



2

Writing is designing

Words and the user
experience



Michael is a **Senior UX Architect** at **Allstate** focused on **Conversation Design**.

Andy is a **UX Content Strategy Manager** at **Adobe**.

*We use **he/him** pronouns.*

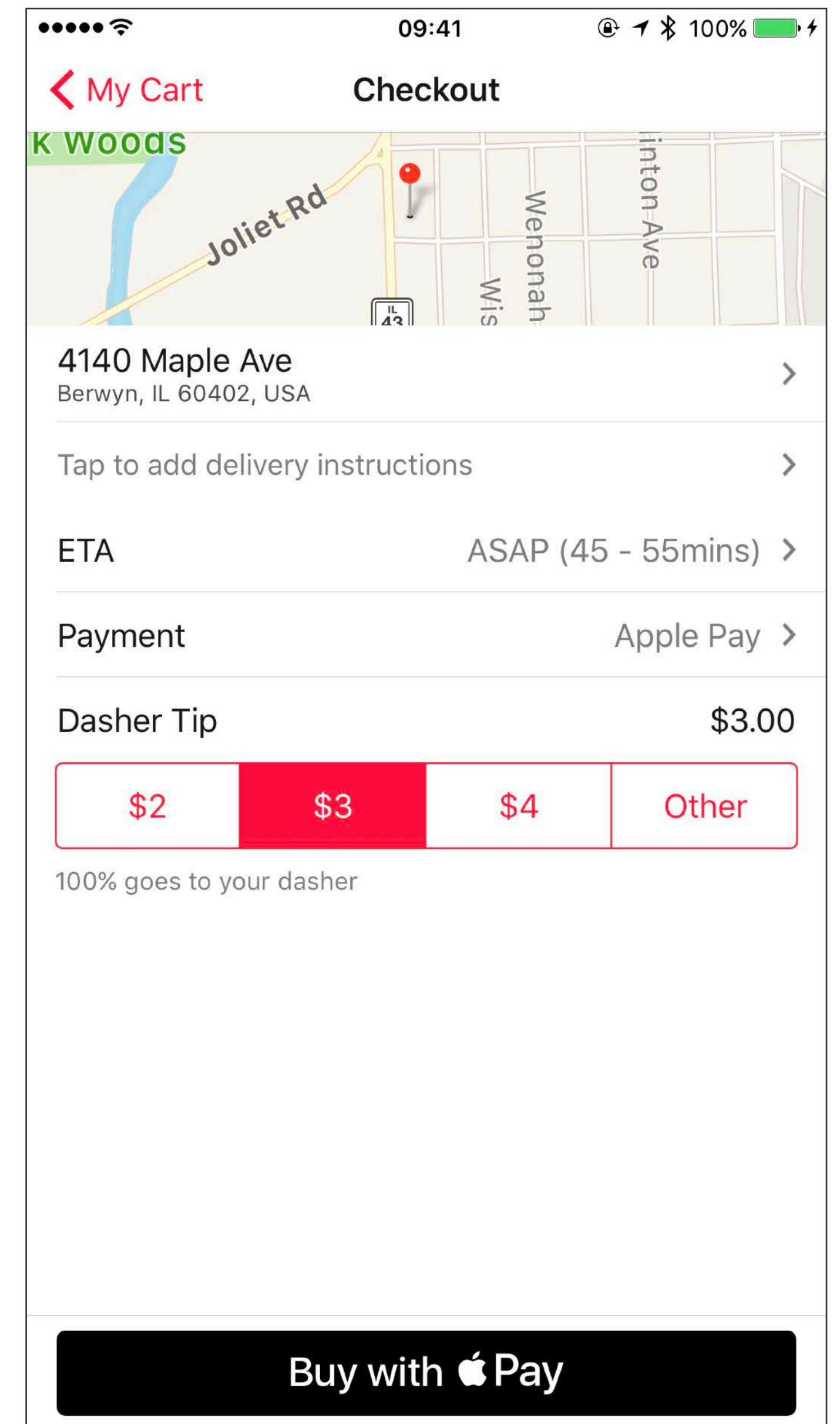
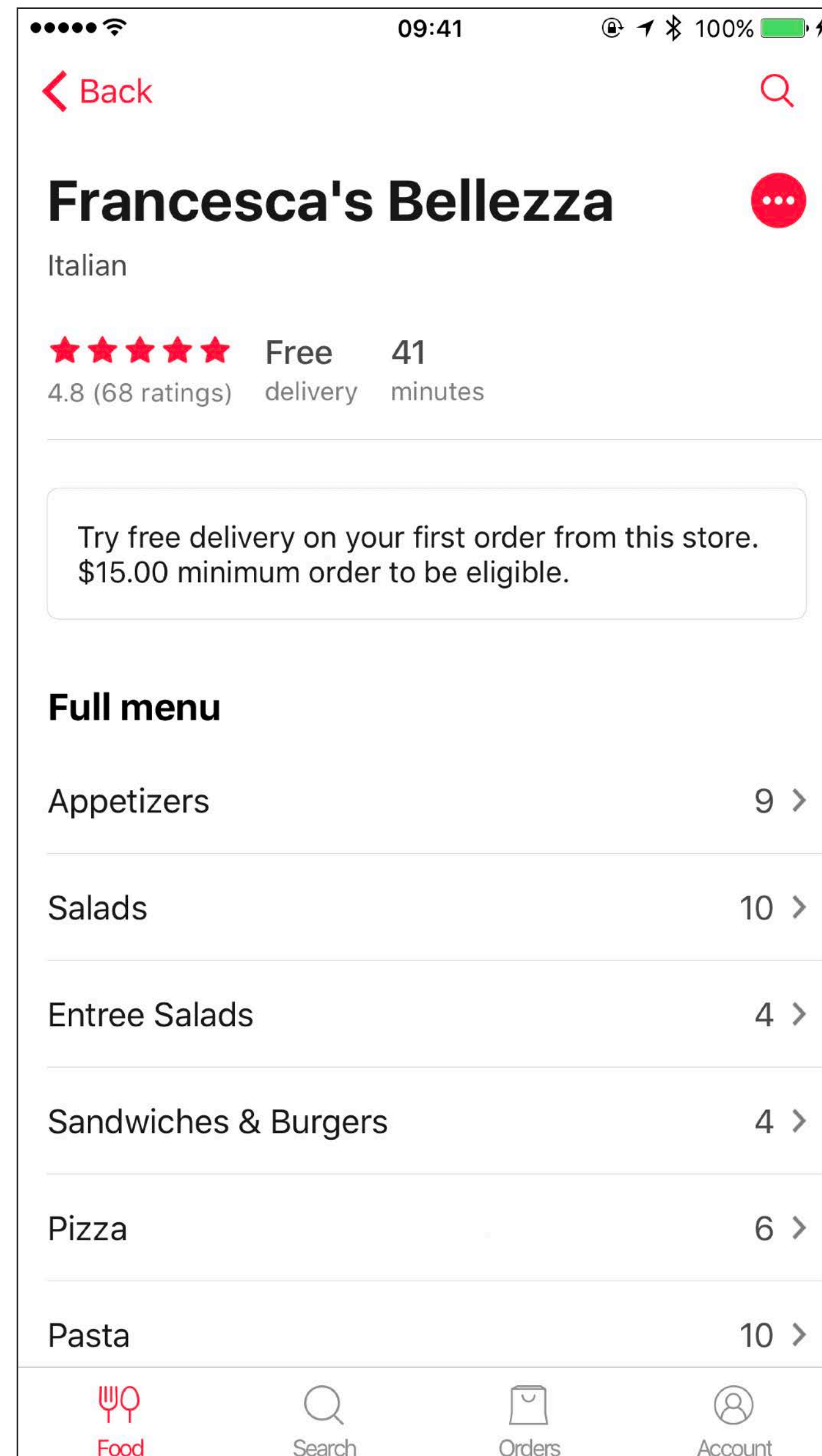
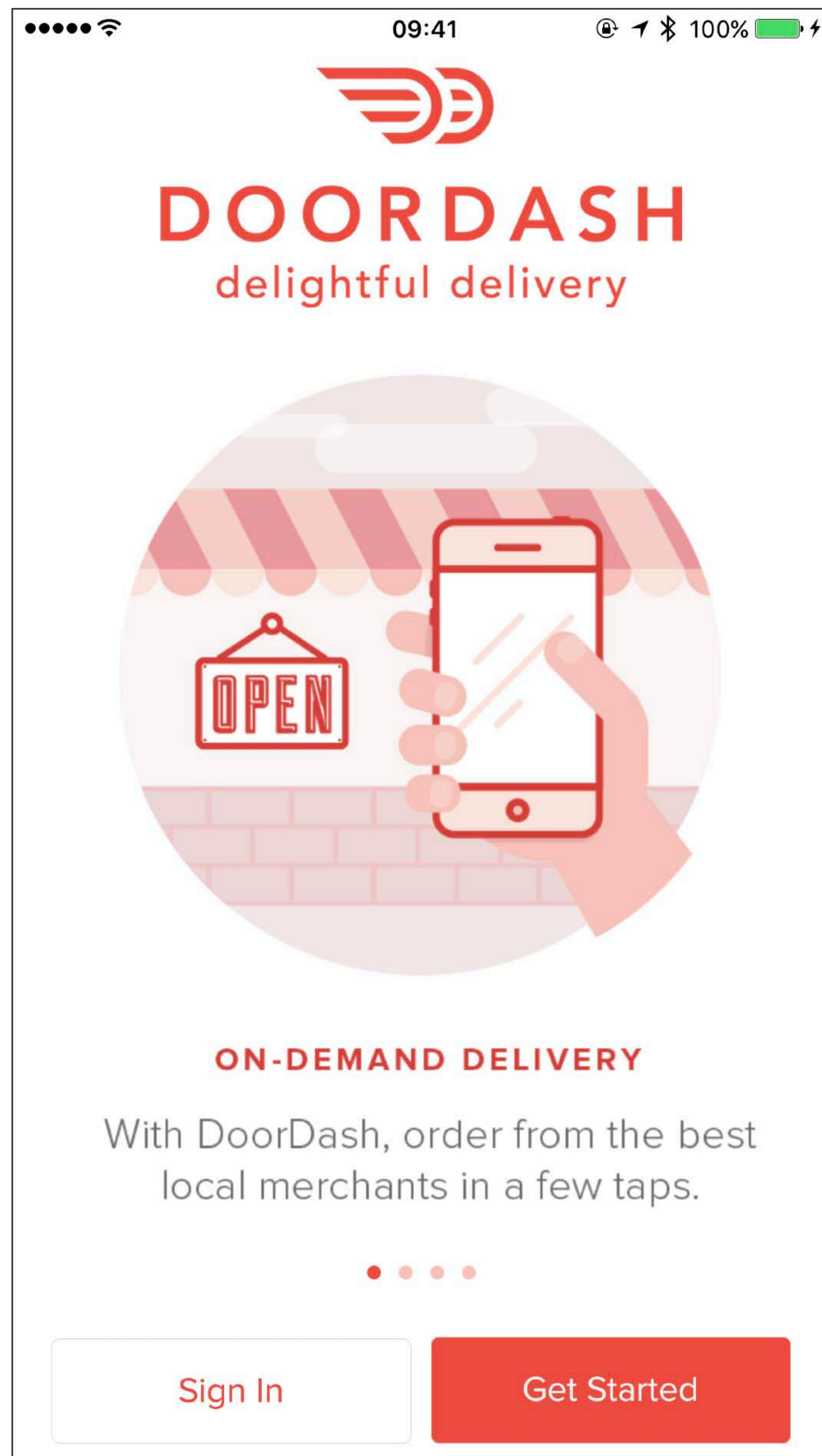
Writing is designing

