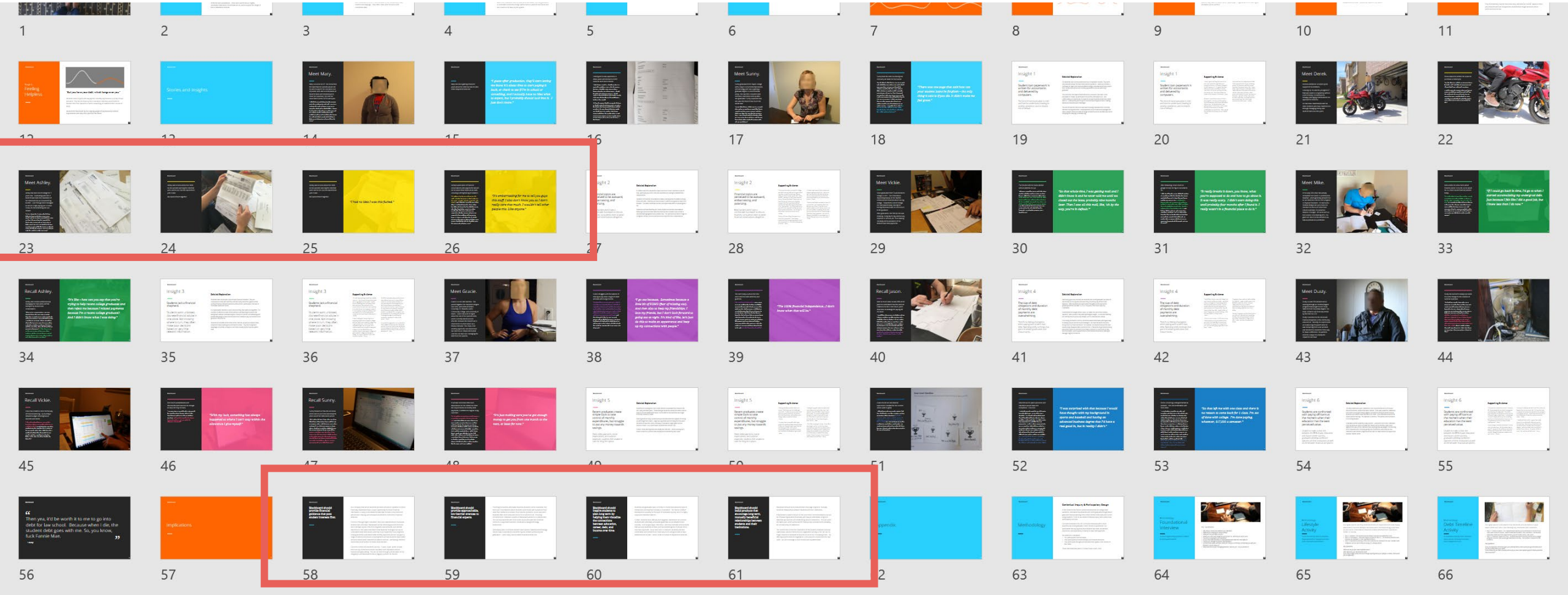
Showing qualitative design research

For example...

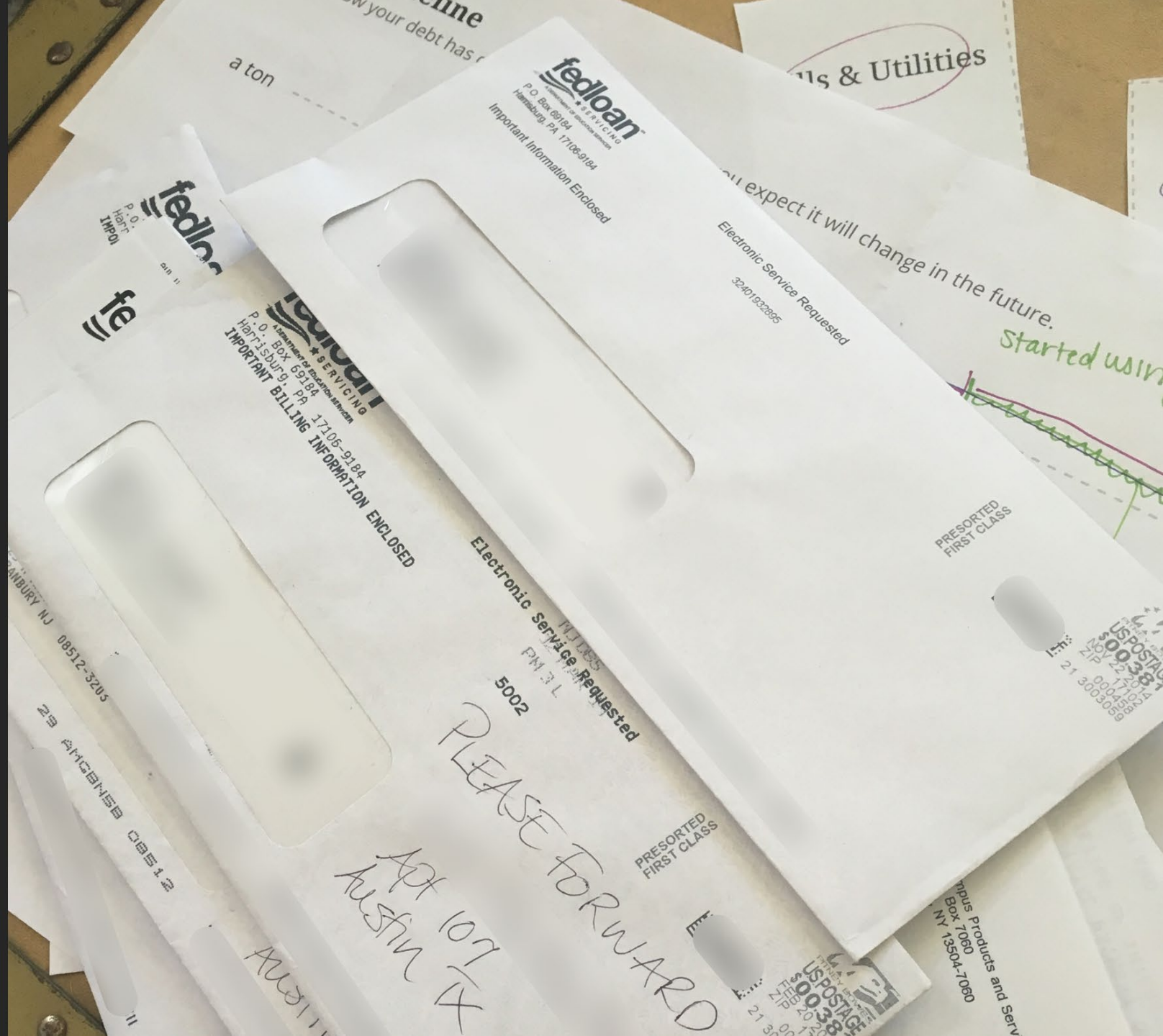


Blackboard

Meet Ashley.

Ashley has been out of college for 3 years now. Graduating with 60K in student loan debt, the realization of her debt feels like an overwhelming burden – even though she's managed to secure a high paying job in Austin Texas, it's not something she can escape.

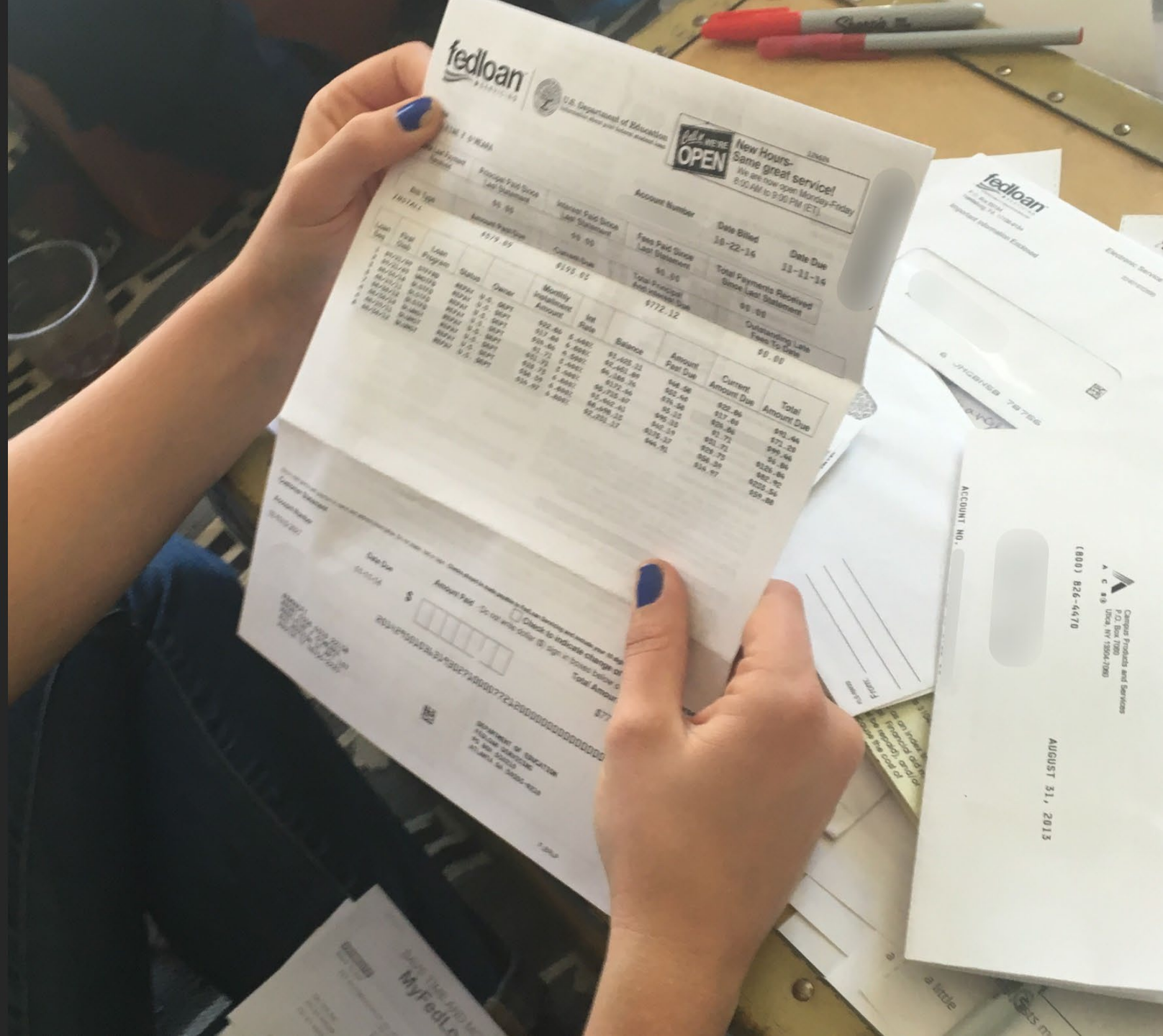
"It's just I know that it's going to be this huge deduction from my checking account every month. And I'm just always worried they're going to.. there's this part of me that's worried that they're going to come and say.. 'we're going to deduct more.' you can't.. I'm afraid that the loans are going to come and be like, 'you're not allowed to have this lifestyle anymore. you're not allowed to do this. and that's really scary to me."



Blackboard

Ashley was nervous about her debt, so she avoided opening the bills that were sent to her, but she saved them, just in case.

We opened them together.



Blackboard

Ashley was nervous about her debt, so she avoided opening the bills that were sent to her, but she saved them, just in case.

We opened them together.

Blackboard

Ashley's association of financial conversations with arguments has led her to avoid those topics at all costs, including a strong feeling of isolation.

"It's embarrassing for me to tell you guys this stuff. I also don't know you so I don't really care that much. I wouldn't tell other people this. Like anyone. And I think that's one of the worst things about it. My friends know that I have student loan debt, and I know they have debt, but no one talks about how fucking scary it is, or about actually what shit means. And you're not supposed to talk about money, and you're not supposed to have problems with money, you know. It's almost a guilt thing, that if I tell this person, are they going to judge me if I buy a taco? Because they'll be like, 'Oh, she should be saving that money and not buying a taco.'"

"It's embarrassing for me to tell you guys this stuff. I also don't know you so I don't really care that much. I wouldn't tell other people this. Like anyone."

Blackboard

Insight 2

Financial topics are perceived to be awkward, embarrassing, and polarizing.

Most families don't have a comfortable framework to discuss finances, so students learn to avoid financial conversations altogether.

Detailed Explanation

It is often easier for a student to make a decision on their own than to ask for help, particularly at a time in life when students are looking to establish their independence.

Avoidance of financial conversations creates a strong sense of isolation among those with debt – that they are there to bear it, without being able to share their troubles. This often contributes to their perception that debt is controlling their life.

Students expressed that they are most receptive to financial conversations following experiences that made them feel like their situation was normal or interests that highlighted some positive trait. The openness seemed to hinge on recognition of their previous decisions and respect for their independence.

Blackboard

Blackboard should provide financial guidance that puts student interests first.

As a company that serves students but does not seek to capitalize on them financially, Blackboard has a unique opportunity to deliver financial information in easily consumable formats that increase comprehension, aids decision making, and empowers students to control their financial destinies.

From K12 through higher education, there are opportunities to humanize student loan processes. Blackboard cannot reformat government forms, but it can take inputs in the form of grants, loan amounts, and interest rates to turn into useful information that students of all ages can use to understand what debt means, and how it will impact their lives long term. Helping students understand what monthly payments will look like given a range of options schools are providing them will help students make better decisions about what institutions to attend up front – decreasing retention issues that would surface for those students later.

Given the context of a student's journey – 2 year, 4 year, public, private – there are key moments to deliver education and inspiration around finances and goal setting. This can be done through a combination of SIS integration and Blackboard's future flagship product, Bb Planner.

Blackboard

Blackboard should provide approachable, low barrier avenues to financial experts.

Providing humanized, actionable financial education will be invaluable, but there are circumstances where students need to talk with humans to help solve their problems or answer more specific questions. As we have seen, students often don't know who to turn to or who to trust. Providing connections to institution experts or Blackboard advisers is a natural step. This will help students with more acute issues articulate their financial concerns in ways that meet their needs and existing technology preferences.

Particularly when it comes to student loan finances, Blackboard technology should make it possible to extend the typical contact window beyond graduation – when many issues related to student debt arise.

Blackboard

Blackboard should inspire students to plan long term by helping them visualize the connections between education, career, debt, and income over time.

Students and graduates have currently no model that allows this type of comparison and objective honesty in exploration. Bb Planner product development will allow for this type of exploration quickly, and in a highly visual and interactive fashion.

Further, students have difficulty forming goals. Blackboard can provoke students with potentially achievable goals that can be adopted more explicitly - such as gaining an internship - and help celebrate achievements that will keep students on track, such as celebrating their first year of on-time loan payments. As we have seen in research, students who feel comfortable and confident are most likely to be willing and able to take additional time to plan – either inside or outside of Blackboard products.

Blackboard

Blackboard should build products that encourage long term, mutually beneficial relationships between students and their institutions.

Blackboard should build products that encourage long term, mutually beneficial relationships between students and their institutions.

If Blackboard is able to deliver on the prior three recommendations, we will be empowering students financially with easy to understand, long term data that lays bare the ROI of attending desired institutions. This will upset the status quo, which works well for financial loan providers and ultimately, for a broad array of institutions.

The next frontier will be the redefinition of the student-institution financial relationship, wherein forms of price negotiation will play a role. We can no longer depend on students to bear the brunt of ever increasing prices. By offering opportunities for negotiation, such as alumni involvement for loan relief – we will encourage a more honest and equitable trade.

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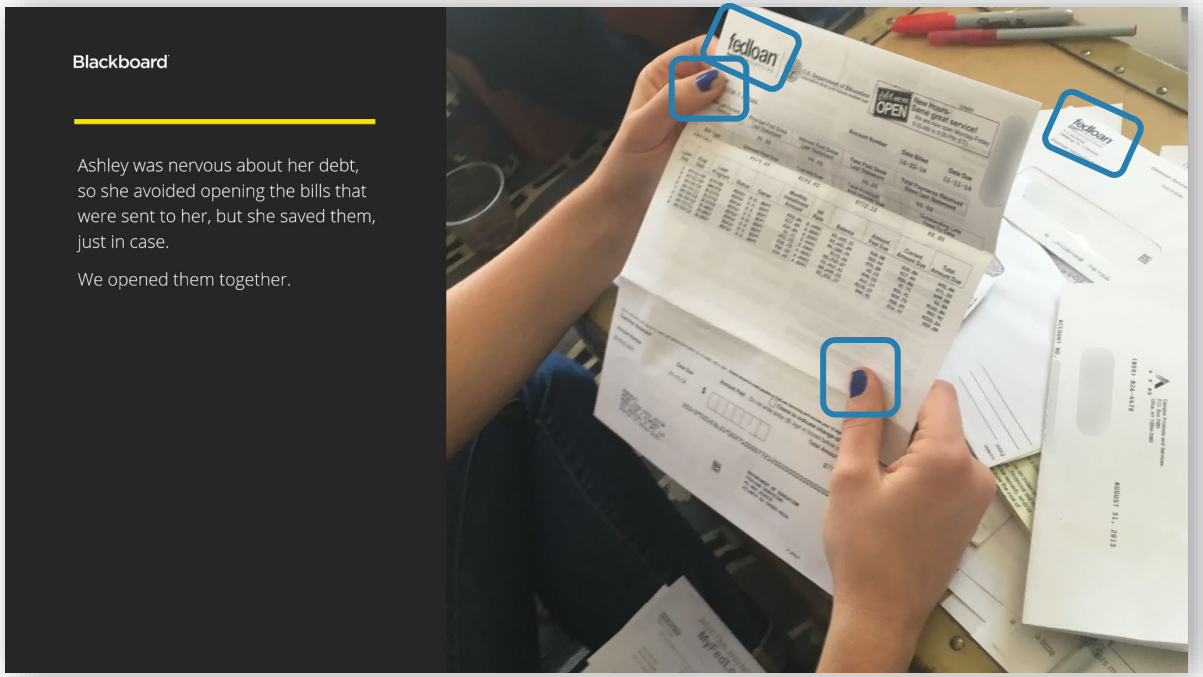
Showing qualitative design research



Show meaningful, unique, memorable photos

Select photographs that are truly unique—images that you would never find on a stock photo site, or from generic research.

Choose photos that have tiny details that humanize, and that continue an unstated narrative.

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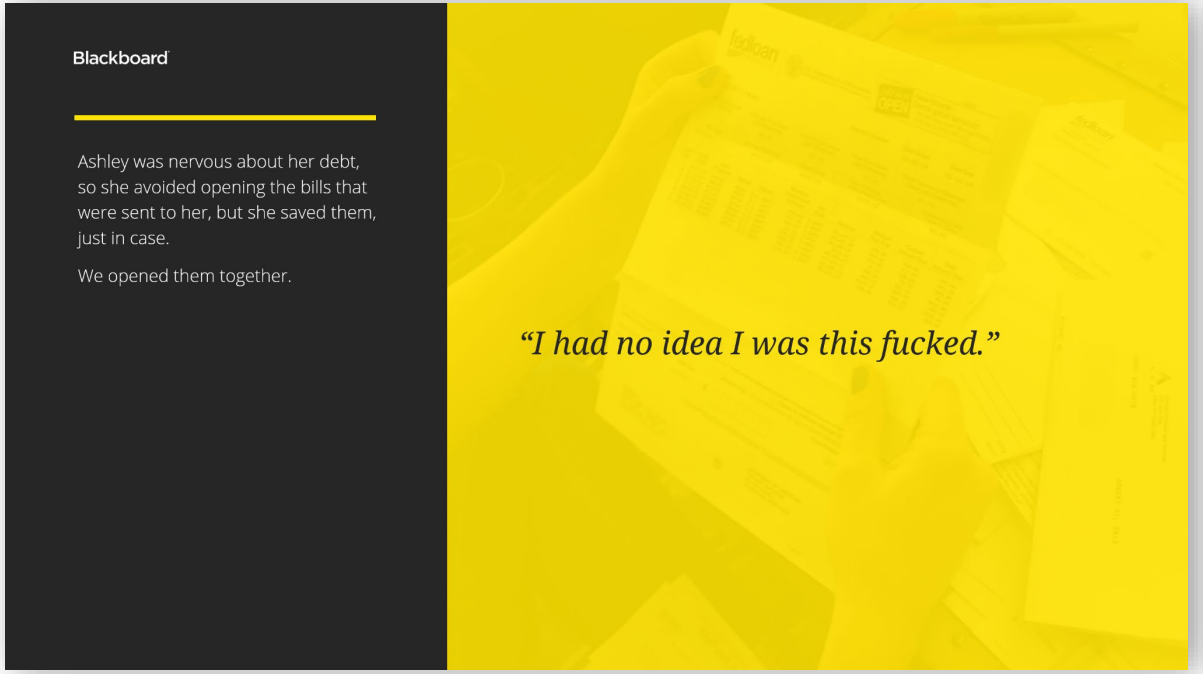
Showing qualitative design research



Use their words to tell their story and shape your story

Extract key quotes that support a story, emphasizing the emotional parts of a journey. Select quotes that are surprising, sad, delightful, or provocative—use quotes from participants in the same way you use photographs of their context and experiences.

