Text Selection

> Below is a 600+-word selection of text for the Typesetting Literature project. I kept the intro, main concepts, and conclusion. I trimmed out the image-heavy examples in the middle, since images are not included in the project scope.
>
> Source: Design for Real Life: Make Space for Real People

Make Space for Real People

OUR USERS AREN'T US. Our users aren't us. We hear this constantly—but as we've seen already, we're not always great at living it out.

It's not only a matter of considering extreme circumstances, though. Designing for real people is also about making space: ensuring our interfaces and expectations don't force users into narrow categories, prevent them from using a product in the way that best fits their lives, or make it difficult to complete tasks on their own terms.

It's about giving people enough room within our interfaces to be themselves.

Understand your bias

Making space for our users begins with understanding our biases—something all of us have.

Bias works like this. Our brains take cognitive shortcuts: rather than thinking through every situation, they conserve energy by developing "rules of thumb" to make decisions. Those rules are built off our necessarily limited past experiences. As a result, we routinely make assumptions about the world, and the people in it, based on a very limited amount of data.

In Thinking, Fast and Slow, psychologist Daniel Kahneman says these shortcuts come from our brains' desire to do as much as possible using "System 1" thinking: quick, automatic decision-making. System 1 thinking is effortless, impulsive, and often stereotypical. In contrast, "System 2" thinking requires much more careful attention, and includes functions like focusing, comparing, counting, or reasoning —all of which take energy our brains want to conserve.

We see this at work in the availability heuristic: the easier it is for you to think of an example of something, the likelier you are to believe that that thing happens frequently. For example, if you know many people with impaired vision, those people are more available to your brain, and so you're more likely to estimate this user group as being large. Conversely, if you know no one with impaired vision, examples of people who are impaired will not come to mind, and you'll be more likely to discount this user group. What's happening in both cases is that the brain is performing System 1 thinking: making decisions based on what's easy to recall, rather than reasoning through the situation.

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System 1 thinking isn't bad or wrong; it's human. But it doesn't always serve us well. To make design and content decisions that include the most people, we need to train ourselves and adjust our processes to invoke System 2 thinking as often as possible: to slow down, step away from our shortcuts, and consider things with real people in mind.

The first step of that process is to imagine your user. Go ahead, do it right now: picture the person using your products.

What did you imagine? Did you visualize a specific age, gender, and race? Did you imagine where they live, what they do for a living, maybe even how they feel? That's okay; most of us do.

The key, though, is not to stop there. There's real value in taking that idealized user, and then imagining someone who breaks its mold—who is different in every single way. As soon as you do, you'll engage System 2 thinking, which will allow you to unpack those assumptions your brain made at first, and increase the variety of users you can imagine. Doing this will also help guide your research process.

Everyone needs space

Making space for your users' real selves matters, even for sites and products that aren't as obviously personal. Any time we're asking a user to define themselves, our design choices can either make them feel welcome or push them away. It takes time and practice to get it right, and we'll all screw it up sometimes. But if you can embrace these concepts in your work, you'll be on your way.