A Practical Guide to UX and UI Design Assessments

We know that User Interface and User Experience Design are not the same thing. They fulfill different roles within the Product Design lifecycle and require different skill sets. Traditionally, UX Design has been described as the 'Why' of the product and UI Design has been described as the 'How' of the Product. Often, nowadays, designers are required to have a combination of these skills in their arsenals. This serves as an outline on what skills hiring managers assess during the interview process and the common practical assessments they use to evaluate them.

Key Competencies

Applied Skills

1. UX Research

To effectively perform their jobs, designers must understand what their audiences want and how they view the world. This means mastering the ability to plan, conduct, and analyze findings from a variety of demonstrated research methods.

We are using UX research to be an umbrella term for both analytical user research and user testing. The former consists of identifying your target users, creating user personas and gathering data to make informed design decisions. The latter, user testing, involves creating wireframes and prototypes (more detail about that later) to test on your users, conducting card sorting sessions, performing website heatmaps and carrying out user interviews.

2. Information Architecture

Good Design requires that all information is logical and within reach. The organization and division of content is a crucial aspect of UX/UI design. Without proper sorting, most users would be lost and confused when navigating your website or app – rendering the real value of your product moot. After all, what good is an awesome feature if users can never find it?

To make sure you have your content well structured and presented to users in the best possible way from the website wireframe stage, you'll need to demonstrate and be able to explain organisation systems (hierarchical/sequential/matrix), labelling systems and navigation systems.

Pro-Tip:
Pick up your phone and look at any of your apps and it will be filled with perfectly crafted words. Microcopy is also a powerful tool to create a good experience for users – and it comes with it's own tricks and hacks. UX writing also deals with creating copy that really speaks to your users' mental models and helps them to understand your product better.

3. Wireframing

The best way to tell if wireframes are hitting the mark is to take a step back and ask this question: When I share my wireframes, are the conversations about the execution OR about the experience I'm creating?

If your creative brainstorms and discussions are getting stuck on "how your wireframes look", you may be missing the mark. And usually, it boils down to one or more of these three problems:

- Your wireframes are executed poorly (Keep them simple, avoid colour or use it intentionally, use actual content and don't wire alone!)
- You failed to set clear expectations with the client about how you are using wireframes as a tool to drive the conversation about design solutions.
- Your wireframes are too polished and not solution-oriented.

4. Prototyping

If you want to convince people of your design acumen, you need to get good at prototyping. App prototyping is a great way to understand key functionality of your design before being built by developers. It is perfect for iterating those sparks of genius that come to you in the middle of the night and just for getting an idea of the direction your app or website may be going. Using a prototyping tool can be a great way to impact investment, too. They allow you to test those assumptions you arrived at from your user research, then validate them with subsequent user testing. It's a great way to get buy-in from stakeholders and managers.

Most importantly, though, both wireframing and prototyping are a no-brainer when it comes to design as they help you catch mistakes before things go South and you have a lot of expensive coding to fix.

5. Visual Communication

No designer will get very far without being fully versed in visual communication. On top of that, 65% of the population are visuall-orientated learners! It's how one creates interactive prototypes and mockups that will have a real impact on users.

You need to demonstrate aptitude in Visual Design Principles (Typography, Shape, Colour) and the ability in everything from white space visual hierarchy, to making elements look clickable and minimizing the need for written instructions.

7. Interaction Design

It's one thing to create an aesthetically pleasing design but it's another thing to understand how users will interact with that design. Interaction design is more concerned with how a user interacts with a product or service, which is why interactive prototypes are a great tool to combine when iterating interactions.

A great way of gaining an understanding of how users interact with your product is, again, by gaining insights into their mental models. You can do this by observing how they use your product or prototype or even through analysing how they use competitor's products (competitor analysis). Interaction design is a UI/UX designer skill which means more than being able to add in fancy animations. It means knowing things like whether your users expect to have to scroll, rather than swipe through a list.