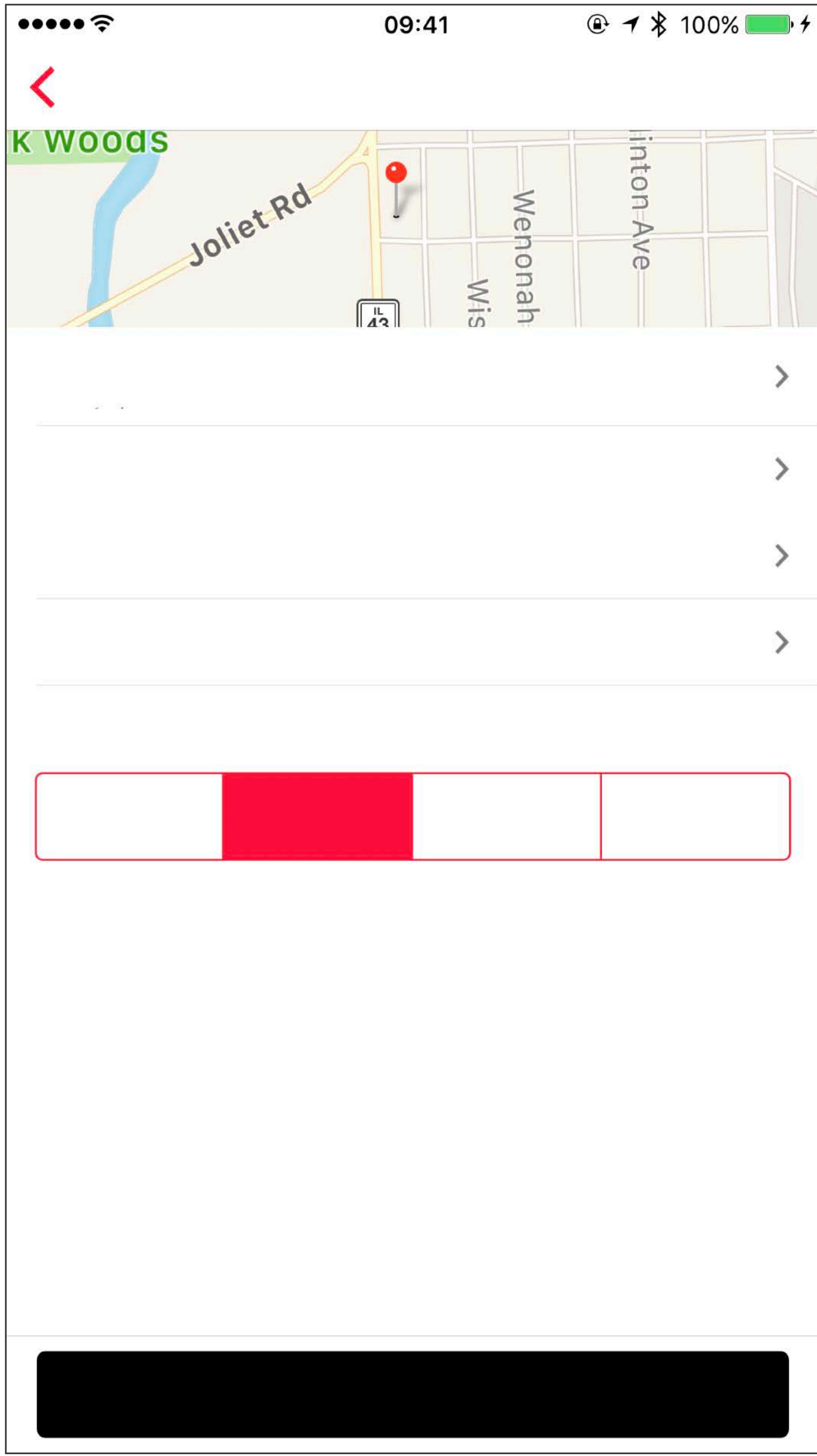
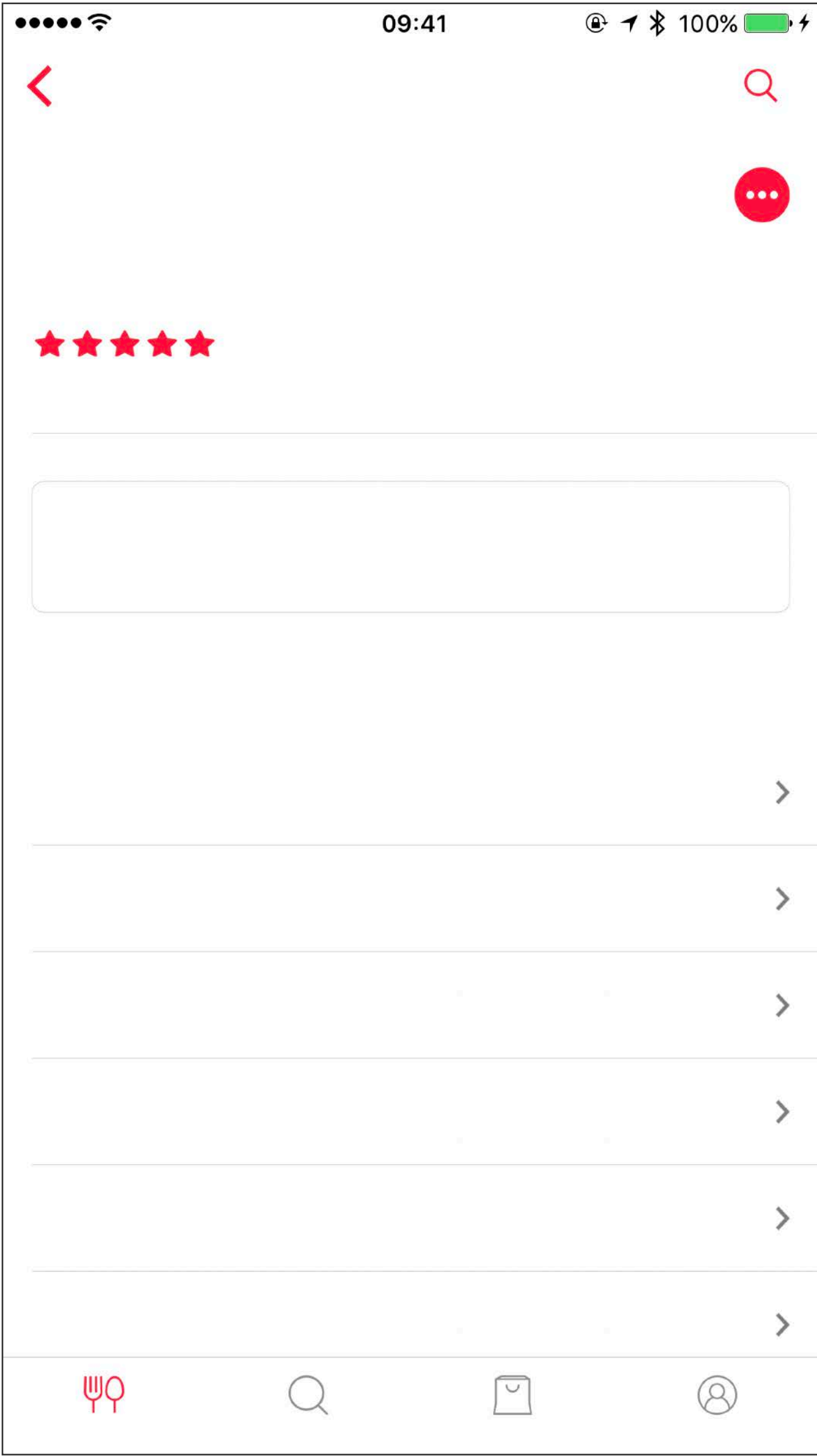