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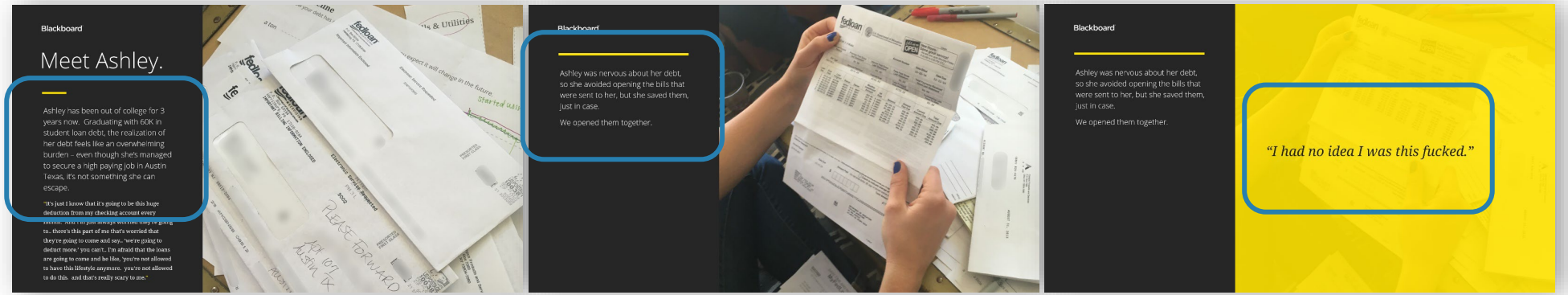
Showing qualitative design research



Tell a short story on the way towards your long story

Create a mini-narrative that mixes a neutral voice, your voice, their voice, and photographs; each mini-narrative is a building block towards a longer story of insight and meaning.

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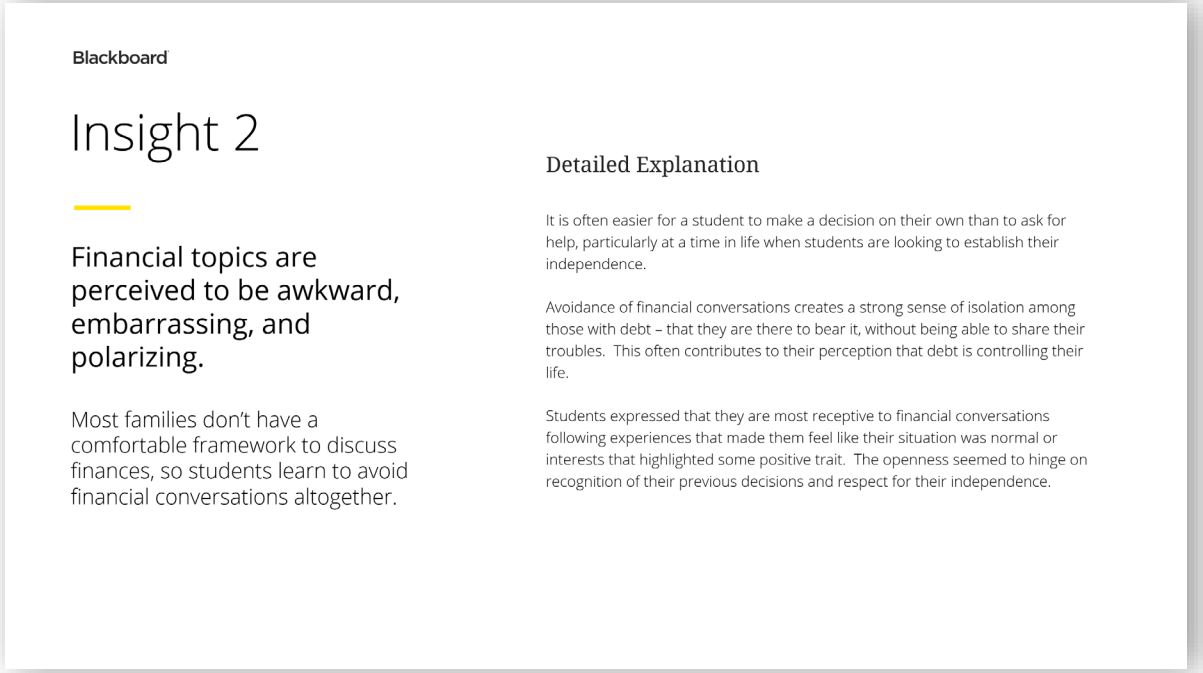
Showing qualitative design research



Drive towards an insight; make it succinct, and support it with an explanation

Use your short stories to build an argument for an insight. Reduce your language to as few words as possible, and support the insight with a "tiered" level of explanation (a main assertion, a supporting comment, and a detailed explanation).

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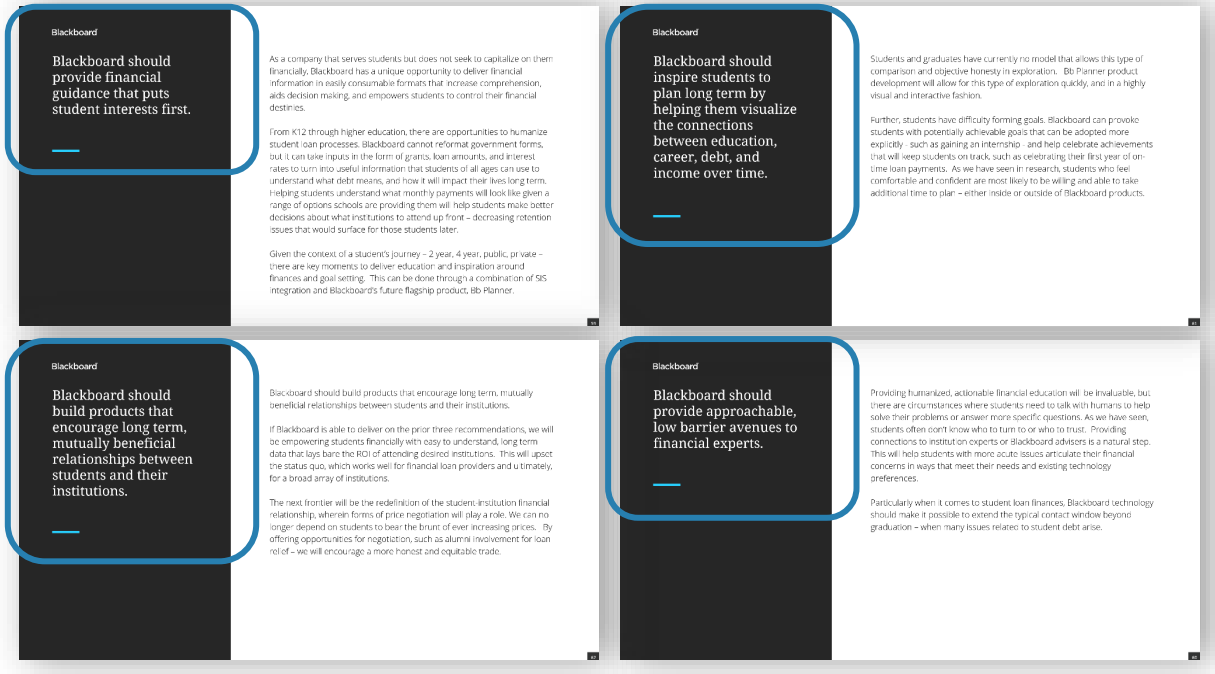
Showing qualitative design research



Make your research actionable to the business

Make a clear connection between your research findings and initiatives, products, or features that the business can engage in to support your users.

Show the value of design research every time you have an opportunity to show your work.

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Showing qualitative design research

Don’t show pictures of post-it notes, or you moving post-it notes around, or post-it notes through glass, or you drawing on a whiteboard, or you talking with your teammates, or…

Images of your raw process add no value, add noise, and indicate a juvenile or shallow practice.

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Showing qualitative design research

Best practices for a design research portfolio:

Tell short stories on the way to telling long stories.

Use quotes to support images.

Curate images, quotes, and insights, heavily.

Be specific.

Don’t show small images of people.

Don’t show generic images.

Don’t use clip art.

Don’t show images of you moving post-it notes around.

Don’t show whiteboard sketches of themes.

Don’t show anything without context.

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Reminder

The work needs to be good

+

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What goes in an interaction design portfolio?

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Showing interaction design work

If you are showing interaction design, show user flows of interface design, diagrams of systems, and testing-driven iterations.

For a mid-level role:

Baseline abilities to show

- Write user scenarios of both a problem state and a solution state
- Diagram user flows and information architectures
- Visualize software interfaces through wireframes
- Explore multiple solutions to a problem, and solve those problems
- Conduct “quick and dirty” usability testing of concepts
- Create specifications suitable for implementation

Bonus points for...

- Create linear or interactive prototypes of “micro interactions”
- Plan and conduct formal think-aloud or A/B testing sessions
- Visualize current and future versions of designs
- Apply existing visual design system on wireframes
- Connect diagrammatic representations of technology with diagrammatic representations of designs

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Showing interaction design work

For example...

Scenario 2.4 – Creating a new loan packet
System visualization

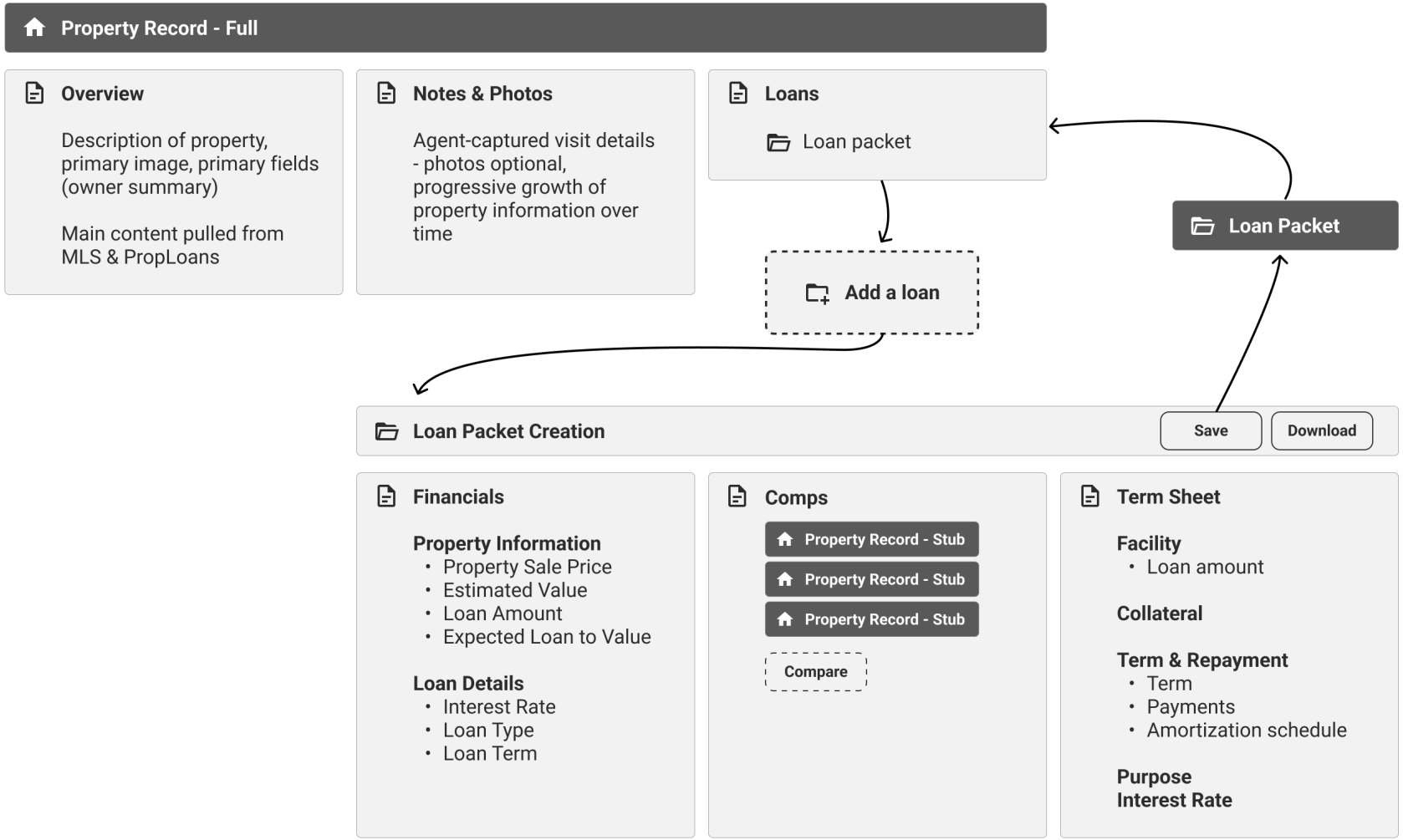
User goal
To establish an in-progress loan packet with a comprehensive set of details suitable for underwriting to begin

Starting state
A property record exists, but has no existing loan information attached to it; suitable comps have been added to the system

Ending state
A loan packet has been created, containing financials, comps (and comparison comps), a preliminary term sheet, and any other qualitative information

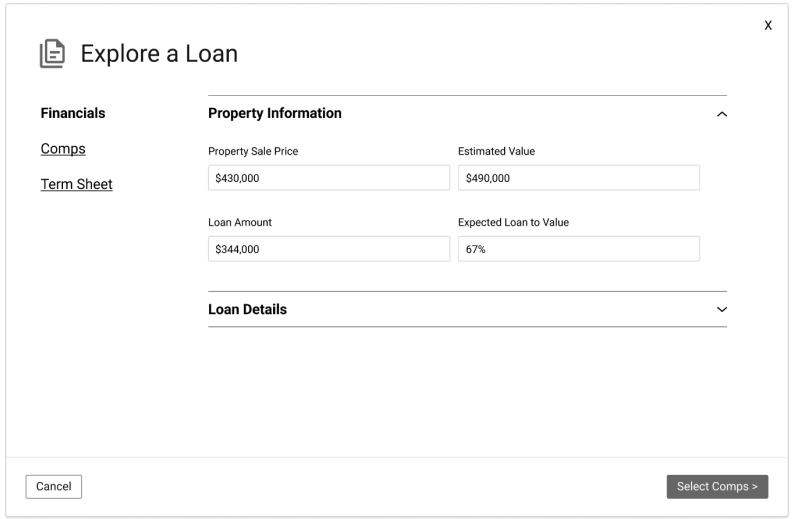
Key actions & features

- Locate a property
- Initiate loan creation mode
- Enter required and optional information
- Identify comps, and compare across properties
- Save in-progress loan
- Download packet