8. UI Design Systems

The UI Design System is an incredibly important element of the Product Design Lifecycle. The deliverable i.e The Style Guide serves as an instruction manual for the frontend development team to implement the results in a prototype of a graphic interface and finally test it. They're also important to track progress. The characteristics of a good Design System include:

- Users navigate intuitively through an interface that is uniform across the product
- Users become familiar with the product's design language
- It includes moodboards, colour palettes, type scale, icons, buttons, sliders, progress bars and complex elements like dropdowns, tags and pop-ups

9. Web Development

One third of designers have engineering training, so the lines are blurring between designer and developer. This doesn't mean you need to be a Full Stack Web Developer but the better your understanding of software development, all the better for the product and the users.

Having knowledge of languages/frameworks such as HTML, CSS, JavaScript and jQuery can help you understand what's possible from a technological perspective and help ease the transition between design-developer handoff.

<u>Common Practical Assessments</u>

1. Portfolio Review

You will be asked to explain about your past experiences, specifically about some of your portfolio pieces. Sometimes, the interviewers have already visited your portfolio, but many times (because they are busy) during the interview might actually be their first time taking a look at your portfolio. This also could happen when the recruiter does the initial screening and passes onto the interviewers.

If you are worried about how to present your portfolio, it's a good idea to focus on your best projects which typically are the ones that are firstly listed on your website or are highlighted.

Since other projects that you didn't anticipate to be asked could also be brought up, you should be prepared to present all of them and be confident with your presentation.

So, how do you then start discussing your project when asked? Firstly, ask the interviewer if he/she has any preferences in how they want to go through, in chronological order or are there any specific part they would want to hear about? Make sure you cover:

- Identifying the problem domain
- Your/your team's approach
- A brief introduction to your solution and then move onto explaining each step
- Depending on the interviewer, questions may be specific parts of your process. Questions that are often asked:
    - Your role within the team
    - Constraints/obstacles/hardships you and your team went encountered
    - How research made its way into design
    - What do you feel proud / not proud about
    - What would you do differently or if you had more time, what would you do with the project

2. Case Studies

Design professionals can put too much emphasis on learning how to make deliverables, and not enough on articulating their design decisions. This is what you need to do when completing practical assessment as part of an interview process. When approaching your design case studies, think like a lawyer. Because how do lawyers win legal cases? With strong communication, and even stronger evidence.

Anatomy of a case study

Here's what you should include in your case study:

1. Overview
2. Problem statement
3. Users and audience
4. Roles and responsibilities
5. Scope and constraints
6. Process and what you did
7. Outcomes and lesson

My Awesome UX Case Study Title

Introduction

What Happened

Conclusion

Overview	Quick summary of the company or product. Provides crucial context.
Problem Statement	Why did this project need to happen? Why was the goal or desired outcome?
Users & Audience	Who was the user? Help the reader understand who would use the product.
Roles & Responsibilities	What did you do? Who else worked on this? How big was the team?
Scope & Constraints	Any unique or limiting factors such as budget, timeline, time zones, etc?
Process & What You Did	A step-by-step run down of what you did and why you did it.
Outcomes & Results	What happened in the end? Goals achieved? Lessons learned?

(from Sarah Doody's UX Portfolio Formula™)

How to write your case study

As you write your case studies, don't worry about length. Get it all on paper first. As you transition your written case studies to something more visual, you will edit them down and also consider how some of the text can be communicated visually.

Step 1. Give your project a title

The big mistake that people make is not giving the project title enough detail when a strong title can give context for the project.

GOOD: Pick 'n Pay user research for mobile app checkout
OK: Pick 'n Pay user research
BAD: Pick 'n Pay Depot

Step 2. Write an outline

Lay out your thoughts before you start giving up the details. An outline's purpose is to help you understand the "big picture" of your project, so you can decide how to structure your case study or if the project is big enough to merit more than one case study.