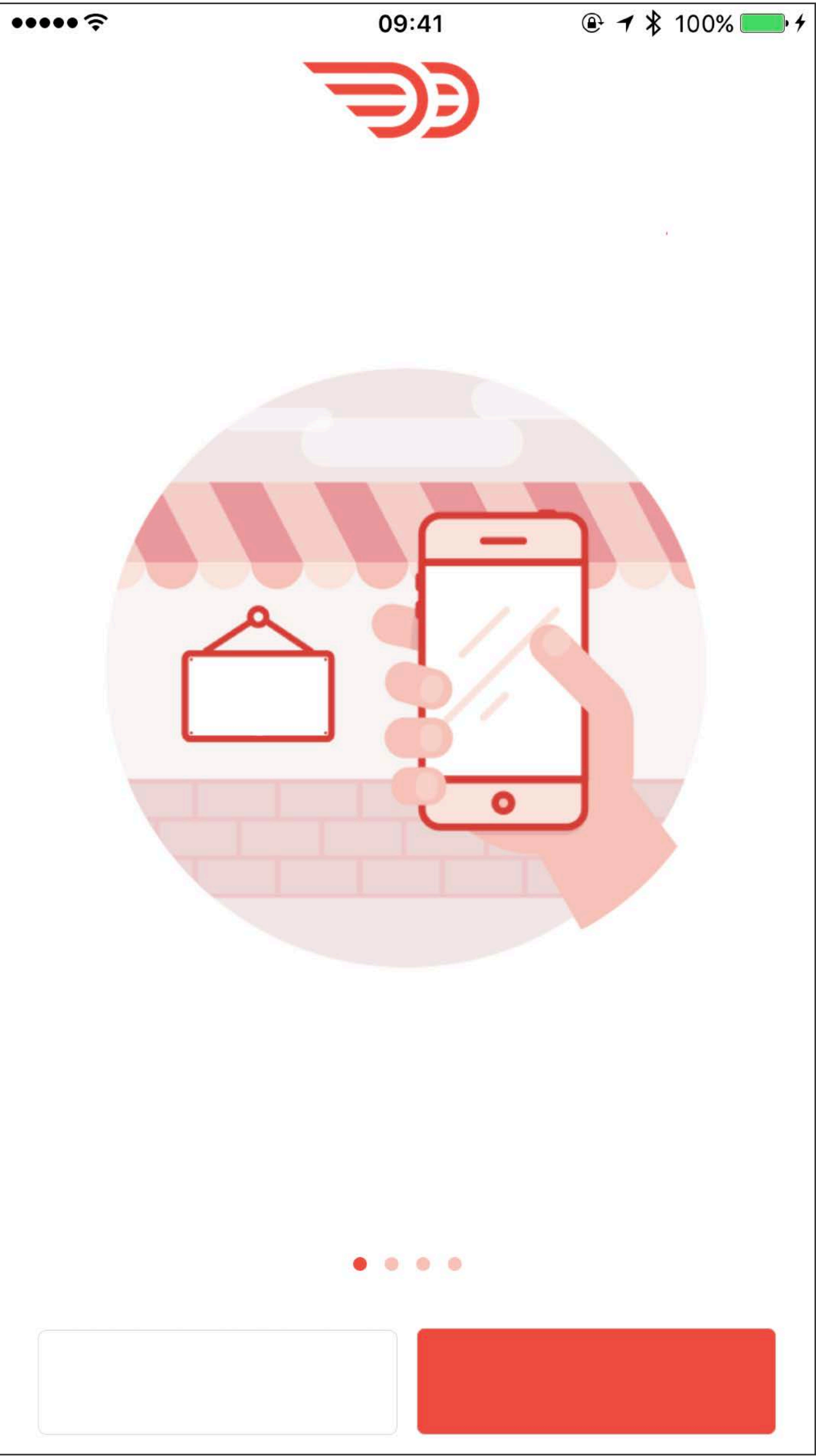
Errors are opportunities