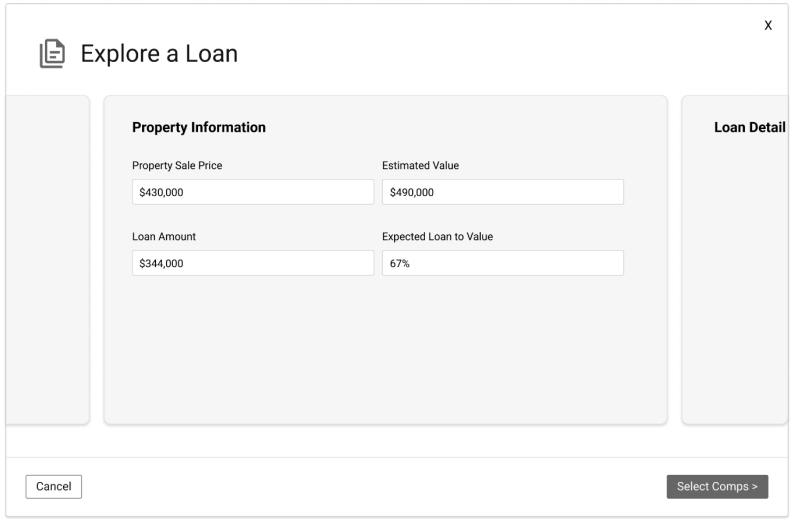


Scenario 2.4 – Creating a new loan packet
Financial Details modal exploration

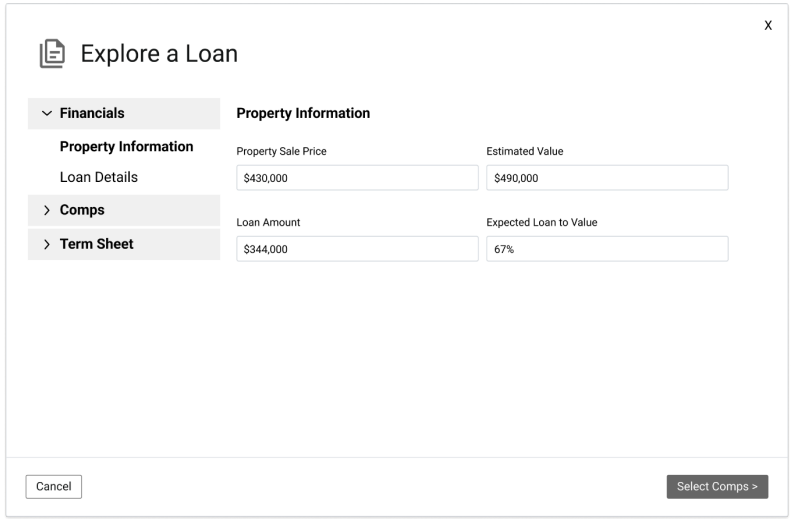
A – Accordion



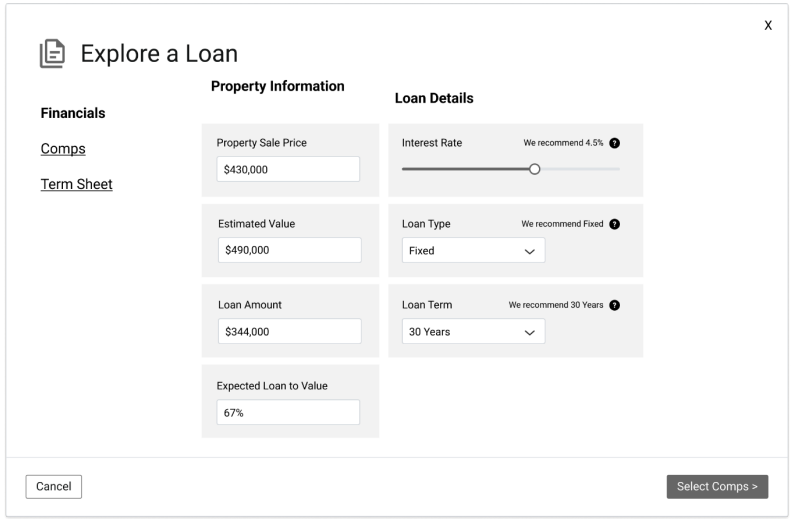
B – Cards



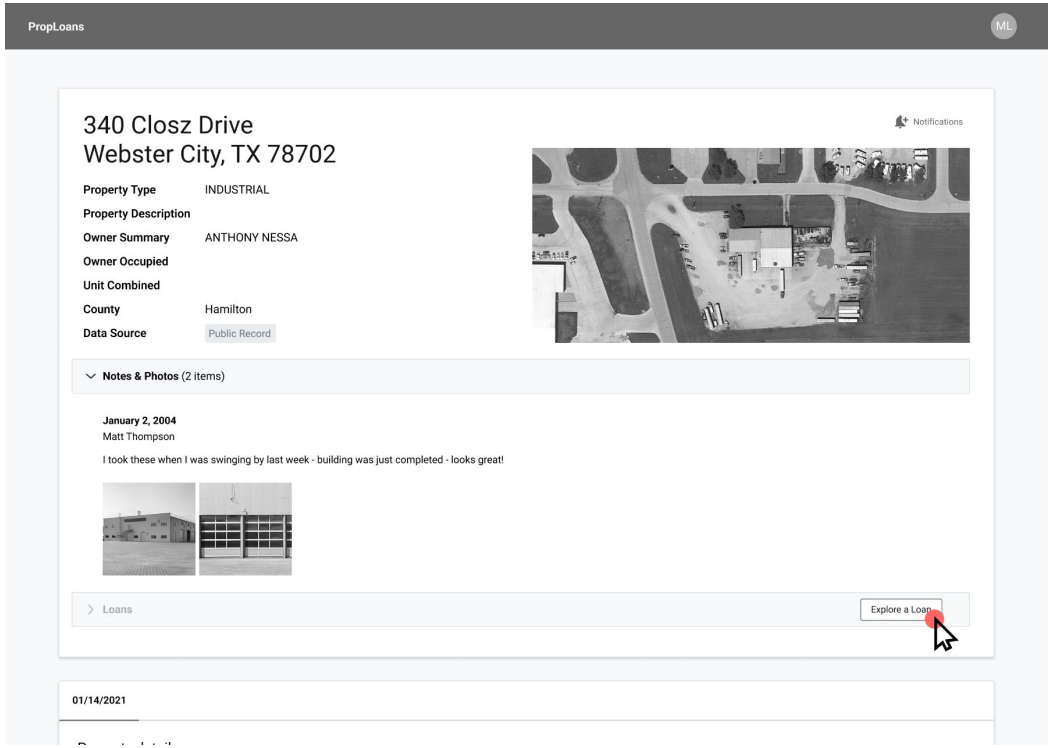
C – Expanded Left Nav



D – Two Column

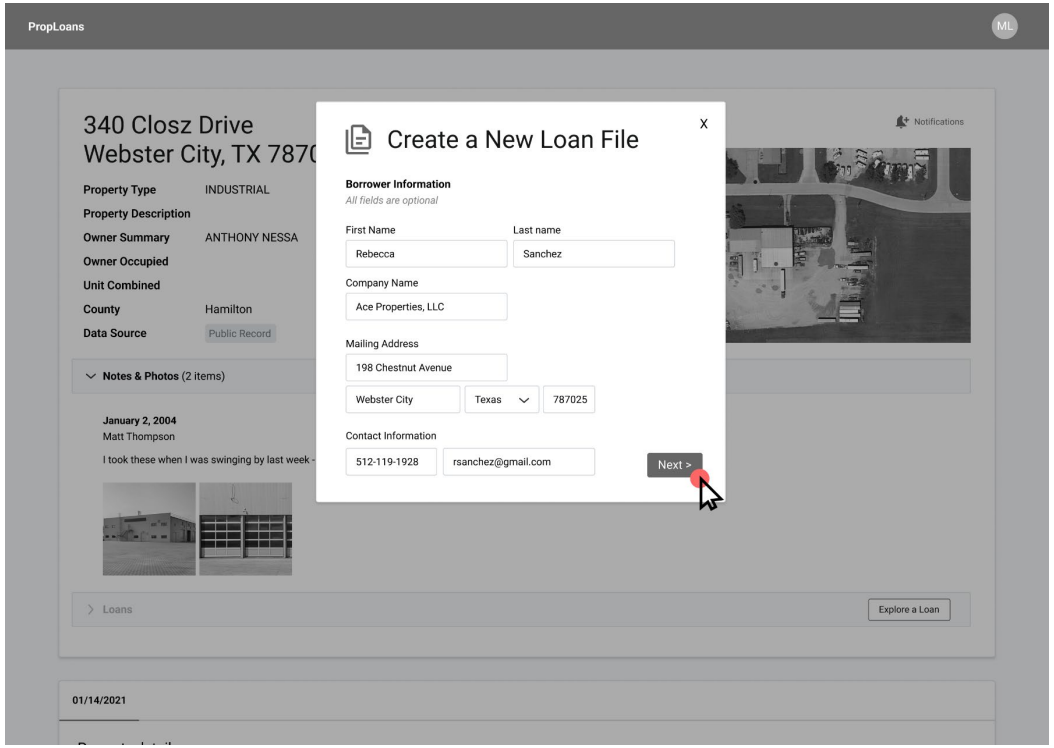


Scenario 2.4 – Creating a new loan packet
Wireframe flows

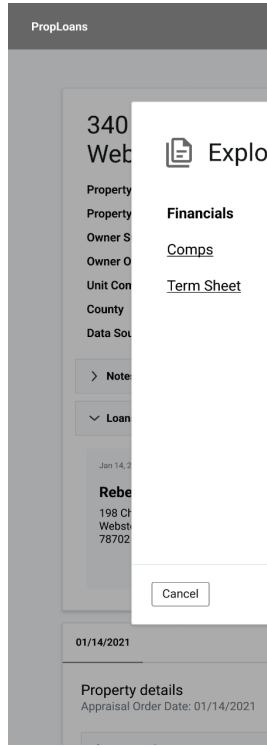


Mary is meeting with Rebecca to talk about a potential new loan. Rebecca has a deal under contract and is looking to secure her financing. Mary pulls up the property in question on her computer.

After looking over the material, Mary clicks to Explore a New Loan.



She enters the basic contact information about Rebecca, and clicks Next to create the loan shell.



Mary starts using the loan cal
terms of the loan. When she's

Scenario 2.4 – Creating a new loan packet A/B concept evaluation

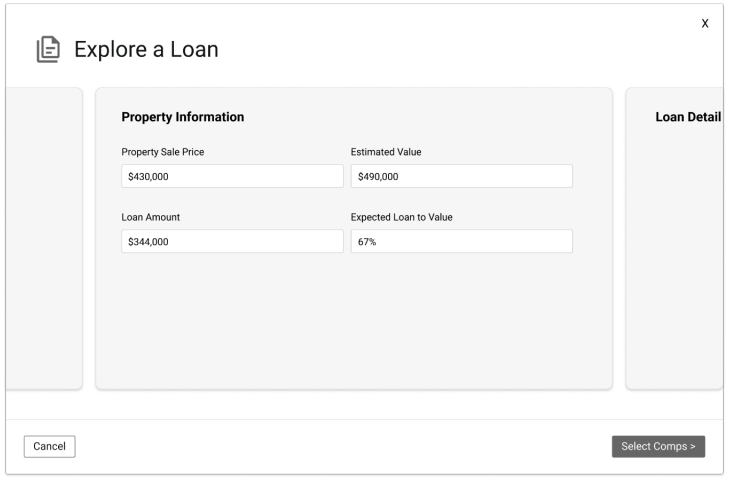
Goal
To assess perceived simplicity, power, and comprehension of alternate Financial Details modal explorations

Method
Asynchronous, unmoderated testing via Lyssna with 25 financial providers; closed and open-ended assessment questions

Findings
Concept “Cards” was perceived as simpler, while concept “Two Columns” was perceived as more powerful and easier to comprehend

Implications
Proceed with concept “Two Columns” and perform additional usability testing on a functional prototype in the context of a flow

Cards (n=25)

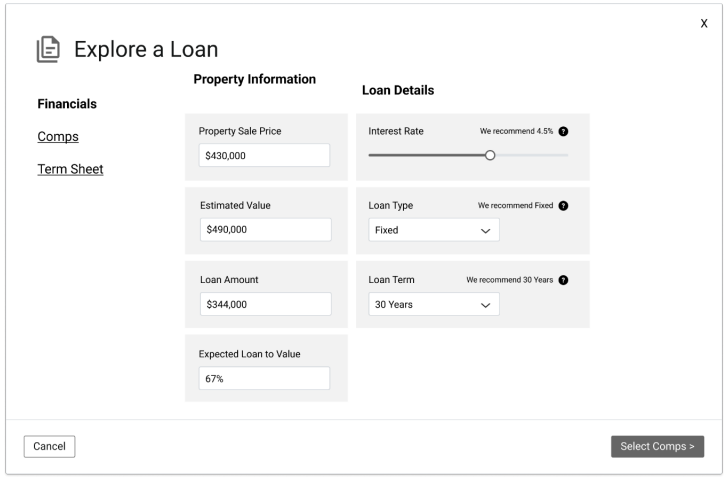


This concept is simple.
4.72

This concept is powerful.
1.12

This concept is easy to understand.
3.22

Two Column (n=25)



This concept is simple.
2.57

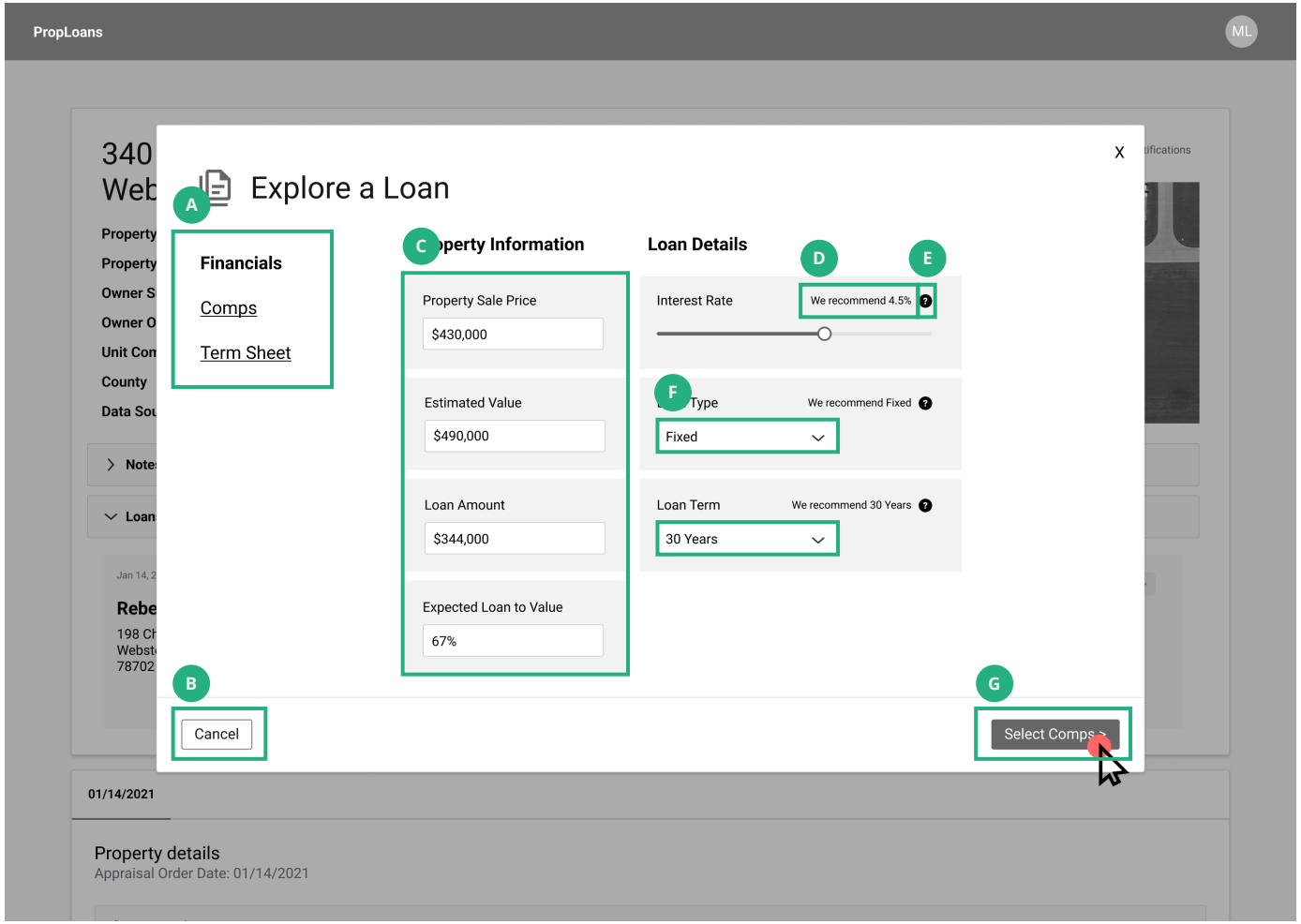
This concept is powerful.
4.81

This concept is easy to understand.
4.91

Scenario 2.4 – Creating a new loan packet
Financial Details interaction specifications

A
Switch between loan packet elements in any order – navigation and status display

B
Prompt for save/abandon changes on Cancel



Required fields TBD

C
Default field values defined here.

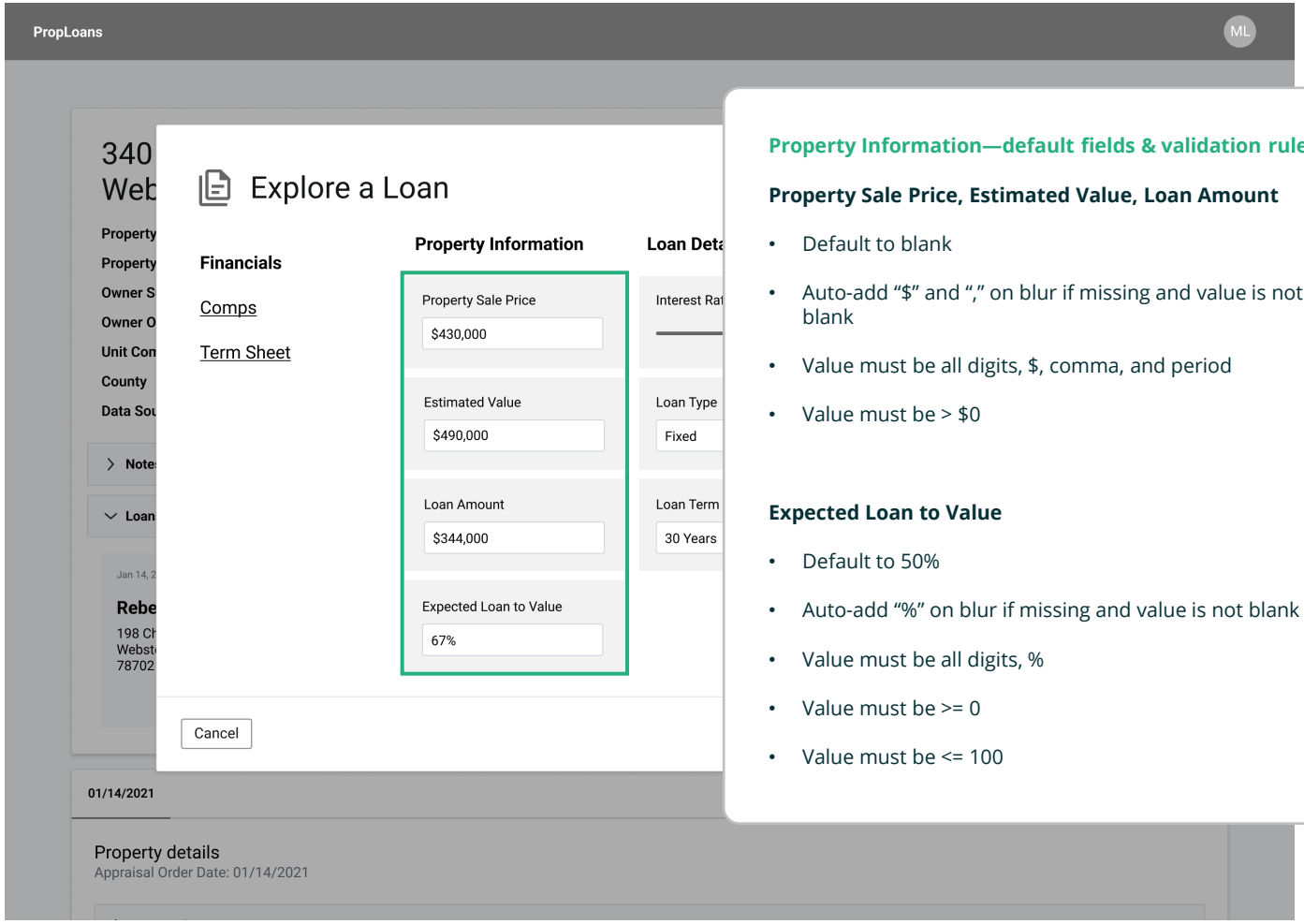
D
Recommendations driven by aggregate, real-time data in comparable markets. View complete data mapping here.

E
Tooltip text defined here.

F
Loan type and term selection options mapped here.

G
Next/back with key verb/noun pairs (act as a wizard)

Scenario 2.4 – Creating a new loan packet
Financial Details interaction specifications



Property Information—default fields & validation rules

Property Sale Price, Estimated Value, Loan Amount

- Default to blank
- Auto-add “$” and “,” on blur if missing and value is not blank
- Value must be all digits, $, comma, and period
- Value must be > $0

Expected Loan to Value

- Default to 50%
- Auto-add “%” on blur if missing and value is not blank
- Value must be all digits, %
- Value must be >= 0
- Value must be <= 100

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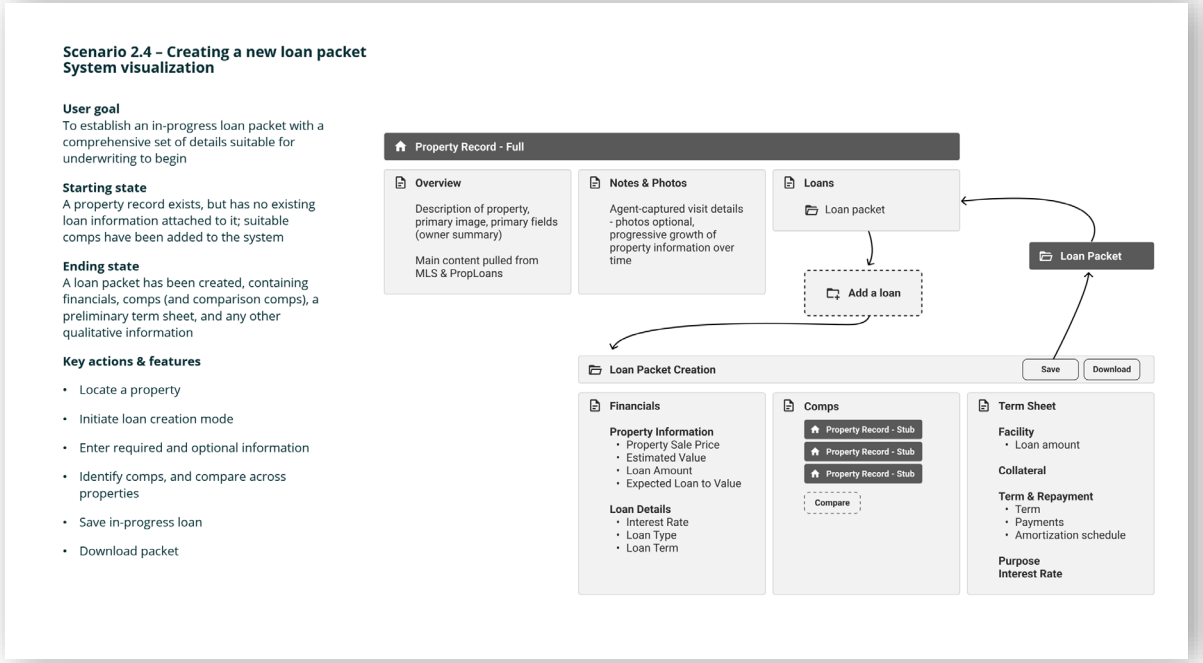
Showing interaction design work



Scenario 2.4 – Creating a new loan packet
System visualization

User goal
To establish an in-progress loan packet with a comprehensive set of details suitable for underwriting to begin

Starting state
A property record exists, but has no existing loan information attached to it; suitable comps have been added to the system

Ending state
A loan packet has been created, containing financials, comps (and comparison comps), a preliminary term sheet, and any other qualitative information

Key actions & features

- Locate a property
- Initiate loan creation mode
- Enter required and optional information
- Identify comps, and compare across properties
- Save in-progress loan
- Download packet

Show diagrammatic explorations of a system

Demonstrate that you think about interaction design as a system; show how you unpack (and “repack”) the system into component parts as part of your exploration, and illustrate that you think about how the Big Nouns and Big Verbs relate to one-another to help users complete their tasks.