Start your outline with the seven sections listed above, and start filling in bullet points under each section. Don't worry about sentence structure; just write and get it out of your head. If you've been documenting your projects as you work on them, then you may have some of this already written.

Step 3. Fill in the details

Now that you have an outline and you see the big picture, you can start filling in details.

Give the "Process and what you did" section the bulk of your effort. This is where you'll document the steps you took, just like documenting science experiments in high school.
You should be answering these questions:

- What did you do? For example, what research method did you use?
- Why did you do it? For example, why did you choose that research method?
- What was the result? For example, did you achieve your research goals?
- What did you learn? For example, what would you do differently next time?

Continuing with our (completely fictional) Pick 'n Pay example:

BAD: "We did usability testing on the checkout of the Pick 'n Pay mobile app."
Why is this weak? Because it only tells the reader what you did. It doesn't address why you did it, what happened, and what you learned.

GOOD: To evaluate the new checkout on the Pick 'n Pay mobile app, we relied on usage metrics in conjunction with 8 usability tests. This allowed us to gain deeper understanding through combining both qualitative and quantitative information. Although users were able to get through the checkout more quickly, they continued to struggle with the shipping section. Discussions with users revealed that often, products in one order have different shipping addresses, which was possible, but difficult in the current checkout.

This version is much stronger because it goes beyond just talking about what was done. Providing this depth is what will set you apart; articulating your design decisions and process will help position you as a more mature and thoughtful professional.

Step 4. Write headlines

At this point, you're probably thinking something like "Who would ever read this novel?" Which is a good point. That's why the next step will help you start to distill everything down so that you are focusing on the key highlights of the story.

The best way to do this is to pretend that you have to write your case study only in tweets. It sounds crazy, but it works.

For each section of the outline we're working with, write a single headline or sentence—except for the Process section, where you'll be focusing your energies. For the Process section, you'll want to have a headline for each step. Using our previous fictitious Pick 'n Pay user research example, some of the headlines for the Process section might be:
- What type of research you did and why you did it. Example: Analytics revealed customers struggled, and sometimes abandoned, checkout at the shipping section. To understand why, we conducted eight usability tests.
- Findings from the research. Usability tests revealed that business customers, versus residential, had different shipping needs, which were not being addressed in the current checkout experience.
- Impact of research on product development. We prototyped two new versions of the checkout, allowing customers to choose shipping addresses on a per-product basis.

Identify the most important points of the case study—which will then become headlines. A good way to test whether or not you have strong headlines is to ask yourself if someone would understand the main points of your project by skimming the headlines. If not, then re-write your headlines—because if you want interviewers/hiring managers to understand your project quickly.

Useful UI/UX Links:

- https://www.offerzen.com/blog/expert-guide-on-how-to-make-a-badass-ui-ux-portfolio
- https://www.offerzen.com/blog/how-i-ux-my-ux-presentations
- https://www.offerzen.com/blog/how-to-avoid-fake-ux-opportunities-spotting-interview-red-flags
- https://www.offerzen.com/blog/we-need-a-standard-developing-ui-design-patterns-and-best-practices

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Resources:

- https://www.justinmind.com/blog/10-must-have-skills-for-ux-designers/
- https://lesley.edu/article/critical-ux-skills
- https://uxplanet.org/how-to-prepare-for-your-first-ux-interview-72358bd2238c
- https://www.invisionapp.com/inside-design/how-to-write-a-ux-case-study/
- https://www.casestudy.club/case-studies
- www.uxportfolioformula.com
- https://www.altexsoft.com/blog/uxdesign/ux-vs-ui-design-stages-participants-roles-and-skills/
- https://medium.muz.li/creating-a-ui-component-design-system-step-by-step-guide-5c18b5a2f529#:~:text=A%20UI%20design%20system%20is,it%20as%20an%20Instruction%20manual.