Writing is designing

Find the words for the people you serve







To find the right words, **writing** and **design** need to team up in your brain and work together.



*I work on digital products and physical goods, so I'm deeply involved in the design process. But I also want to call out early that my process is the design process. **I don't write fiction or short stories; I use language to solve problems**—whether that's behind the scenes or in the product itself. I use words as material.*

Nicole Fenton

Co-Author, Nicely Said

Button

A writer might ask:

- **What are the right words for this button?**



Button

Done? Continue? Finish? Complete?

A UX writer or a designer might ask:

- **What are the entry and exit points?**
- **What action immediately follows pressing this button?**
- **Are we using the right messaging component here?**



Button

- **What's the inverse action?**
- **How does it translate/localize?**
- **Does it fit within our voice and tone strategy?**



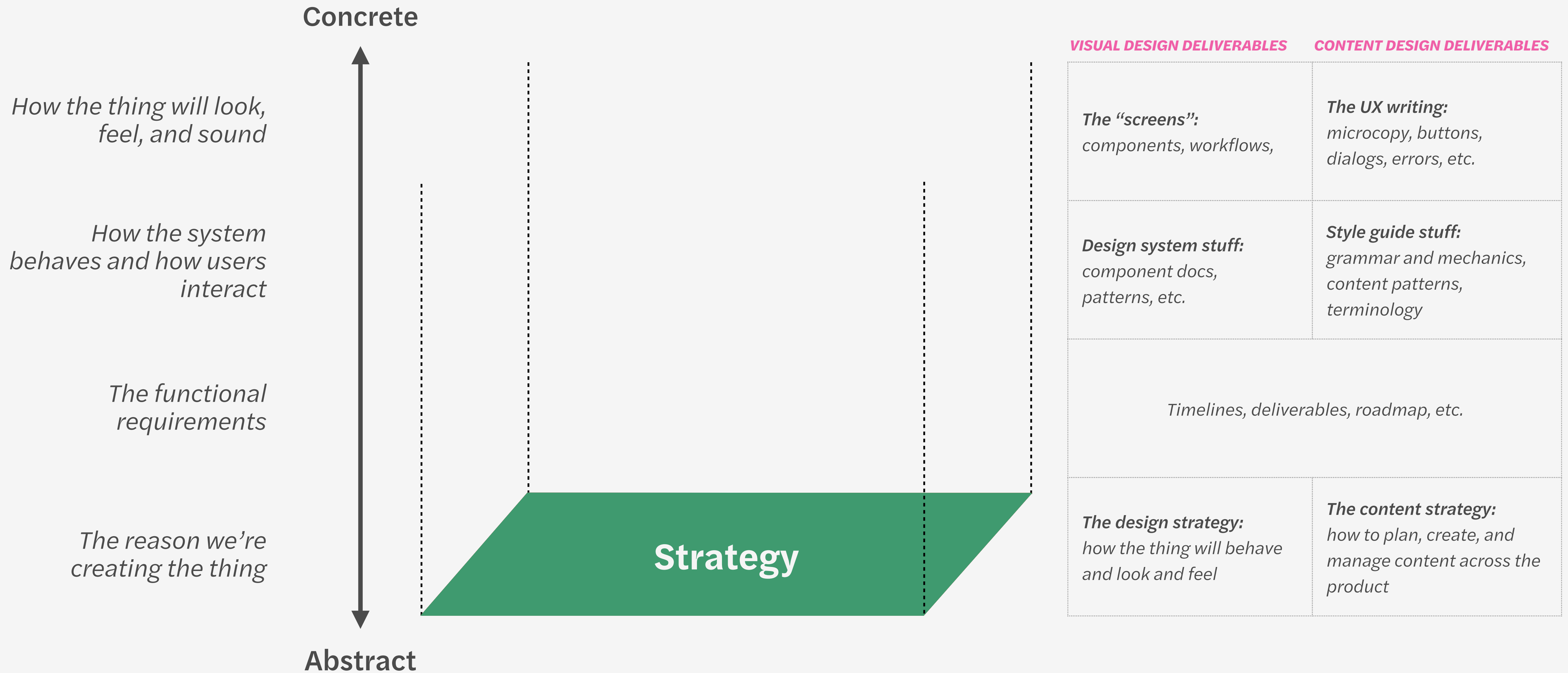
Button

Button

**Writing is about fitting words together.
Designing is about solving problems for your users.**

We design with words.

The ~~Five~~ Four Layers of UX



So if **words** are such an important part of **design**, why do we often think of design in terms of **visual tools**?

**Should I use
Sketch, Figma,
or Adobe XD
to design this
interface?**



**Don't mistake making a deliverable
with making a difference.**

Your writing should be....

1. Usable

2. Useful

3. Responsible

Your writing should be....

1. Usable

2. Useful

3. Responsible

Help users do stuff

A link that takes you to the app's search feature is way more usable than trying to explain where the search icon is.

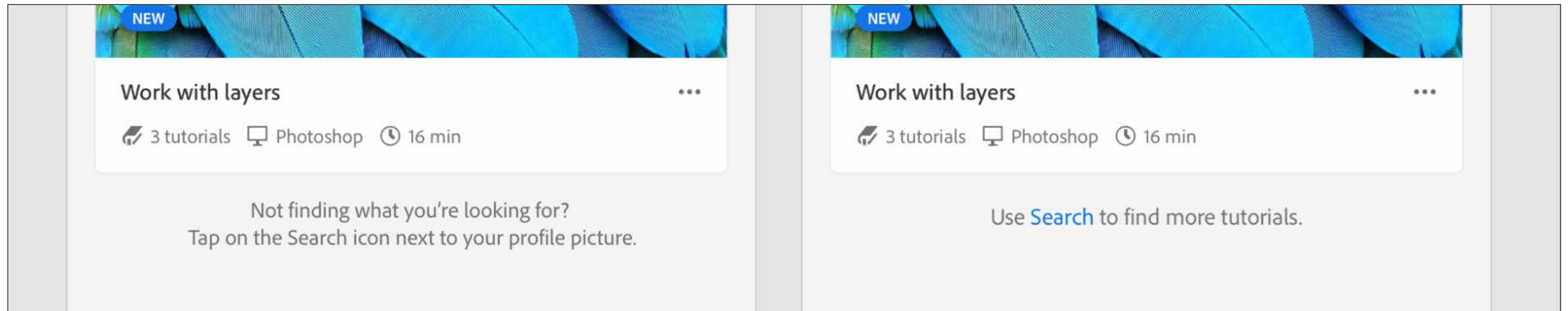


Figure out if people can **use the words**
you've written.