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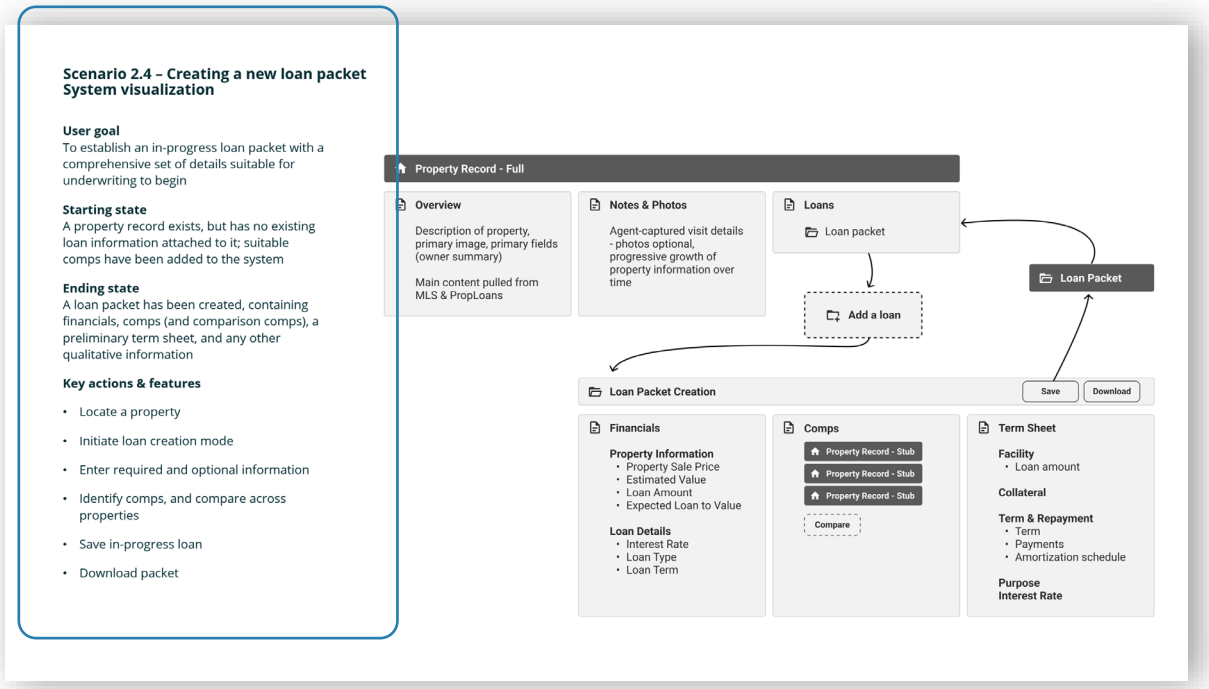
Showing interaction design work



Include meta-information, even if it wasn't part of your original sketch or diagram

Show the elements that influenced the creation of your diagrams and models, including things like user goals, actions, features, data objects, and other context.

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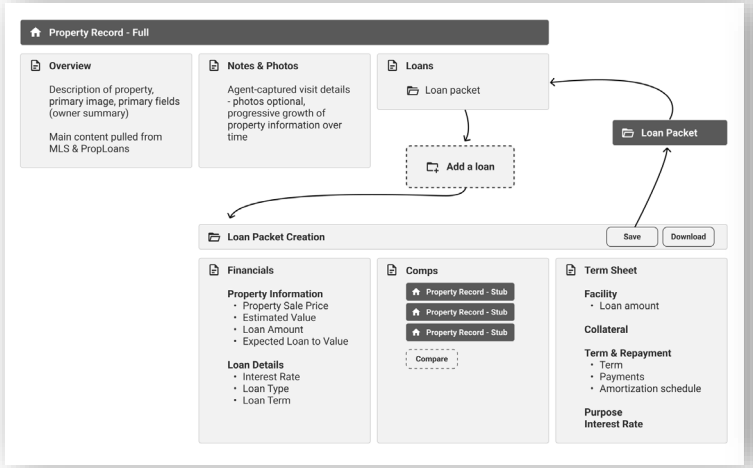
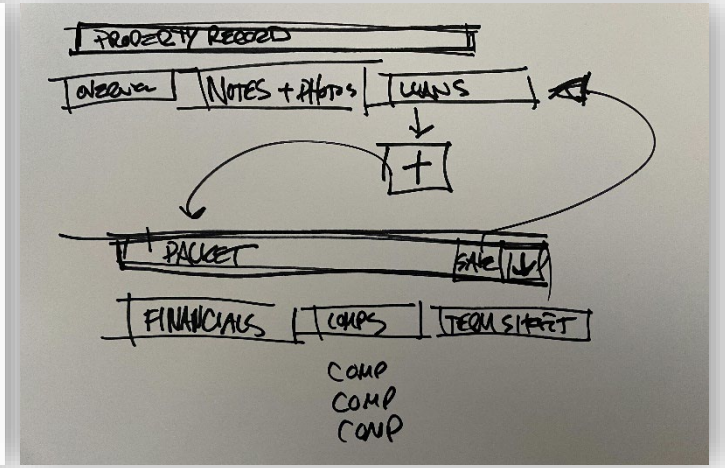
Showing interaction design work





Clean it up

Don’t show your whiteboard or freehand sketch; show a refined, crisp, clean version of the final diagram or model.

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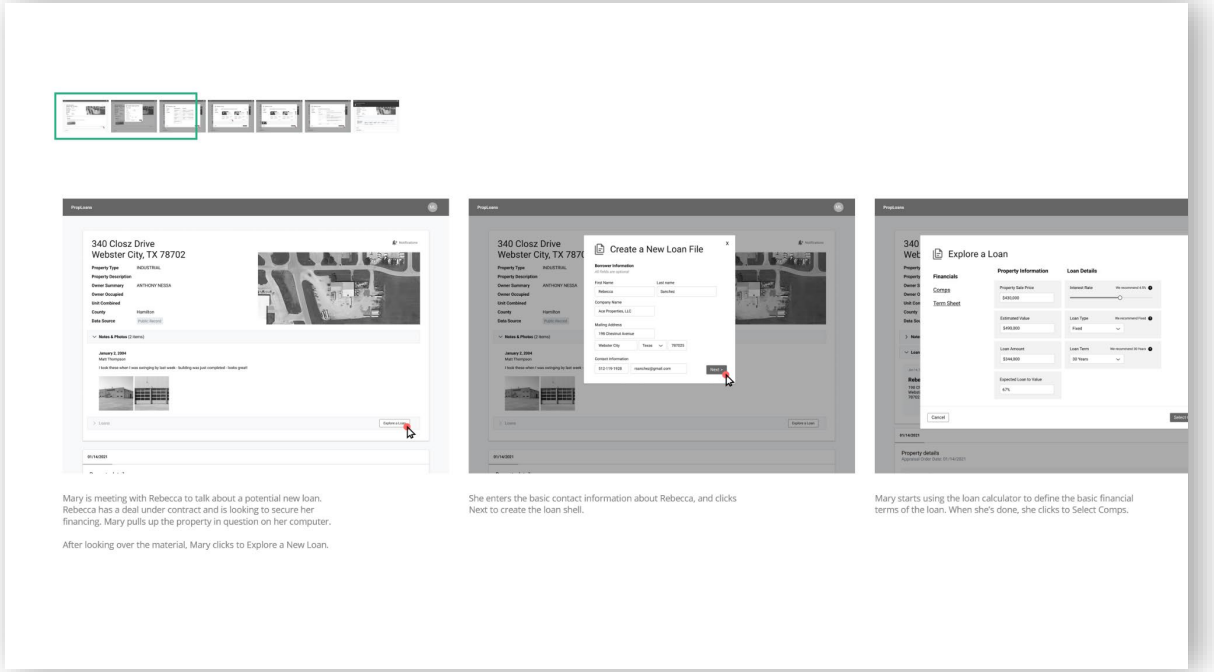
Showing interaction design work



Show screens in a flow

Always show your interface work in a sequence, telling a story of how a user will encounter your solution.

If a flow doesn't fit on a single screen, show the whole flow small—either on a single slide, or as a mini navigation element—and then walk through each screen one by one.

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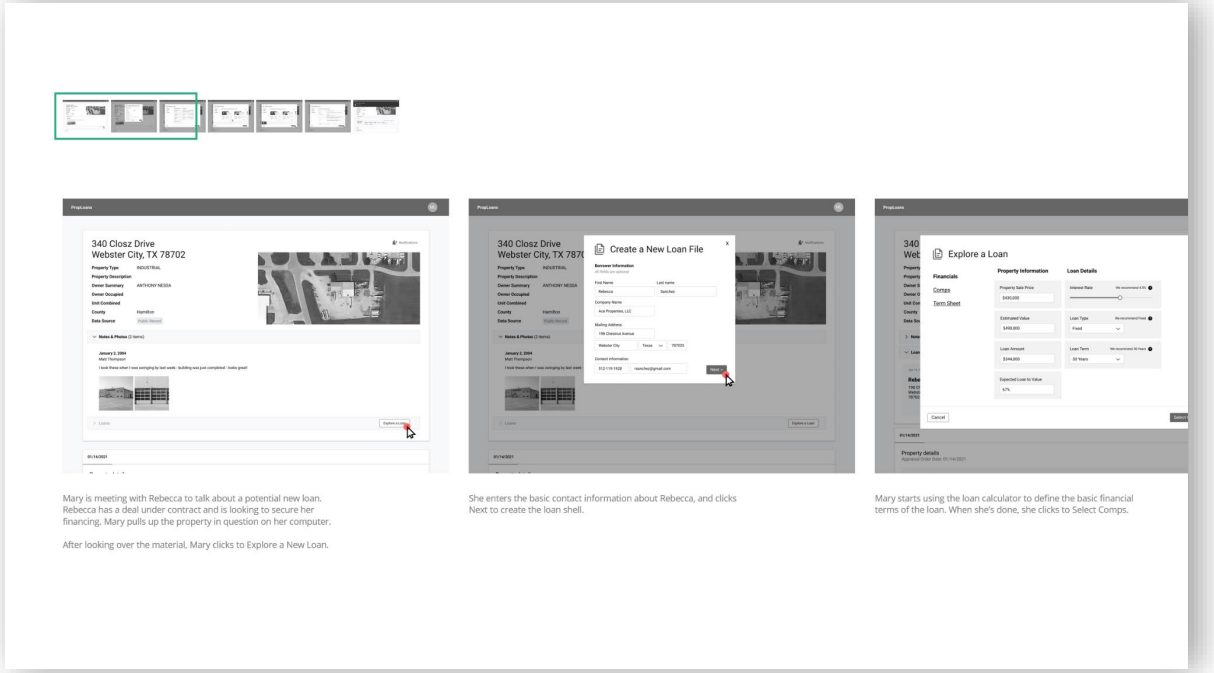
Showing interaction design work



Include scenario text

Describe how a person will engage with your solution; don't assume that complex interaction design work can easily be understood by a new audience.

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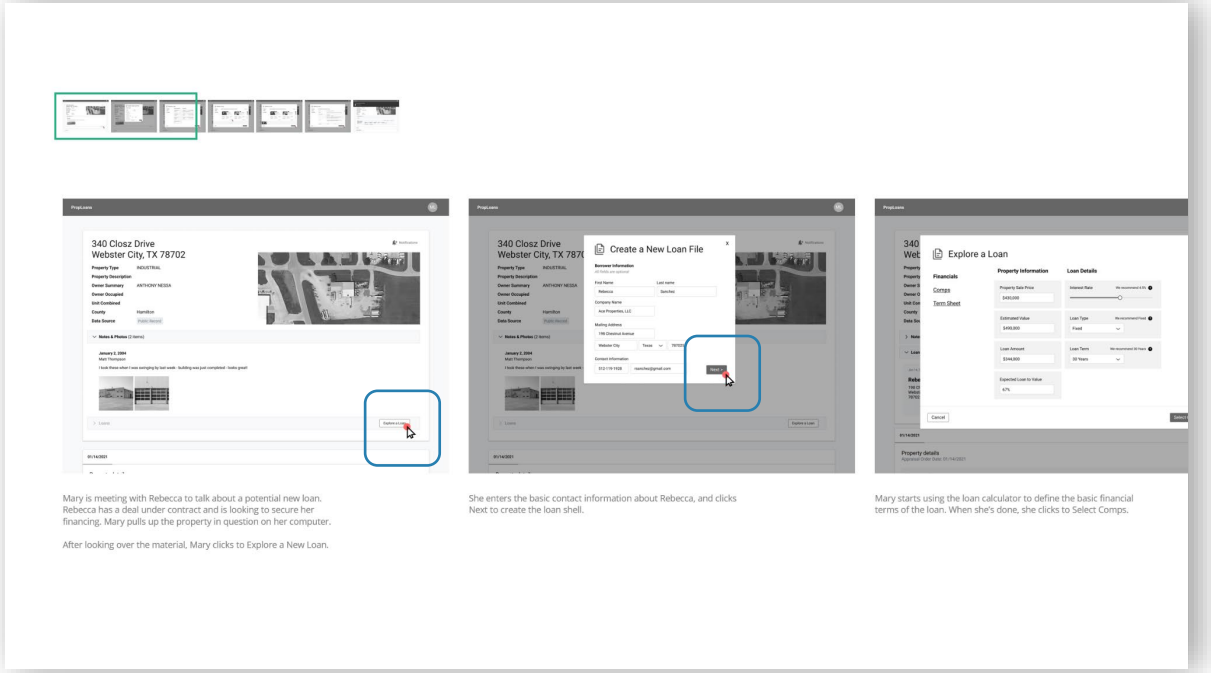
Showing interaction design work



Show a mouse pointer (or tap indicator)

Show where the user in the scenario is clicking by including a mouse pointer (or a round circle to indicate tapping on mobile).

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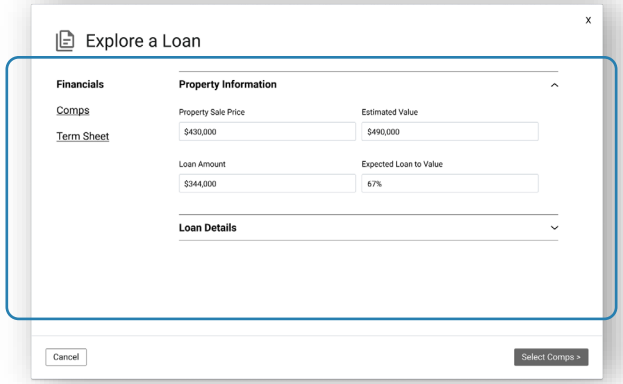
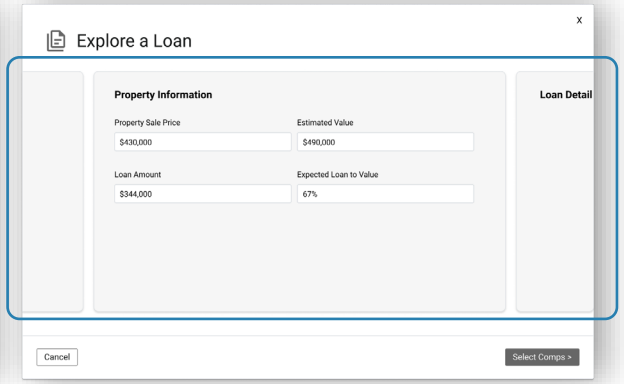
Showing interaction design work

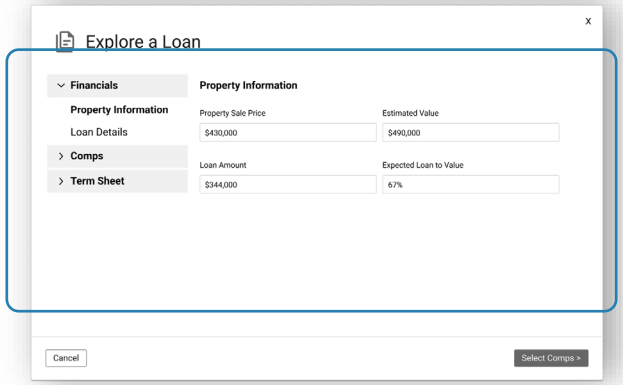
A – Accordion



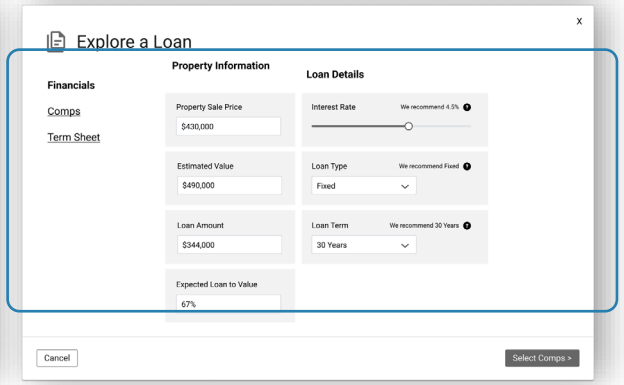
B – Cards



C – Expanded Left Nav



D – Two Column



Show alternative solutions to the problem

Make it clear that you explore a problem before selecting a direction; show alternative solutions to a problem at a *detail* level, not just a conceptual level.

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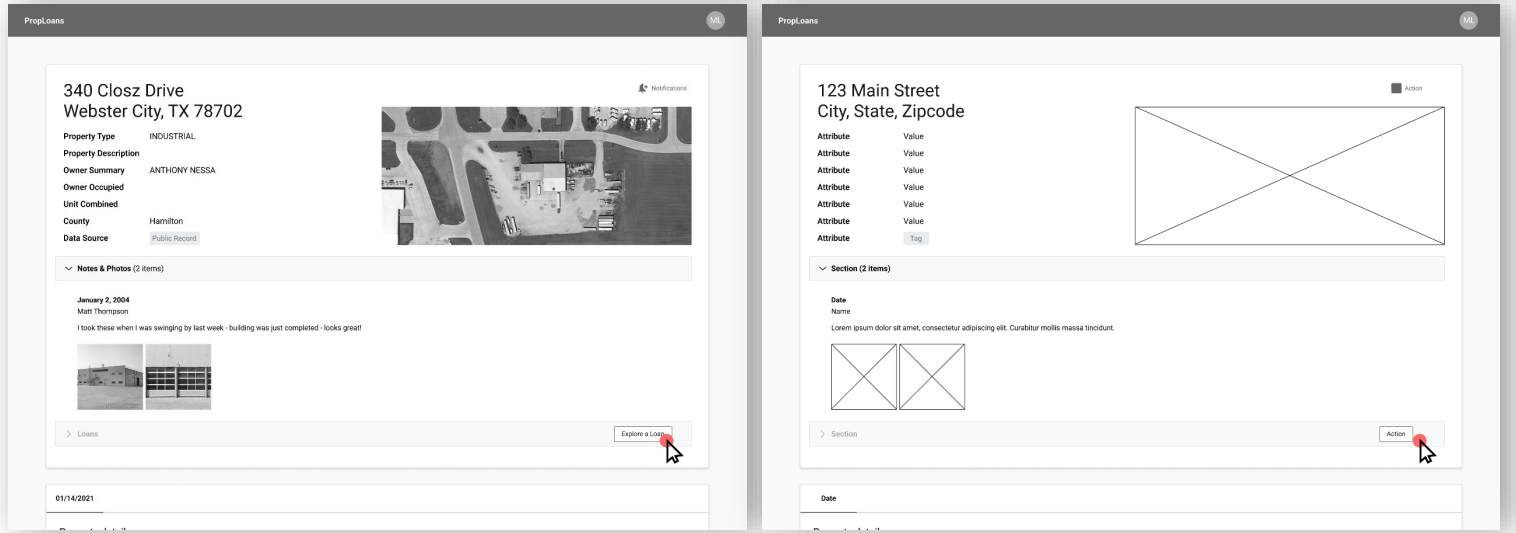
Showing interaction design work



Show real content

Use real words, icons, and images; don't use Lorum Ipsum (or the equivalent image placeholder), ever.

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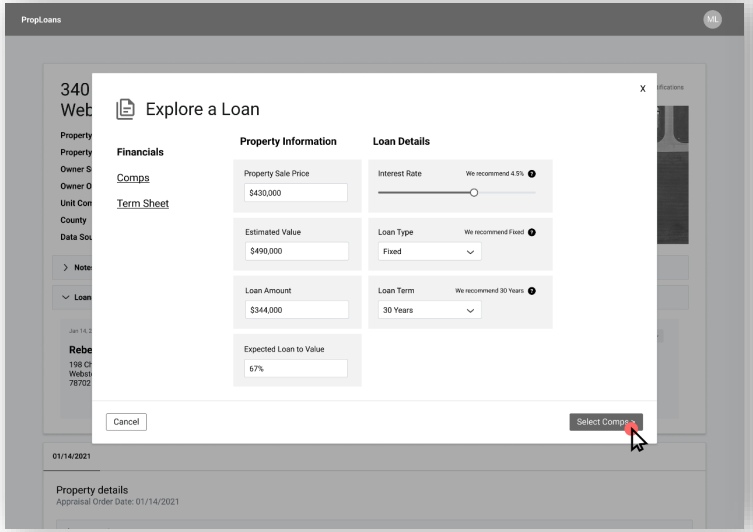
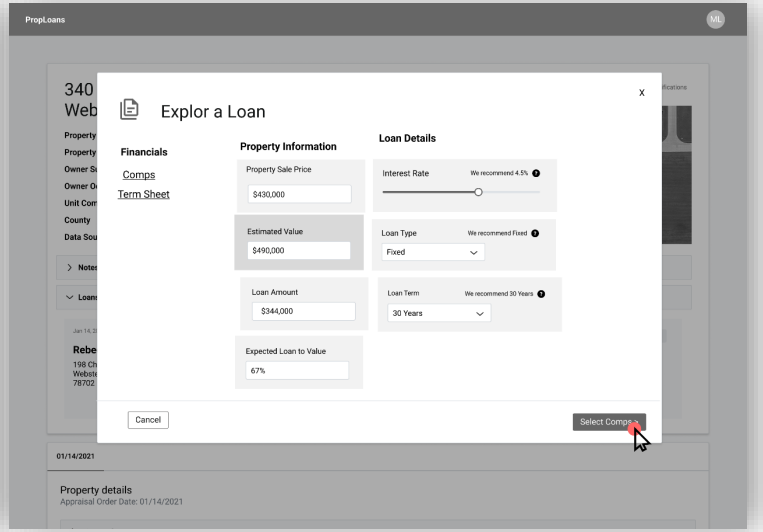
Showing interaction design work





Be precise

Alignment, padding, spelling, and other details matter.

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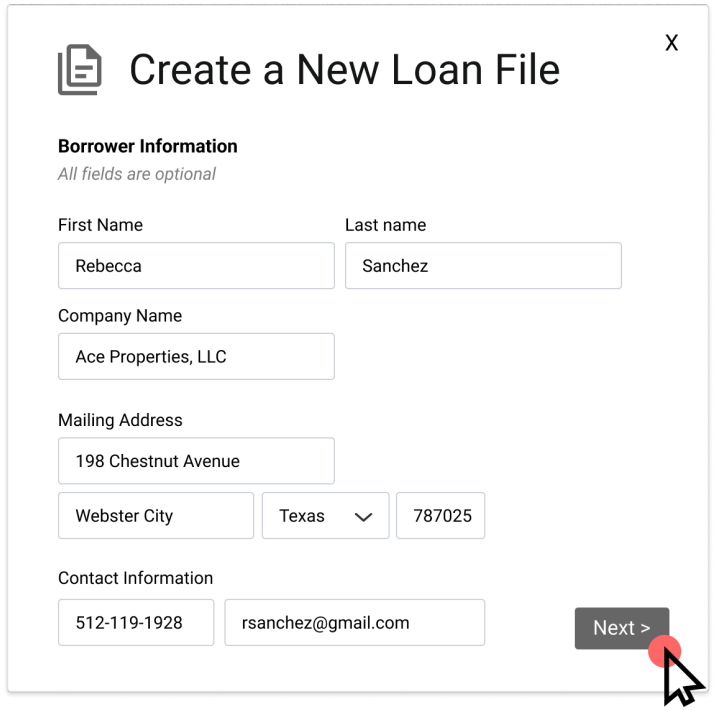
Showing interaction design work



Soften, and be realistic

Avoid “shouting”—real interfaces have a soft, approachable feel.

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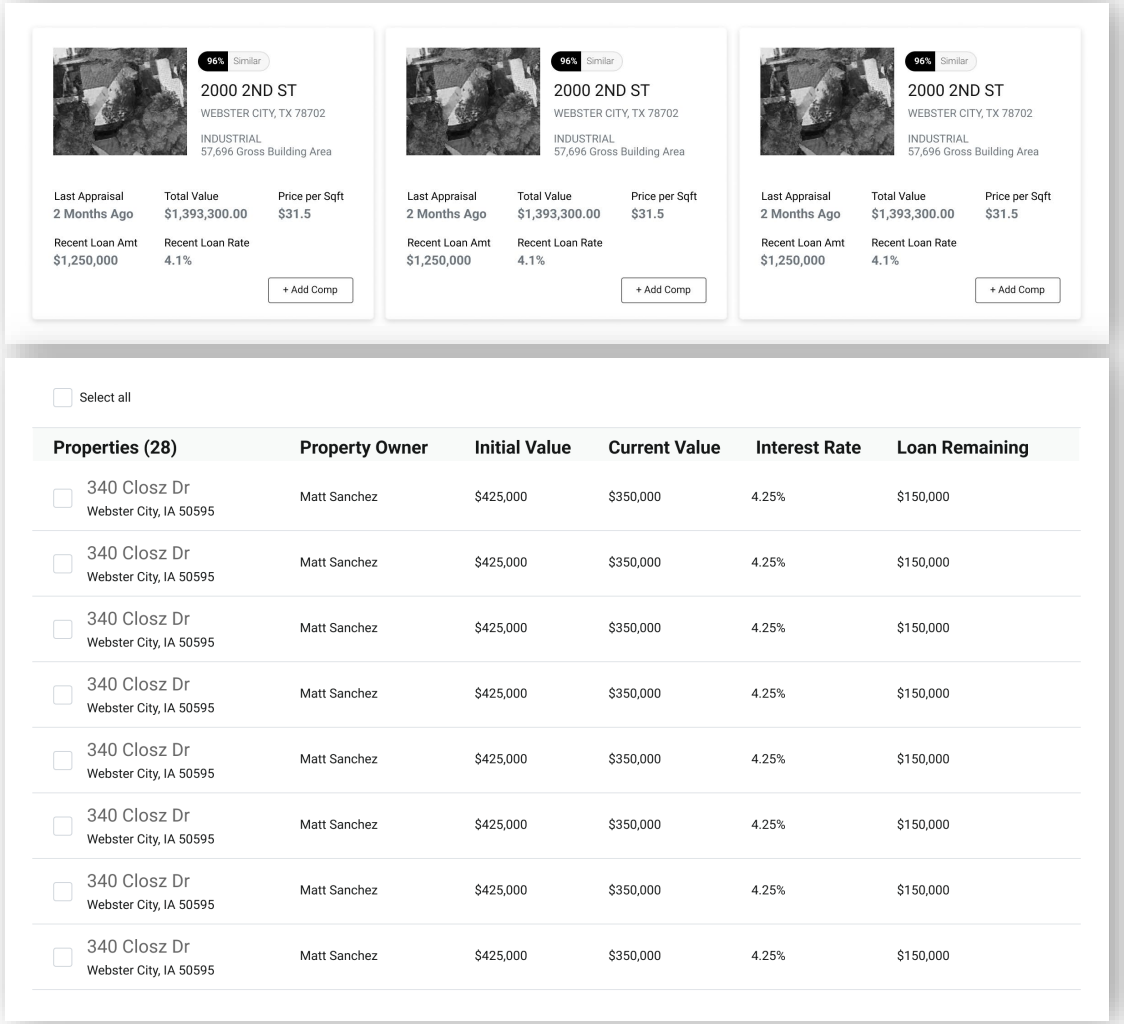
Showing interaction design work



Avoid lazy content

Don’t repeat rows and tiles; use unique elements for each item to reflect reality.

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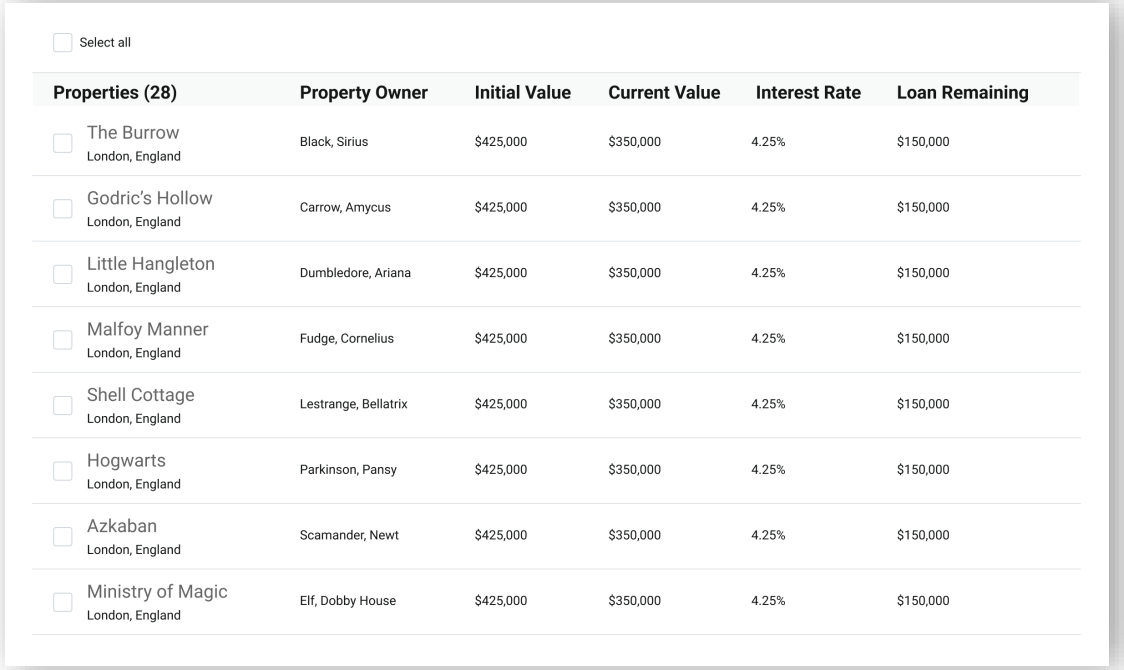
Showing interaction design work



Select all

Properties (28)	Property Owner	Initial Value	Current Value	Interest Rate	Loan Remaining
The Burrow London, England	Black, Sirius	$425,000	$350,000	4.25%	$150,000
Godric's Hollow London, England	Carrow, Amycus	$425,000	$350,000	4.25%	$150,000
Little Hangleton London, England	Dumbledore, Ariana	$425,000	$350,000	4.25%	$150,000
Malfoy Manner London, England	Fudge, Cornelius	$425,000	$350,000	4.25%	$150,000
Shell Cottage London, England	Lestrange, Bellatrix	$425,000	$350,000	4.25%	$150,000
Hogwarts London, England	Parkinson, Pansy	$425,000	$350,000	4.25%	$150,000
Azkaban London, England	Scamander, Newt	$425,000	$350,000	4.25%	$150,000
Ministry of Magic London, England	Elf, Dobby House	$425,000	$350,000	4.25%	$150,000

Avoid ridiculous content

Don't use fake content related to movies, cartoons, comic books, and other pop-culture content.

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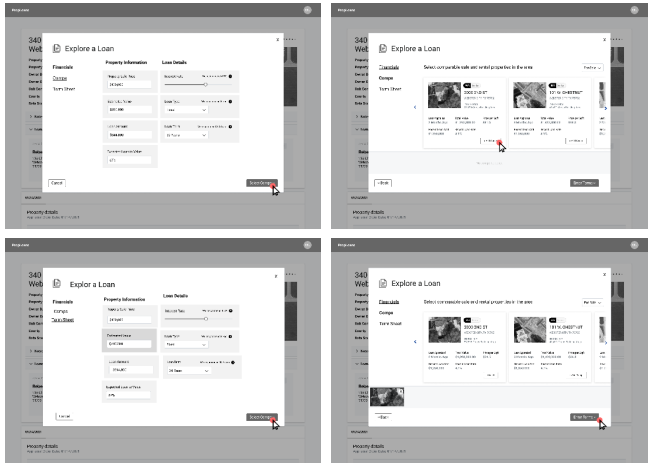
Showing interaction design work



Avoid tiny thumbnails

Make it big, bold, and proud.

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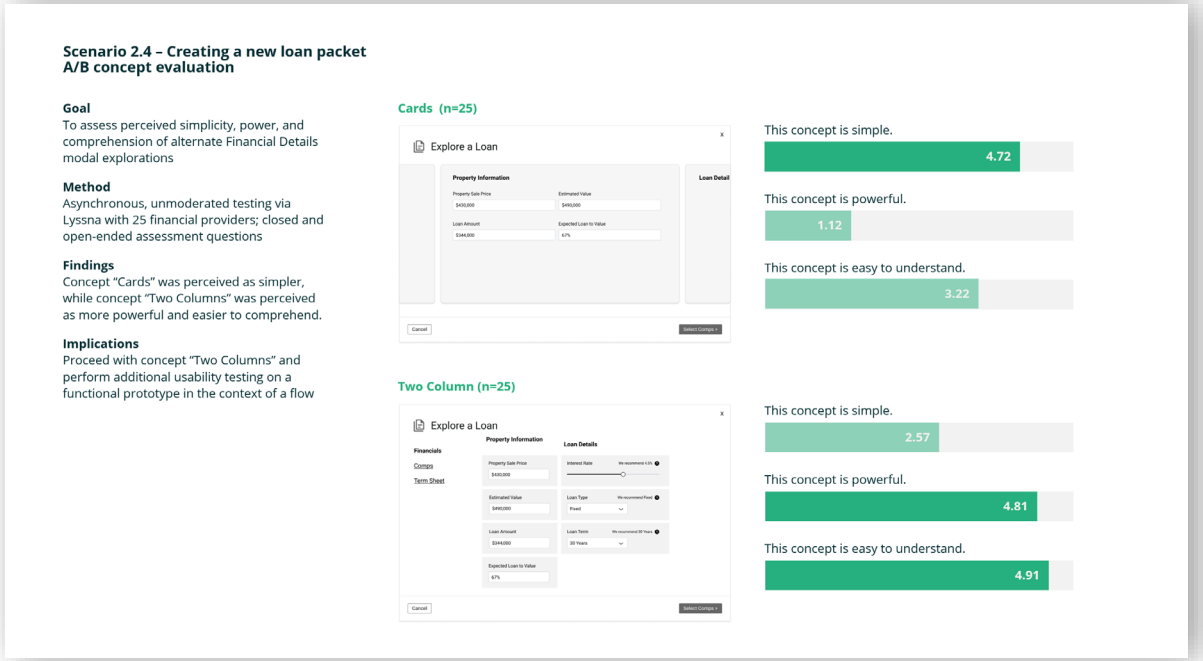
Showing interaction design work



Scenario 2.4 – Creating a new loan packet A/B concept evaluation

Goal
To assess perceived simplicity, power, and comprehension of alternate Financial Details modal explorations

Method
Asynchronous, unmoderated testing via Lyssna with 25 financial providers; closed and open-ended assessment questions

Findings
Concept "Cards" was perceived as simpler, while concept "Two Columns" was perceived as more powerful and easier to comprehend.

Implications
Proceed with concept "Two Columns" and perform additional usability testing on a functional prototype in the context of a flow

Show how user/concept testing influenced your design decisions

Demonstrate that, as part of your process, you continually gather feedback from users (either formally or informally). This might include A/B concept testing, formal think-aloud evaluation, or informal feedback and critique.

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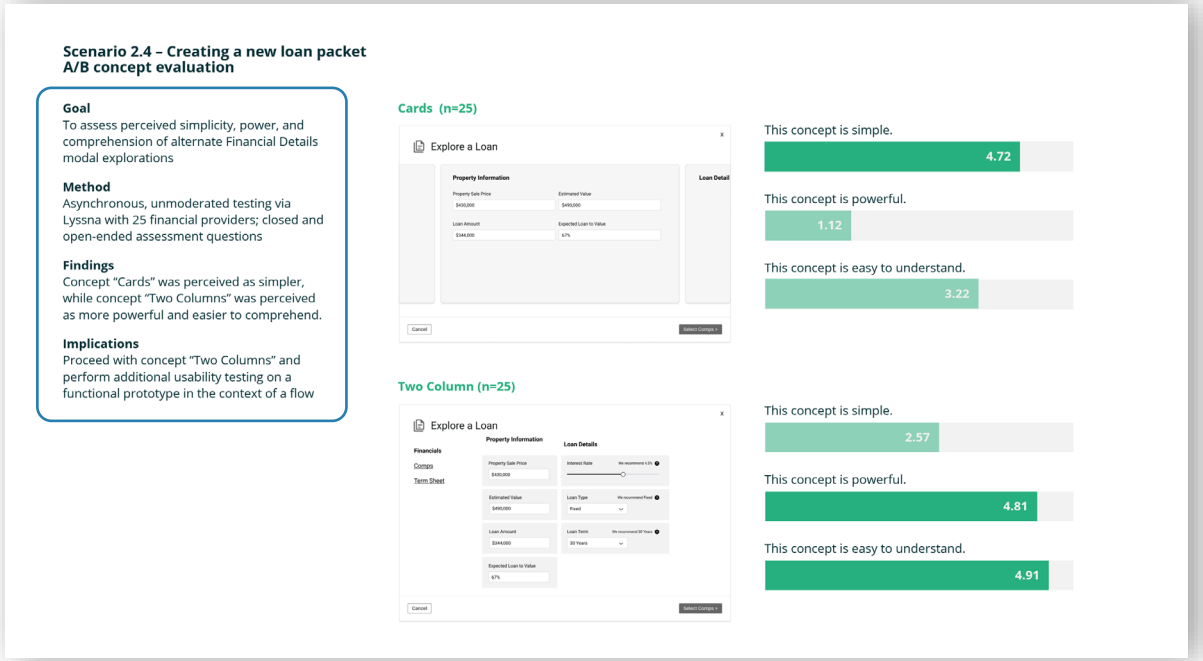
Showing interaction design work



Explain your testing goals and methodology

Make it clear that you understand how different approaches to testing lead to different types of understanding, and different levels of confidence in drawing conclusions.

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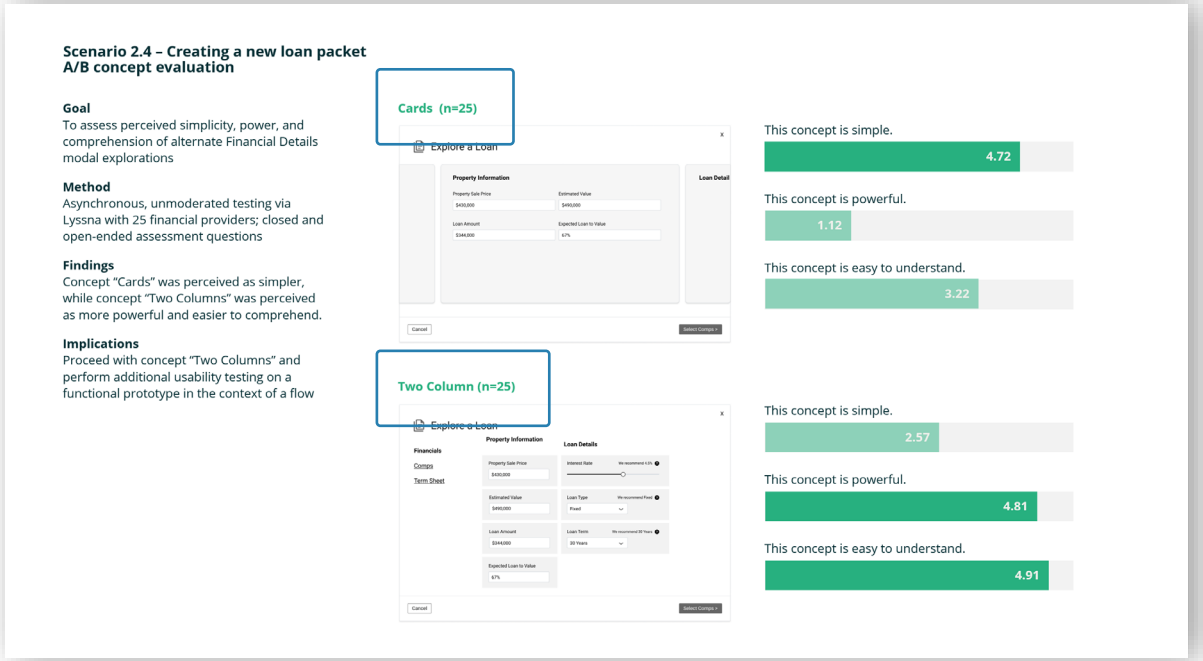
Showing interaction design work



If you draw quant-driven conclusions, include a sample size

Testing with a small sample is fine, but if you summarize your testing with a very fine level of specificity (x% preferred one over the other), be sure to explain the sample size you tested with so your audience can understand *confidence*.