Sarah Richards, author of *Content Design*, points out that **if the words you write for something aren't accessible to everyone, you've made a design choice that prevents people from using that thing.**

In a study with **821 participants**, customer service behavior was found to be one of the **four most important** usability factors out of **76 possibilities**.

"Customer Service Behavior included items that were related to the friendliness and politeness of the system, its speaking pace, and its use of familiar terms."

Melanie Polkosky, PhD

*Toward a Social-Cognitive Psychology of Speech Technology:
Affective Responses to Speech-Based e-Service*

Source: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/33994535_Toward_a_social-cognitive_psychology_of_speech_technology_electronic_resource_affective_responses_to_speech-based_e-service

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Human communication is the most important gift we have, whether it's through speech or writing. I really do think that human beings are worth fighting for, especially as technology overtakes more and more of what it means to be human.

Melanie Polkosky, PhD

*Author, Uncovering Truffles: The
Scarcity and Value of Women in STEM*

Your writing should be....

1. Usable

2. Useful

3. Responsible

☒ Yes, I want to register for the MeliáRewards loyalty program by Meliá Hotels International and I have read and accept their [Terms and conditions](#). Yes, I want to receive information about special offers and promotions from melia.com and accept the conditions detailed in the [privacy clause](#). If you do not want to receive commercial information, [click here](#).

☒ I do not want to receive advertisements

ACTIVATE ACCOUNT

GRAN MELIÁ
HOTELS & RESORTS

ME
BY MELIÁ

PARADISUS
BY MELIÁ

MELIÁ
HOTELS & RESORTS

CREATE ACCOUNT

Do what users want

The team responsible for this reservation system is using writing and design to force people into the loyalty program and email lists when they're just trying to book a room.

Sign up

Pinterest may contain links to third party websites, advertisers, services, special offers, or other events or activities that are not owned or controlled by Pinterest. We don't endorse or assume any responsibility for any such third party sites, information, materials, products, or services. If you access any third party website, service, or content from Pinterest, you do so at your own risk and you agree that Pinterest has no liability arising from your use of or access to any third party website, service, or content.

More simply put

Pinterest has links to content off of Pinterest. Most of that stuff is awesome, but we're not responsible when it's not.

Explain yourself

Creating legal agreements that use plain language so people can actually understand what they're agreeing to? Very useful.

Writers need to understand a **product's purpose** and their **users' needs** to create useful experiences.



I feel like I always need the full context of what I'm solving for, so it's best for my work when I'm able to be in environments where I can get it. If you're joining a project at the very end and there's low tolerance for questions, it's a sign your role as writer hasn't been well positioned or isn't well understood.