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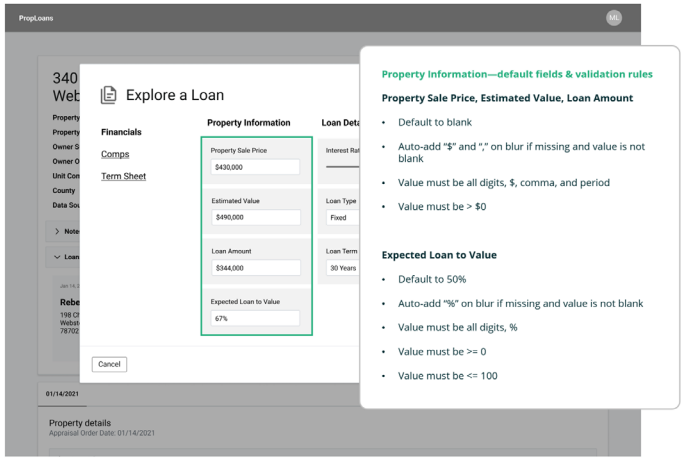
Showing interaction design work

Scenario 2.4 – Creating a new loan packet
Financial Details interaction specifications



Demonstrate that you can specify complex interactions with detail

Show that you can deconstruct an interface into parts that will drive implementation, and can discuss those parts in detail.

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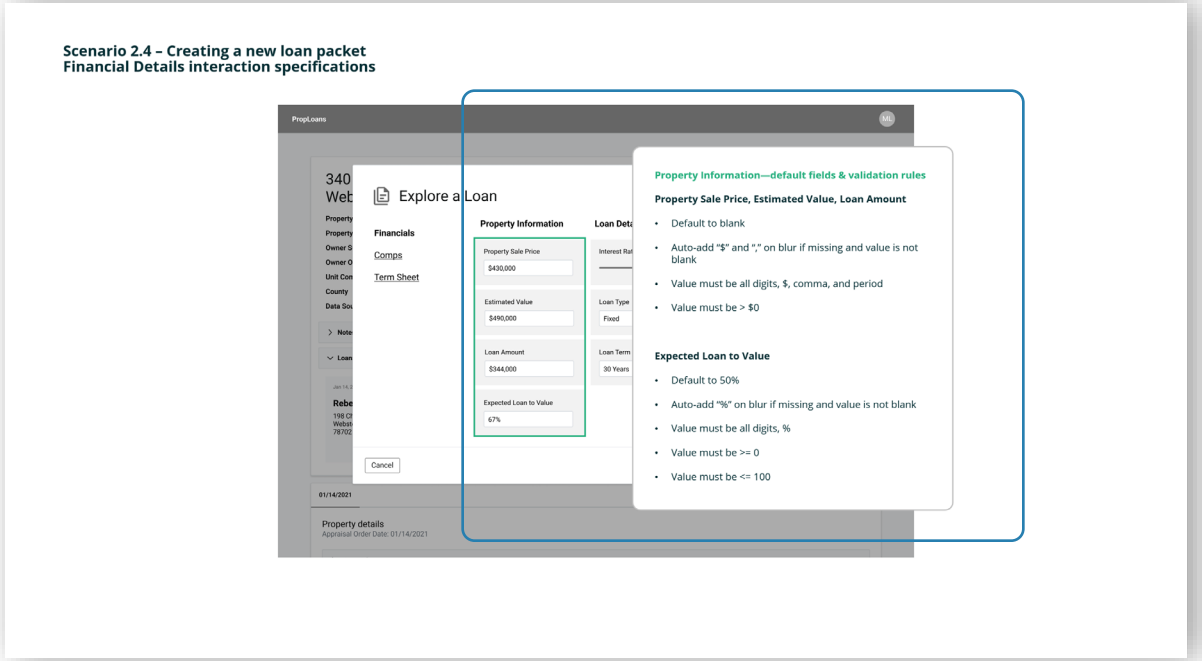
Showing interaction design work



Show that you are thinking about data

Include details about form validation, structured data elements, requirements, and other details that impact how a user's interactions will be structured for later use.

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Showing interaction design work

Best practices for an interaction design portfolio:

Show your screens in flows.

Highlight main user actions.

Show systems.

Show variations and explorations.

Show user feedback or testing.

Use real content.

Clean up the work.

Show it large.

Show, and tell.

Don’t show a persona.

Don’t show a competitive analysis.

Don’t show a literary review (unless you want an academic job).

Don’t show an illegible whiteboard sketch.

Don’t show empty wireframes.

Don’t show generic features.

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Reminder

The work needs to be good

+

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What goes in a visual design portfolio?

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Showing visual design work

If you are showing visual design, show how you created or used a design language system, and how you extended it.

For a mid-level role:

Baseline abilities to show

- Create moodboard-style visual explorations to explore and visualize different emotional qualities
- Design multiple visual design solutions to a problem, all within a single brand language
- Leverage a design language system effectively, staying within established guidelines and style
- Extend an existing visual system to include a new component or capability
- Document parts of a visual design with enough detail for development to implement it

Bonus points for...

- Create interactive, reusable, attribute-based components in Figma (or other tools)
- Extract or write starter css (or other visual design code) in support of development
- Create linear or interactive prototypes

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Showing visual design work

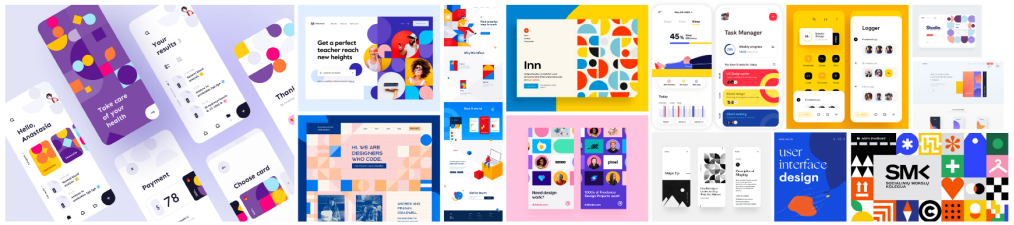
For example…

The Bauhaus Tenant

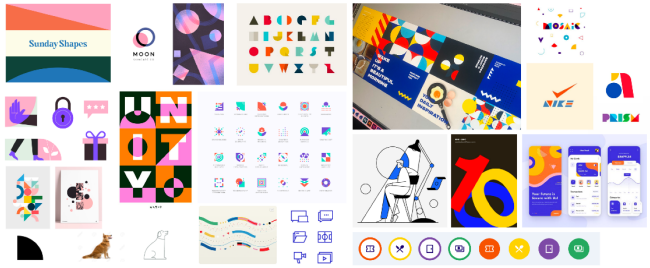
ATTRIBUTES

Fundamental
Modular
Courageous
Grounded
Driven
Adaptive
Innovative
Smart
Considerate
Confident

IMAGES & UI



ILLUSTRATIONS



COLORS

TYPE

MUSEOMODERNO-BOLD

NUNITO

Payments

Here you can view and schedule payments for your tuition, fees, meal plans, and more

Meal Plan

Here you can view and schedule payments for your tuition, fees, meal plans, and more

Key Card

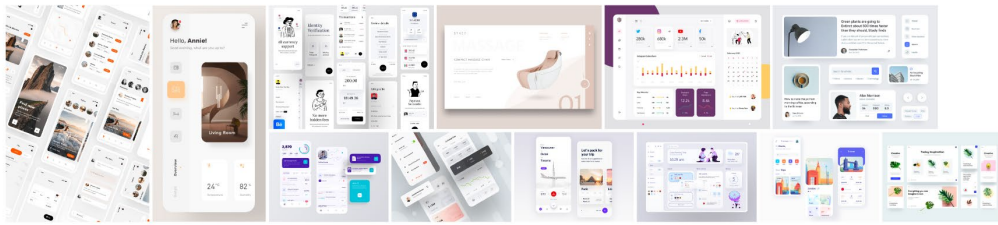
Here you can view and schedule payments for your tuition, fees, meal plans, and more

The Time Traveler

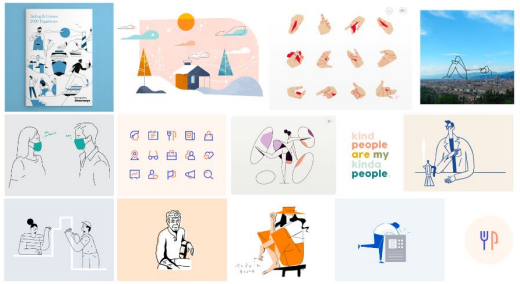
ATTRIBUTES

Pack light
Organized
Curious
Prepared
Humble
Mature
Minimalist
Friendly
Calm
Wise

IMAGES & UI



ILLUSTRATIONS



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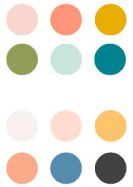


NOTES

Muted color palette with customizable accent colors

TYPE

QUICKSAND

RUBIK LIGHT

Payments

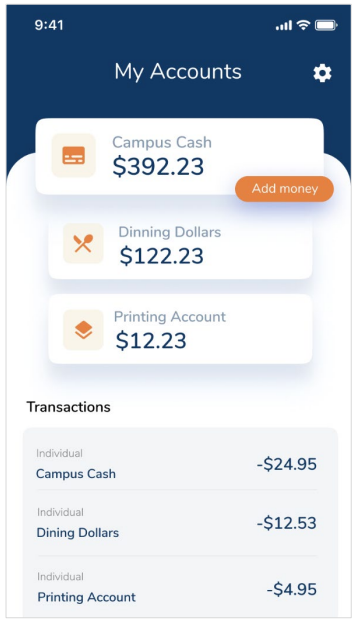
Here you can view and schedule payments for your tuition, fees, meal plans, and more

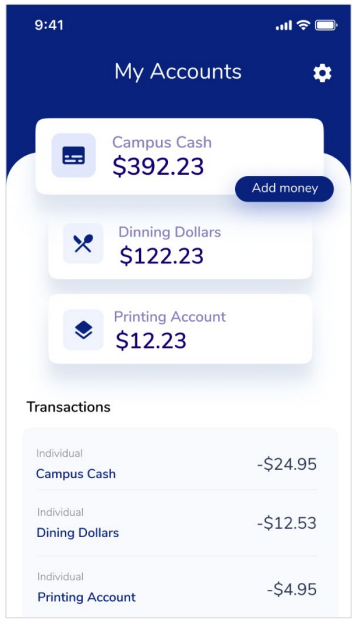
Meal Plan

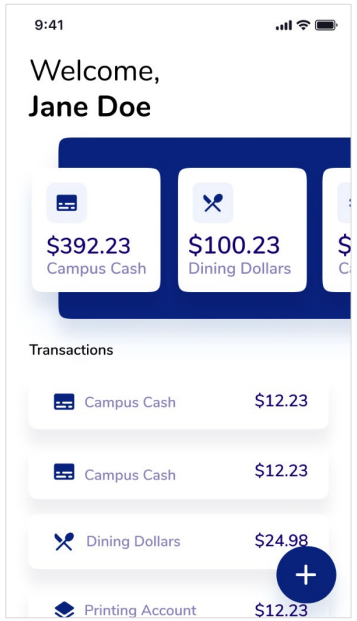
Here you can view and schedule payments for your tuition, fees, meal plans, and more

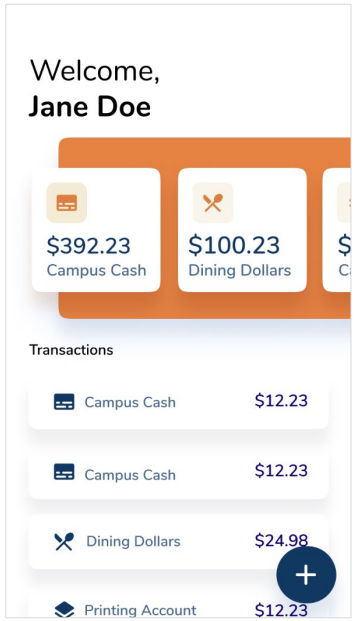
Key Card

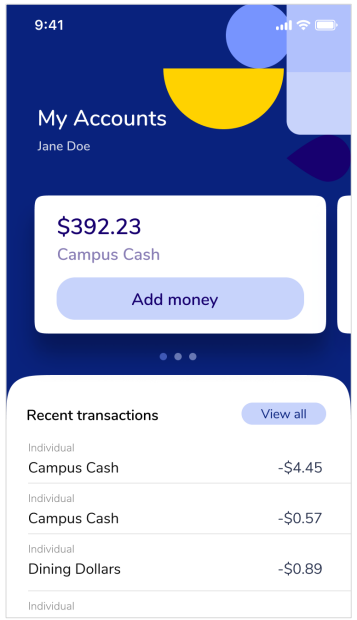
Here you can view and schedule payments for your tuition, fees, meal plans, and more


9:41
My Accounts
Campus Cash
$392.23
Add money
Dinning Dollars
$122.23
Printing Account
$12.23
Transactions
Individual
Campus Cash
-$24.95
Individual
Dining Dollars
-$12.53
Individual
Printing Account
-$4.95


9:41
My Accounts
Campus Cash
$392.23
Add money
Dinning Dollars
$122.23
Printing Account
$12.23
Transactions
Individual
Campus Cash
-$24.95
Individual
Dining Dollars
-$12.53
Individual
Printing Account
-$4.95


9:41
Welcome,
Jane Doe
$392.23
Campus Cash
$100.23
Dining Dollars
Transactions
Campus Cash
$12.23
Campus Cash
$12.23
Dining Dollars
$24.98
Printing Account
$12.23


Welcome,
Jane Doe
$392.23
Campus Cash
$100.23
Dining Dollars
Transactions
Campus Cash
$12.23
Campus Cash
$12.23
Dining Dollars
$24.98
Printing Account
$12.23


9:41
My Accounts
Jane Doe
$392.23
Campus Cash
Add money
Recent transactions
View all
Individual
Campus Cash
-$4.45
Individual
Campus Cash
-$0.57
Individual
Dining Dollars
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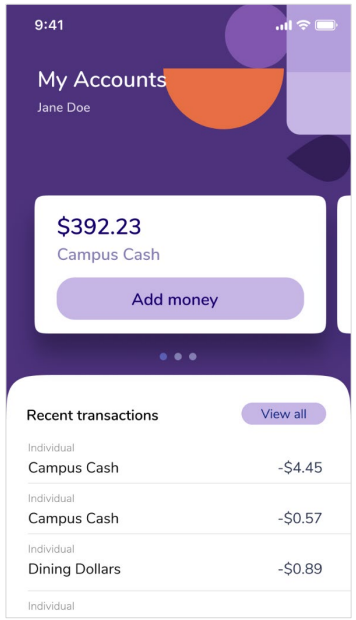
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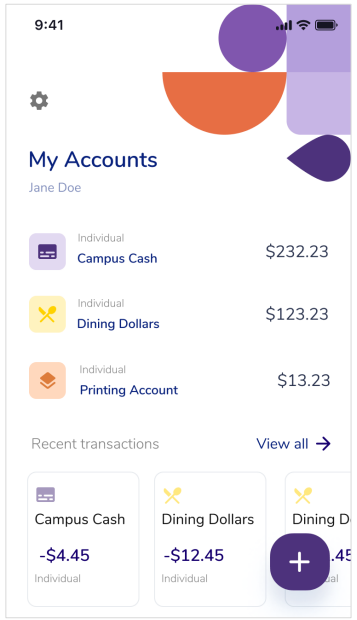
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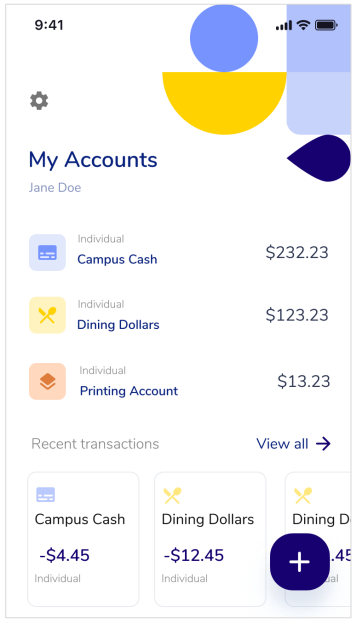
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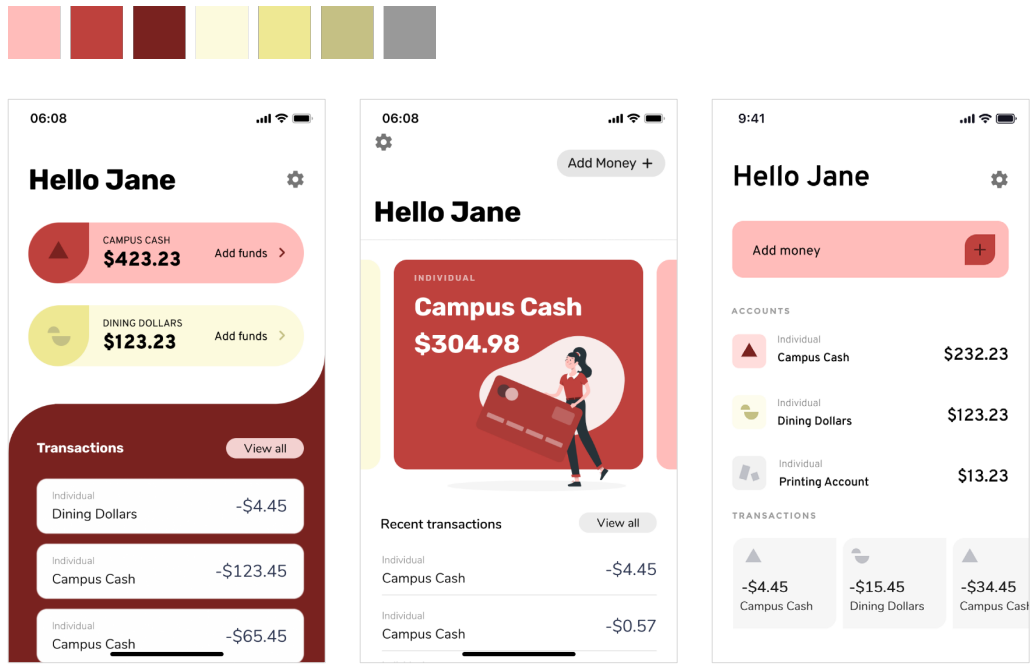
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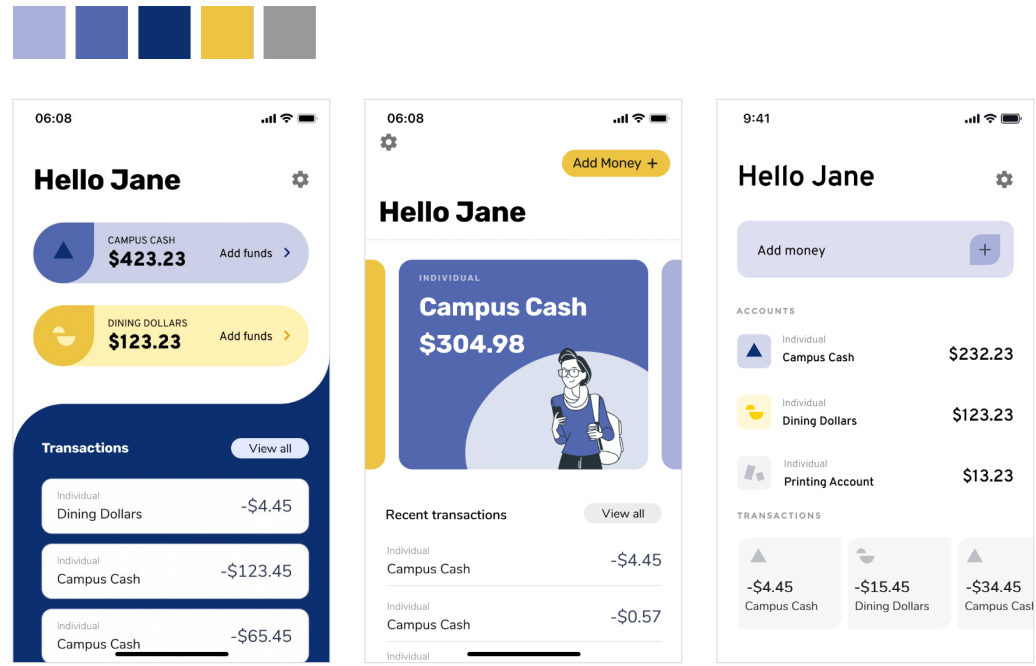
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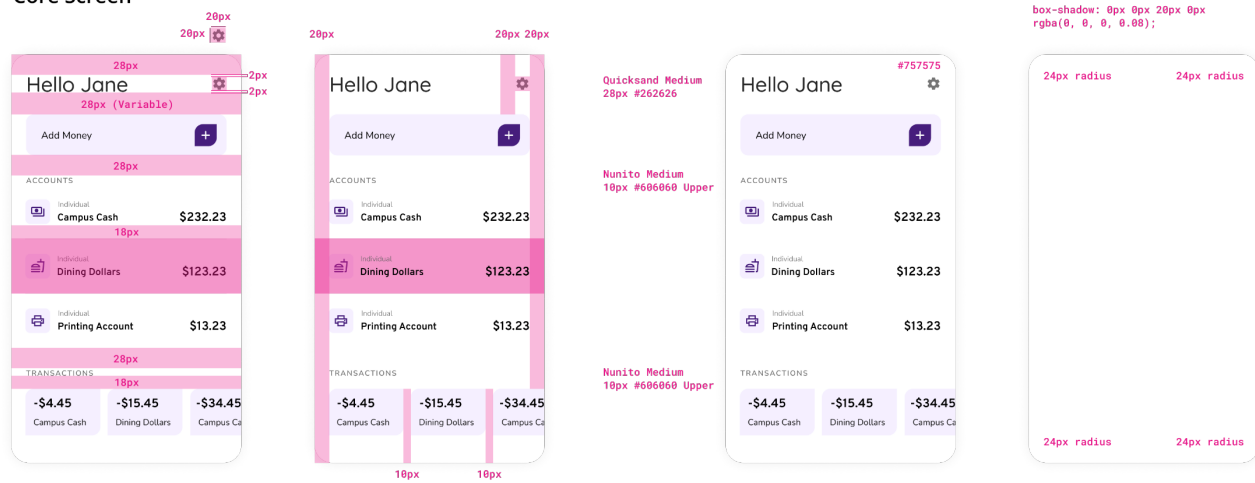
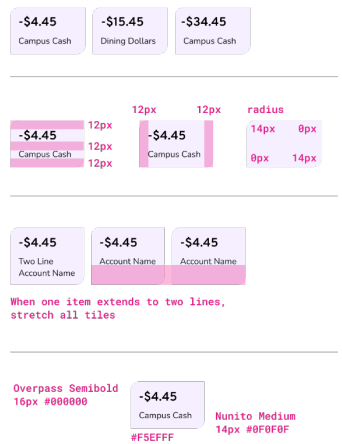
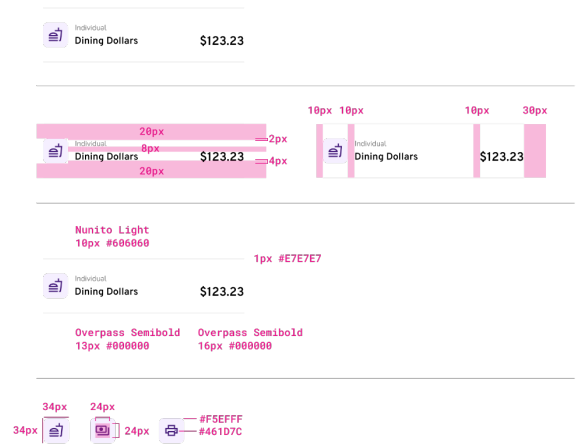
Core Screen



Transaction Tiles

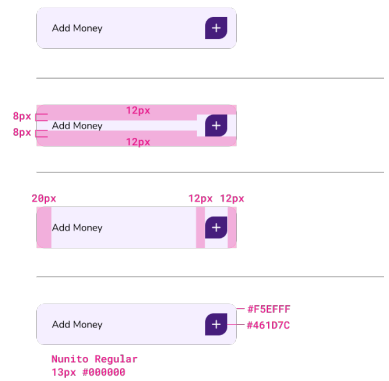


Account Tiles



Add Money Button

See Button guidelines for additional information



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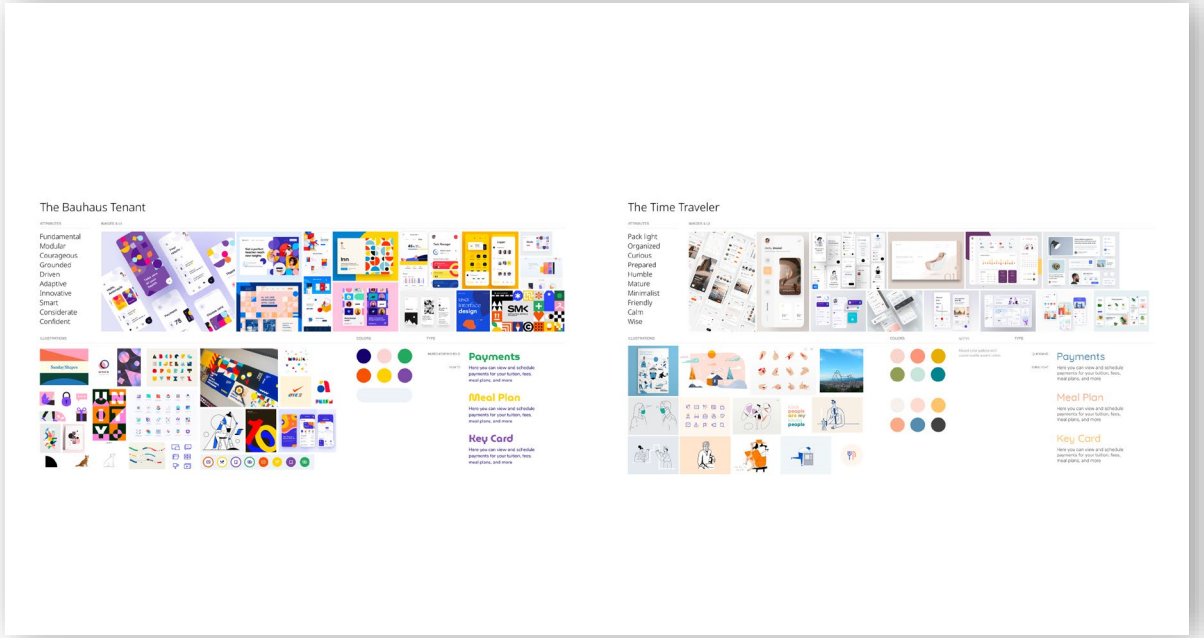
Showing visual design work



Show your ability to think about aesthetics broadly and abstractly

Artifacts like mood boards demonstrate that you think about visual language both in and out of an interface, and that your understanding of aesthetics is broader than just software design.

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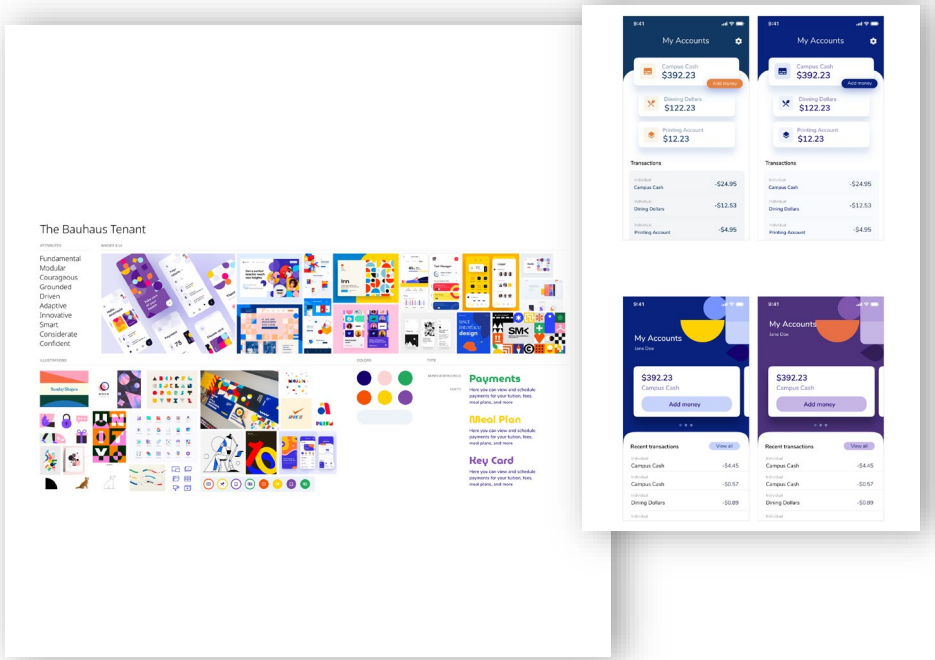
Showing visual design work



Show that you can leverage an abstract visual style in UI-specific ways

Make a clear connection between more abstract artifacts, like mood boards, and actual interface design work. Be able to show and describe how one led to the other, and how you adapted (and simplified) your broad exploration into something more appropriate for software.

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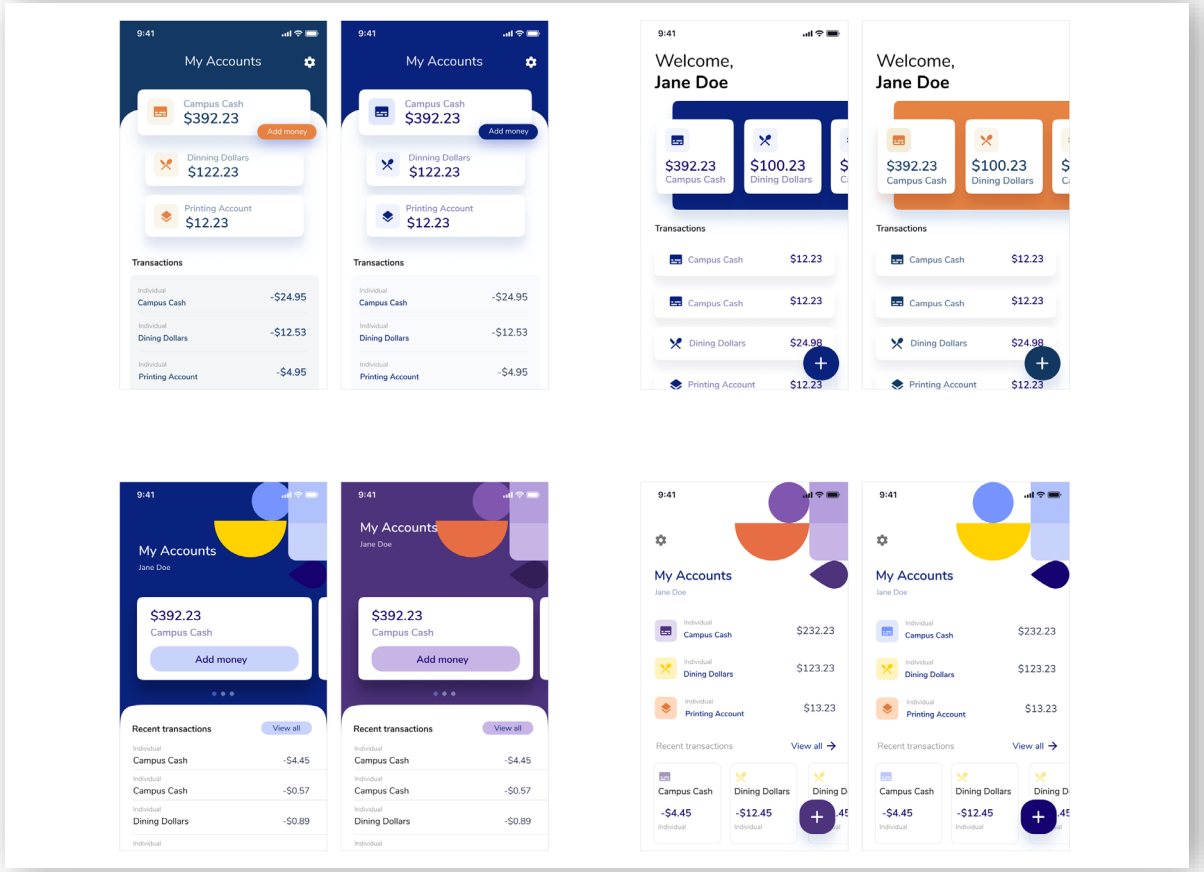
Showing visual design work



Demonstrate that you can explore variations around a single visual style

By showing multiple variations, you demonstrate that your process is exploratory and investigative: that you have a visual curiosity, and constantly work to find better solutions.

Curate your variations; take out the work that you don't feel exemplifies the visual language.

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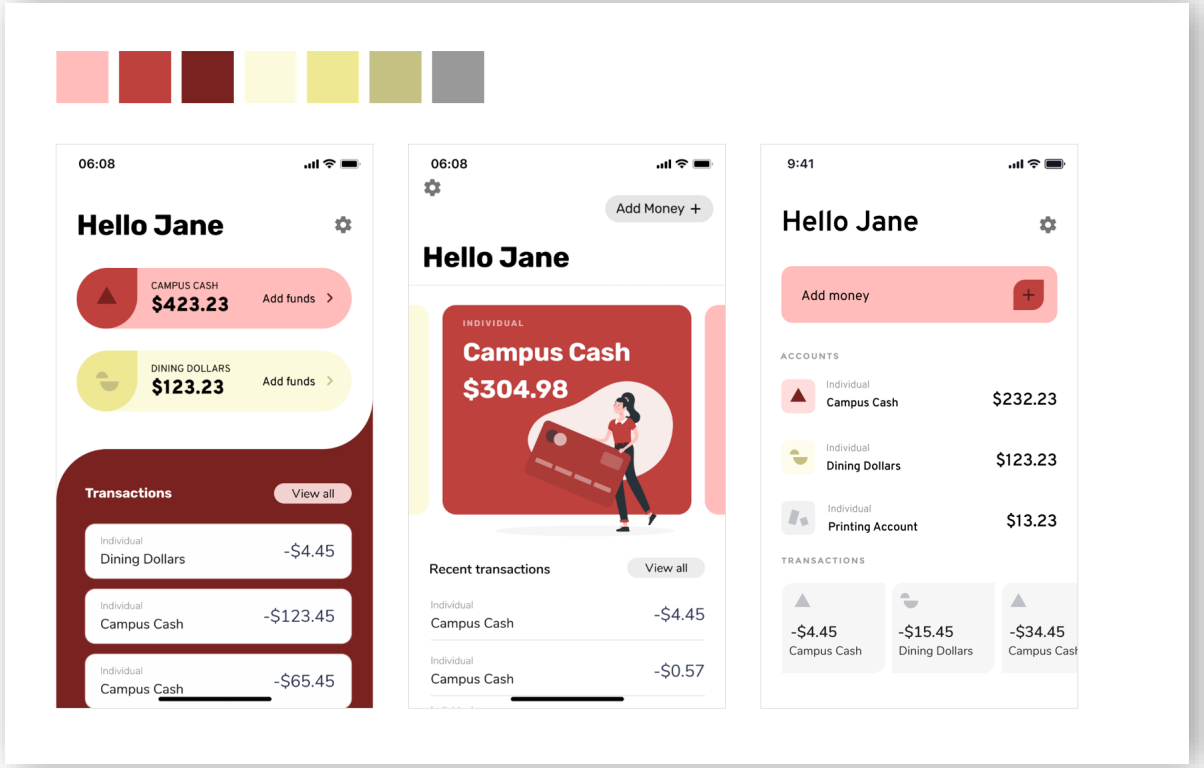
Showing visual design work



Show that you can "reign in" a visual approach to be *interface appropriate*

There are parts of a process that demand creative exploration, but as a product or interface becomes more real, the design should begin to formalize. Show that you can move from broad, liberal explorations to something more conservative and that speaks "software" better.

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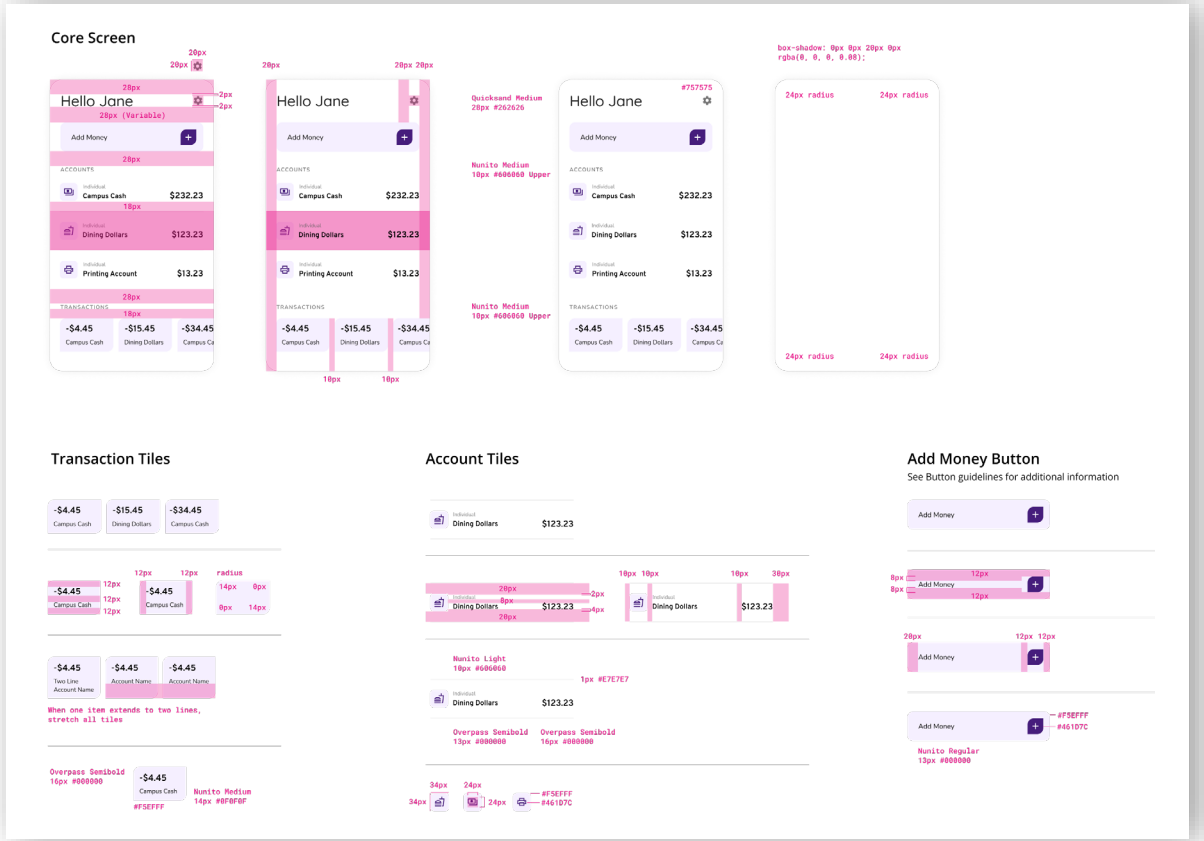
Showing visual design work



Demonstrate that you can be detailed, and do “boring” production work

Most product work is about bringing interfaces to production, and that work is often viewed by junior designers as being less exciting than blue-sky exploration. Show that you can do this type of work; more importantly, show that you are *willing* to do this type of detailed specifications.