Katie Lower

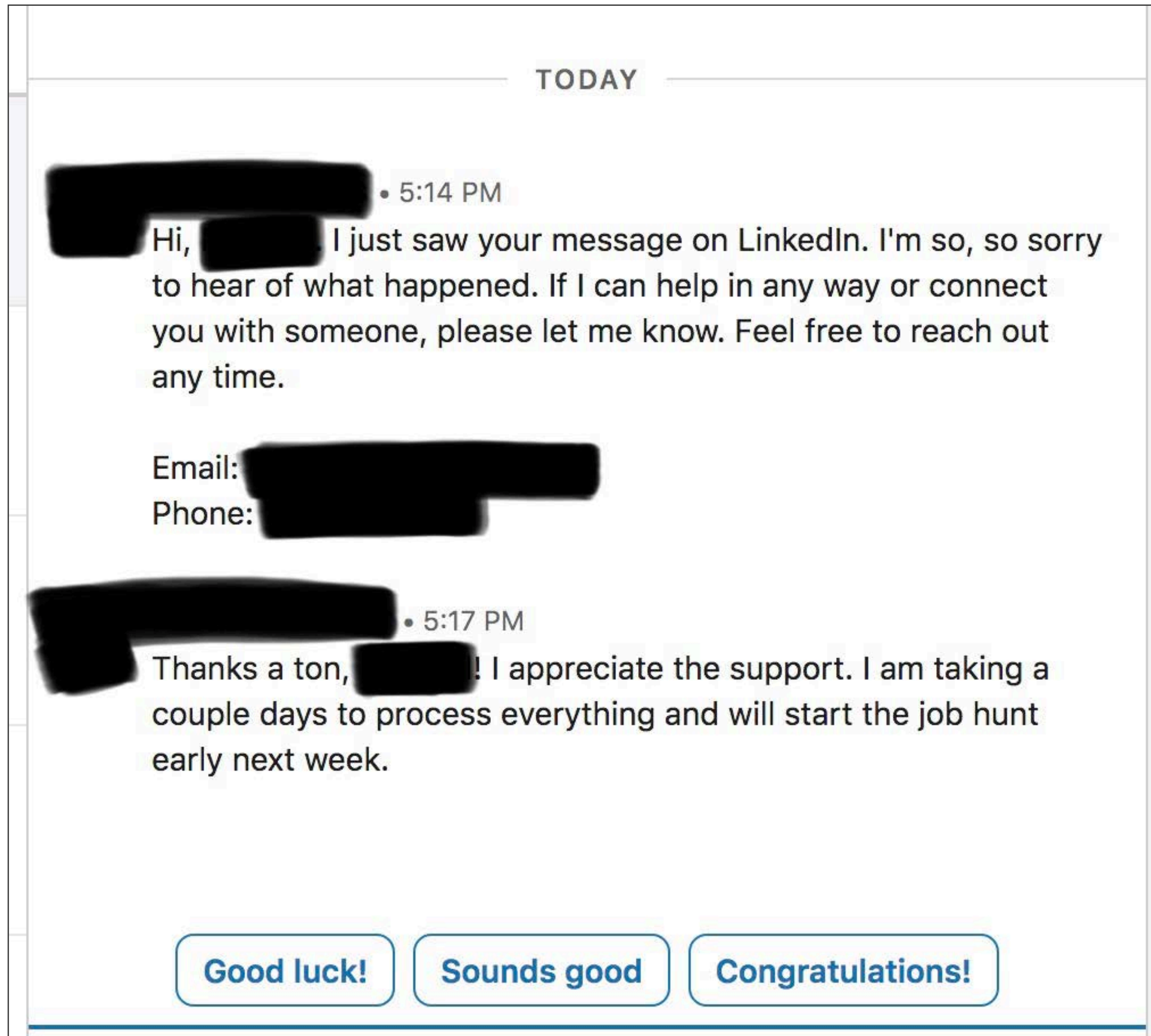
Designer and Writer

Your writing should be....

1. Usable

2. Useful

3. Responsible



Harmless?

An accidental tap
could make you seem
like a complete jerk to
someone who just lost
their job.

Log


Community


Premium

Labs

Logout

Personal Info

[Change Profile Picture](#)

[Change Cover Image](#)

EMAIL ADDRESS

andy@welfle.com

[Change Email Address](#)

[Reset Password](#)

NAME

Andy

Welfle

SEX

✓ Male

Female

BIRTHDAY

1983

February

20

COUNTRY

United States

STATE

California

CITY

San Francisco

HEIGHT

Easy choice?

For someone like me,
this is an easy, quick
choice.

But think about the
experience a trans
woman might have.



If they were thinking about inclusivity, they'd understand that some questions don't have easy answers. By explaining what they want to know and why, it not only helps people on the margins like me, but anyone who may not be easily categorized—and gets them even better-quality information to act on. It's a win-win for the user and for the company.

Ada Powers
UX Designer,
Community Activist



We know that words can really hurt people or help them in their personal lives. We can say really reassuring words to people, and it has this huge impact, and we can say hurtful words, and it can have a years-long impact, but we don't really treat the words we write in interfaces that way.

Natalie Yee
UX Designer

The screenshot shows a web form with a tooltip explaining the 'Sex' field requirement. The tooltip text is: "We require this field because one of the many ways we use this information is in communicating with your insurance provider. Please make sure the sex you provide here is the same as what your insurance provider has on file (usually the same as what your HR has on file). If you would like to tell us more about your gender identity, please click on the 'Add gender information' link; that information will not be shared outside One Medical. Our entire team is committed to making sure every member feels safe, welcome, and respected." The form includes a 'Sex' field with radio buttons for 'Male' and 'Female' (the 'Female' option is selected), a '+ Add gender information' link, a 'Year' field with a placeholder 'YYYY', and a 'How did you hear about us?' dropdown menu with the text 'Please select'. A green 'Next' button is at the bottom left.

ost c
creat

We require this field because one of the many ways we use this information is in communicating with your insurance provider. Please make sure the sex you provide here is the same as what your insurance provider has on file (usually the same as what your HR has on file). If you would like to tell us more about your gender identity, please click on the "Add gender information" link; that information will not be shared outside One Medical. Our entire team is committed to making sure every member feels safe, welcome, and respected.

Sex ? + Add gender information

☐ Male ☒ Female

How did you hear about us?

Please select

Year
YYYY

Next

Give context

If you're asking for this kind of information, tell users why you're asking.

Think about a "News Feed".



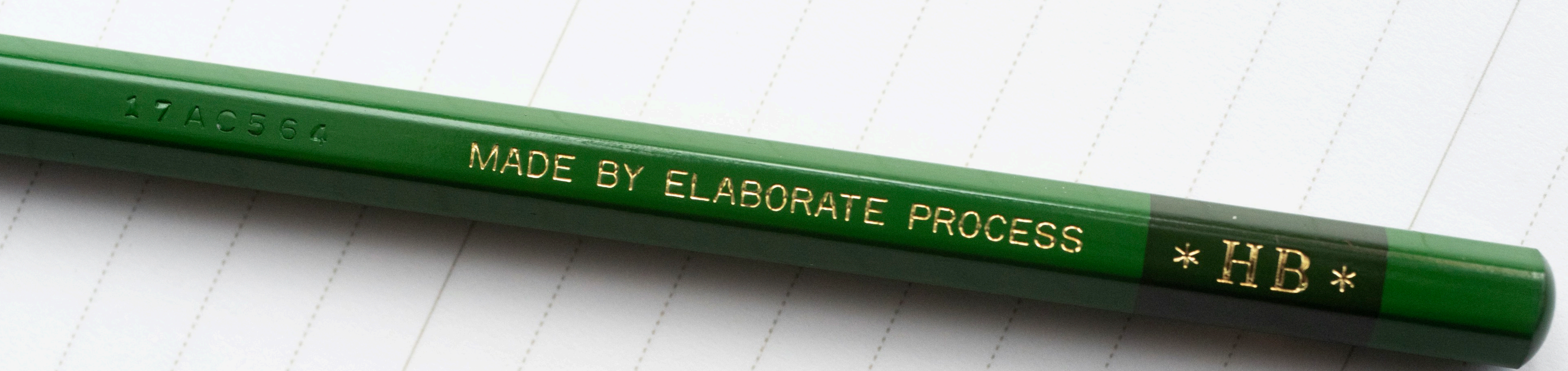
News is the feedback mechanism of our society; we vote based on the things we learn in the news. When we take a concept like that and we subvert it for commercial use, that's something that should give you pause.