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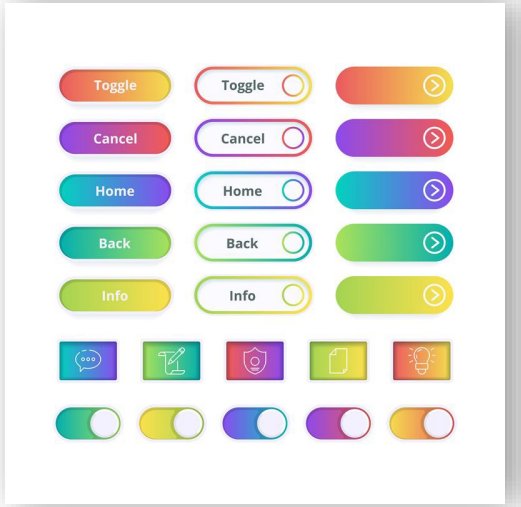
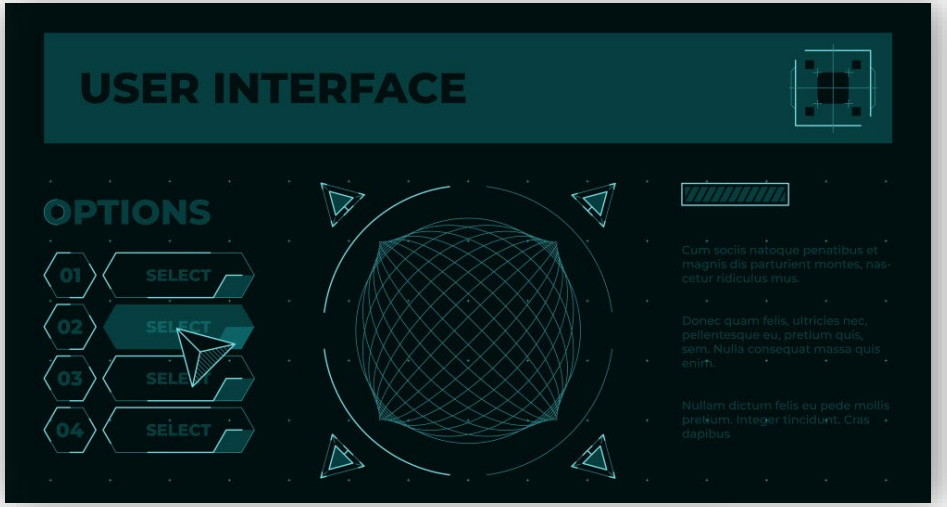
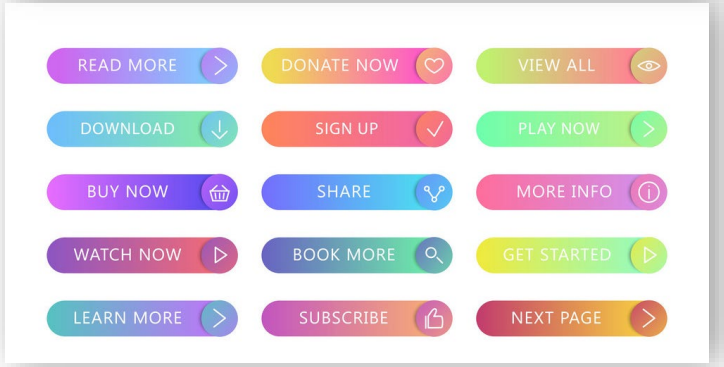
Showing visual design work







Be conservative

Avoid showing wild interface elements; showcase that you can be appropriate, not innovative in your use of color, type, composition, and iconography.

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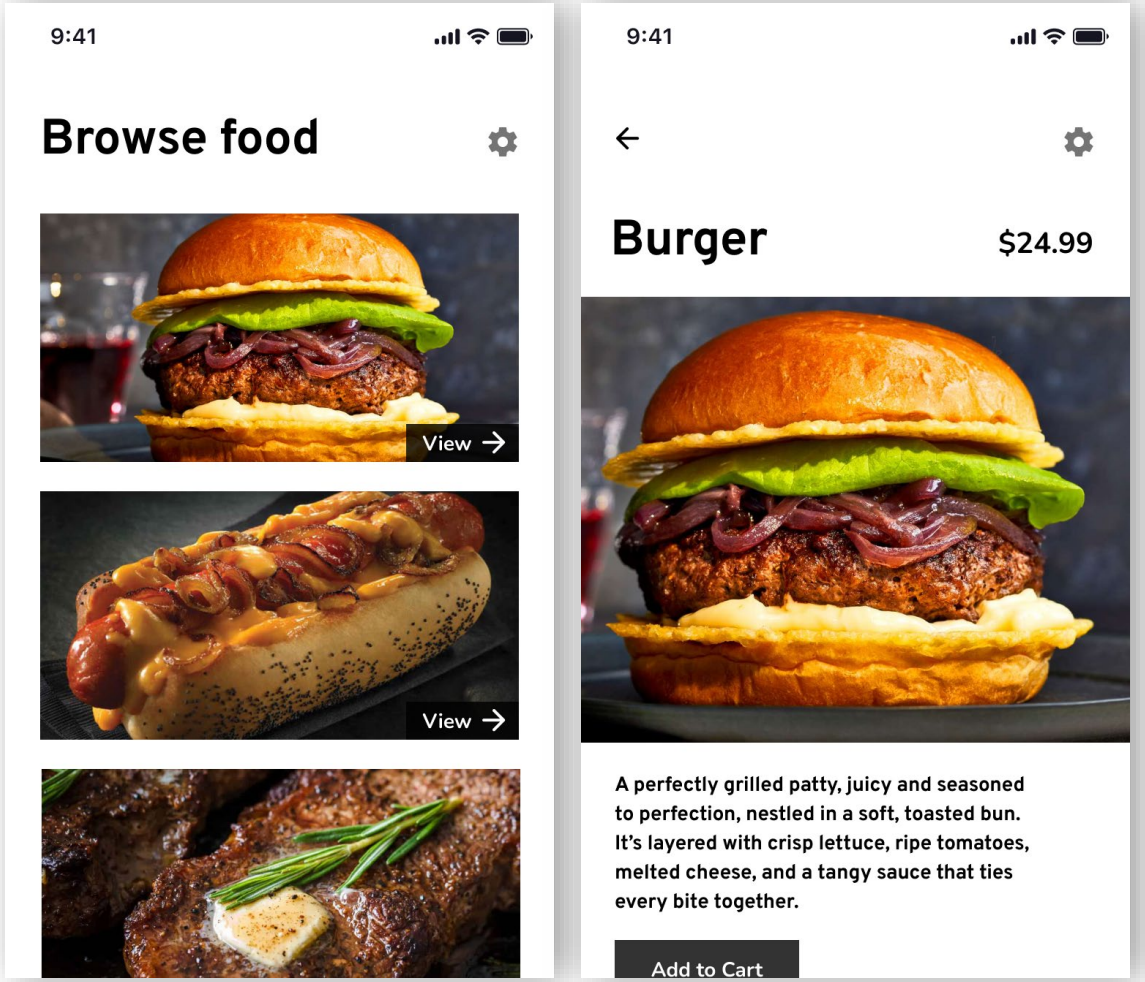
Showing visual design work



Don't lean on beautiful content

Beautiful photos of merchandise can make an interface look great—but a hiring manager is looking for your interface design abilities, not your ability to find great photos. Select work that showcases design, not art direction.

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Showing visual design work

Don’t show interfaces in ways a user will never see them

When you show screens, show them in a way that they will actually be encountered; a jaunty angle may be ok for a dramatic cover shot, but is distracting from your core skillset.

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Showing visual design work

Best practices for a visual design portfolio:

- **Show explorations, not just final work.**
- **Emphasize production work over concept work.**
- **Show how you used an existing system and extended it.**
- **Show how you used a system from one platform (mobile) and applied it on another (web)**
- **Highlight small but meaningful personal touches on an existing system.**
- **Show your ability to specify design decisions in a way that is clear to a technologist.**

Don’t show visual design work if you aren’t a visual designer!

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Reminder

The work needs to be good

+

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What *doesn't* go in a portfolio?

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What doesn't go in a portfolio?

Don't show hobbies and interests, except artistic skills—and only show those in brief.

- ✓ **Illustrations**
- ✓ **Paintings**
- ✓ **Sculpture**
- ✓ **Drawings and sketches**
- ✓ **Photography**

- ✗ **You on vacation**
- ✗ **You playing football**
- ✗ **You doing yoga**
- ✗ **Your cats and dogs**

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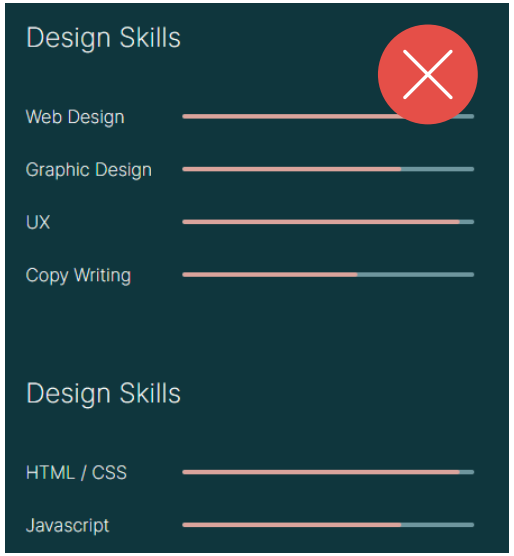
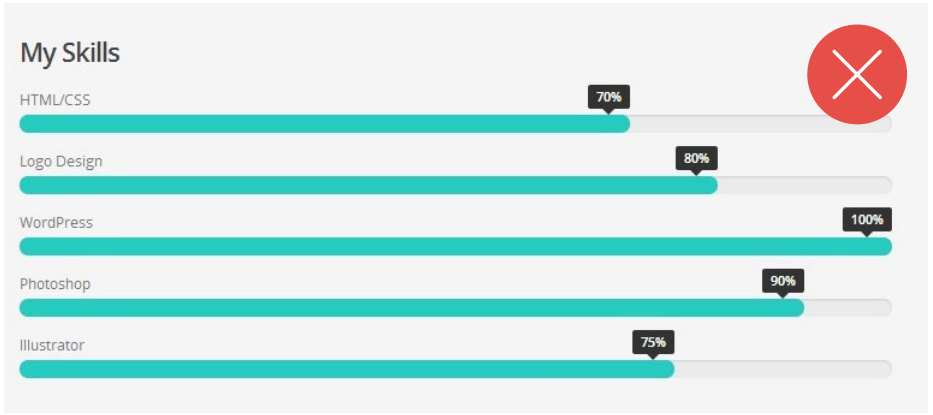
What doesn't go in a portfolio?

Don't show a "skill breakdown" or a "word cloud" or other design trash.





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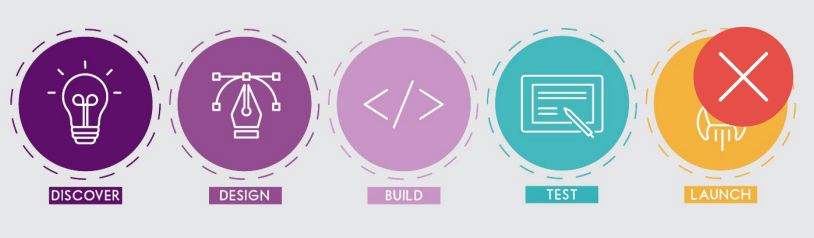
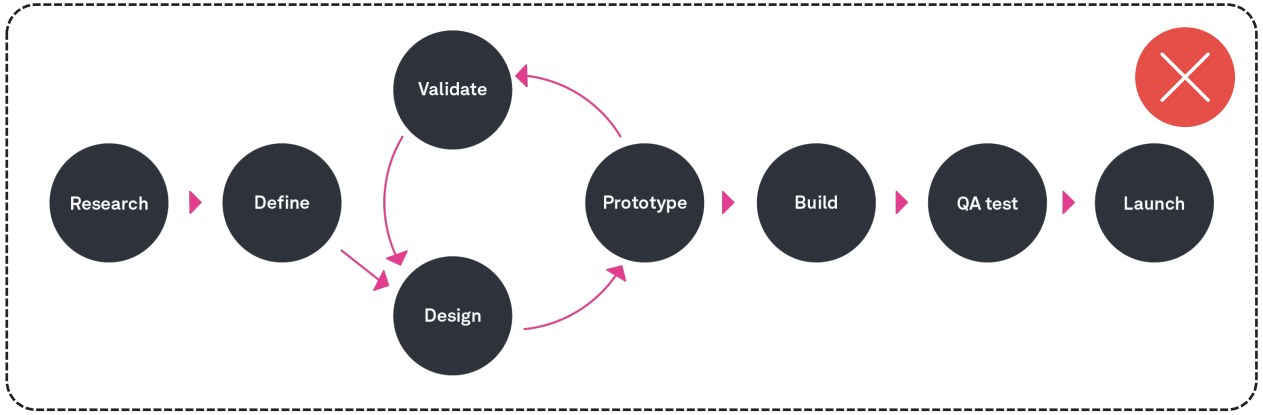
What doesn't go in a portfolio?

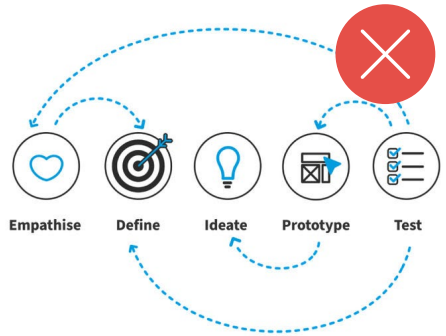
Don't show generic "process" visuals.

Discover. Define. Develop. Deliver.





5 Steps of UX



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Discussing your work

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Discussing your work

To *get* an interview, your work needs to stand on its own. When you *have* an interview, your work becomes a show. The interviewer is trying to assess...

The relationship you have with creativity

Design has become operational, and many interviewers are looking for an exception to this "follow the process" approach to design. They are looking for:

- Indications that you use, but also selectively ignore, methods and process
- Unexpected solutions to a problem
- "Raw" creativity: solutions that feel more artistic and less designerly (but as explorations, not necessarily as final solutions)

The way you present and discuss design

In a work environment, you are constantly presenting. An interviewer will be judging not only your work itself, but also how you:

- Set a context for a design problem
- Discuss your decisions and provide user-centered rationale for what you did and why you did it
- Frame a problem, including real and artificial constraints that impacted your solution
- Use, avoid, or explain jargon and methods

Your temperament

During your interview, you communicate the way you will behave if you were hired. An interviewer will be looking to see if you:

- Have a sense of humor
- Are thoughtful and methodical
- Are arrogant or humble
- Are inquisitive and curious
- Are self-aware
- Communicate a sense of passion for making and creating things
- Are cleaned up

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Discussing your work

Take charge.

Ask if there's a plan, and propose an approach.

I would like to start by showing some of my work. Is that okay with you?

I have several projects I would like to discuss, one that shows my process, and one that dives deep into wireframes and software. Do you have a preference for which I start with?

I see we have about 45 minutes. Does it seem reasonable for me to spend about 30 of that discussing my work, and leave time for questions?

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Discussing your work

Get to the work, quickly.

Set the context

Help your interviewer understand the backdrop of the project. Describe…

- Was it a team project?
- How long did you have to work on it?
- Why are you selecting it to show? What skills and abilities are you hoping to communicate?

Skip the *process preamble;* jump to the work itself

Unless your goal is to illustrate a generalist end-to-end process, avoid the parts of the process that aren't related to your *job search mission statement*.

Skip the diagrams of your process.

Jump into the work product: show the things you made.

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Discussing your work

Read your audience, and check-in frequently.

Establish key milestones to see if people have questions or comments

When you start, explain that you will stop at certain points to ask for feedback. Then, use those stopping points to check for questions, and also to see if you are using the time effectively.

- *Before I show the next part of the project, I want to stop and see if you have any questions or comments about what I just presented.*
- *I'm about halfway done with this project. Is it valuable for me to continue, or would you like to shift to see another project?*
- *Is there a part of this work that you would like to see in more detail?*

Observe detailed behavior, like eye movement or device use

Keep an eye on your audience, and adjust accordingly.

- Does it look like they are using other monitors and reading other things?
- Are they holding a mobile device and looking at it?
- Do they look bored? *Careful: bored, angry, and listening intently all look similar!*

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Discussing your work

Explain your decision making process.

Describe what you did, and why you did it

After setting the context, select a small part of your work, and dive into the details.

- Be specific; drill into very small design elements.
- Avoid naming methods (“I did the persona”). If you *do* mention a method, briefly explain what it is, and why you elected to use it.
- Explain why you are showing the parts of the work: *I wanted to share this with you because it shows how I think about designing complex forms that users have to fill out during a workflow.*

Emphasize the decision points you faced

When you solve a design problem, you continually encounter small detailed challenges. Show what these were, and explain how you resolved the challenges.

- How did you work through a problem?
- What role did users play in your decisions?
- What role did external critique play in your decisions?
- How many different things did you try? How did you select your final choice?

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Discussing your work

Offer to show the mess (and have it ready to show).

Have Figma open and organized (but not too organized)

- Name your layers and pages.
- Align your artboards and frames.
- Show explorations, not just a final design.
- Remove things that are really bad.
- Don’t overclean: leave some of your working process and show the way you think when the work is still raw and unpolished.

Clean your digital environment

- **Don’t share your whole screen;** just share the application you are using.
- If you have to share your full screen (seriously, don’t!) close your various chat tools entirely.
- If you are sharing a browser, hide your bookmark bar, use an incognito window so your search history doesn’t show up, and close your other tabs.
- Close other Figma files, particularly those with names of other clients or companies.

Don’t make your audience sick

Think about how your computer navigation will be received by someone who isn’t you. Careful; watch out for:

- Window and page switching too quickly
- Zooming in and out rapidly
- Panning all around a canvas

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Additional details and suggestions

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Additional details and suggestions

Make portfolio development easier by organizing and archiving your content *during a project*, not after it's over.

Organize your materials outside of a tool

- Keep a rigid, well-named folder and file structure during a project.
- Export png files periodically during your project, so you don't have to dig around in Figma or Miro to find the content you want.
- When you work collaboratively, make sure you have copies of all of the materials.

Build an outline as you build your project

- Keep a short written outline of a project as you work on it, bulleting out key decision points.
- Write short paragraphs that will remind you, later, of your design process and exploration.

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Additional details and suggestions

It is completely acceptable (and a really good idea) to redo your work after a project is over!

Redo the work

Your portfolio should showcase your current skillset and abilities, not the skills you had when a project started.

- You grow your skills and abilities with each project you work on; show your most recent capabilities, demonstrating that growth.
- Just because you learned it or did it doesn't mean you have to show it.

Make it yours

Even though you may have worked in a team, make the work your own by redoing things that were delegated to other people.

- A hiring manager isn't hiring a team—they are hiring you.
- Be honest in your discussion of the work; explain that, during the project, you weren't responsible for some things, but you decided to do them afterwards to show your abilities.
- Extending your impact after a project is over shows initiative to a hiring manager.

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Additional details and suggestions

Visual detail matters, even if you aren't a visual designer.

Your audience will judge the way things look—they can't help themselves

Even when a hiring manager is looking specifically for an interaction designer or researcher, they will be influenced by the way things look.

In practice, all design should look strong, because all design needs to be *sold*.

There's no expectation that everyone is a visual designer. But there is a strong expectation that every designer can attend to visual details.

Hit the simple stuff

- Leverage a consistent layout.
- Align objects precisely.
- Use simple, legible type, and a consistent type hierarchy.
- Limit your color palette, primarily to grey and one other color.
- Use subtle line weights for diagrams and wireframes.

Ask a visual designer for critique and help!

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In summary

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In summary

The work needs to be good

+

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Thank you!

jkolko@wonderfulnarrative.com