Jorge Arango

Author, Living in Information

Discussion

Any questions so far?



Errors & Stress Cases

What to do when things go wrong

What's an error?

BIRTHDATE

9/14/1915

Please check the birthdate and try again.

Think in terms of **stress cases**, not
edge cases.

What are your users doing?

- **A highly stressed parent** trying to find the right medicine for their sick child.
- **A newly engaged couple** trying to figure out how to request a marriage license.
- **A student** try to look up their recent test scores.
- **A driver** who was just involved in a car accident trying to schedule and pay for repairs.

Each error represents a moment where the needs of your users conflict with the needs of your system. Error are opportunities.



*Where you find **sustained** success driven by recommendations, you find **badass users**. Smarter, more skillful, more powerful users. Users who **know** more and can **do** more in a way that's personally meaningful.*

Kathy Sierra

Author, Badass: Making Users Awesome


Writing error messages:

1. Avoid

2. Explain

3. Resolve


Scenario: Check deposits through an app

 DONALD E. KNUTH
COMPUTER SCIENCE DEPARTMENT
STANFORD UNIVERSITY
STANFORD, CA 94305-9045


11-3167/1210
01

505

Date 8 Mar 99

Pay to the
Order of  \$ 2.50

Two and 50/100 Dollars



AMERICA CALIFORNIA BANK
2390 El Camino Real • Palo Alto, CA 94306

For 3.589 Donald Knuth MP

⑆ 1 291 3 16 7 3 ⑆ 0 5 0 5 0 1 1 4 5 8 4 9 0 6 ⑆

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Colonial Classics WCC

Security features
are included.
Details on back.

Avoid

The "Next" button isn't active until the user enters the amount and takes photos of the check.

- The "Deposit amount" field is visually prominent
- The app teaches its users what to do by progressively activating UI

The screenshot shows the Chase QuickDeposit mobile app interface. At the top, the status bar displays the time 11:07, signal strength, Wi-Fi, and battery icons. The app header is blue with a hamburger menu icon, the text "CHASE QUICKDEPOSITSM", and a user profile icon. The main content area is white. It starts with "Deposit to" followed by "CHASE PREMIER (, 3487)" and a balance of "\$5,154.83" with a right arrow. Below this is the "Deposit amount" field, which is a large, bold, black text input showing "\$0.00". A horizontal line separates this from the text "Your current mobile deposit limit is \$10,000.00". Underneath are two camera icons labeled "Front" and "Back". At the bottom, there is an information icon and text: "Deposit by 11 PM ET and your money will typically be available for withdrawal by the next business day...". Below this are two buttons: a grey "Cancel" button and a blue "Next" button. At the very bottom, there is a link for "Mobile Deposit Limits" and a home indicator bar.

Avoid

However, something like this can only take you so far.

- If a user enters an amount then deletes it, you still need to show a message
- Be wary of accessibility concerns as well—disabling UI can cause issues for visually impaired users

The screenshot shows the Chase QuickDeposit mobile app interface. At the top, the status bar displays the time 16:00 and signal icons. The app header is blue with a menu icon, the text "CHASE QUICKDEPOSITSM", and a user profile icon. The main content area shows "Deposit to" with a faded account name "CHASE PREMIER (123456)" and a balance of "\$3,005.35". Below this, the "Deposit amount" is displayed as "\$0.00". A red warning message with an exclamation mark icon says "Please tell us an amount." Below the warning, it states "Your current mobile deposit limit is \$10,000.00". There are two camera icons labeled "Front" and "Back" for document capture. At the bottom, an information icon and text state "Deposit by 11 PM ET and your money will typically be available for withdrawal by the next business day...". Two buttons, "Cancel" and "Next", are at the bottom. A "Mobile Deposit Limits" link is at the very bottom.

Explain

Tells the user quickly and clearly what went wrong.

- Doesn't tell users what to do next, e.g. go to an ATM
- Doesn't serve users who want to know more about the deposit limit
- When unsure, test

The screenshot shows the Chase QuickDeposit mobile app interface. At the top, the status bar displays the time 18:27 and signal indicators. The app header is blue with a menu icon, the text "CHASE QUICKDEPOSITSM", and a user profile icon. The main content area shows a deposit to "CHASE PREMIER (...3447)" for an amount of "\$15,000.00". Below this, a red warning icon and text state: "This is over your deposit limit. Your current mobile deposit limit is \$10,000.00". There are two camera icons labeled "Front" and "Back" for deposit capture. At the bottom, a note says: "Deposit by 11 PM ET and your money will typically be available for withdrawal by the next business day...". Two buttons, "Cancel" and "Next", are at the bottom. A "Mobile Deposit Limits" link is at the very bottom.

18:27

CHASE QUICKDEPOSITSM

Deposit to
CHASE PREMIER (...3447)
\$1,005.75

Deposit amount
\$15,000.00

! This is over your deposit limit.
Your current mobile deposit limit is \$10,000.00

Front Back

Deposit by 11 PM ET and your money will typically be available for withdrawal by the next business day...

Cancel Next

Mobile Deposit Limits

Resolve

Tell the user what to do next. Help them finish their task.



Auto capture didn't work.
Try again or take the picture yourself.

Cancel

Retry auto

Capture manually

Scenario

Your team is designing and building a sign-up flow for an online insurance company. The law says that account holders must be 18 years of age or older, and you've been asked to handle the error state for when users are younger than 18.

Activity

Write down ideas for avoiding, explaining, or resolving the error.

Discussion

How did it go?

Writing is designing

Usable, useful, and responsible

Errors are opportunities

Avoid, explain, and resolve

Thanks!

Time for some Q&A





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writingisdesigning.com**

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like to stay in touch!**