

CONTENT DESIGN

Fondo

The public arts-grant application,
rewritten.

68% of individual artists abandoned their
application. The council thought artists
needed training.

*The form wasn't hard. The
language was.*

TYPE	Self-initiated concept project
OWN	Research > IA > Content > IxD > Visual
SCOPE	Responsive web - mobile first

BEFORE

Applicants must not be
concurrently in receipt of
disbursements from a cognate
instrument.

Not one of 17 artists could tell me what
this sentence meant. Four assumed it
disqualified them and closed the tab.

It did not disqualify them.

AFTER

Are you already getting money from
another Council grant for this same
project?

If so, you can't apply here - but you can apply
for a different project.

Same rule. Same legal effect.
One of them turns eligible artists away.

Fondo: the public arts-grant application, rewritten

A state arts council gives away money. Individual artists - the people the fund exists for - were the least likely group to successfully ask for it.

68% of individual applicants who started an application never submitted one.

Institutions, with grant-writing staff, completed at 91%. The council read that gap as a capacity problem, and proposed workshops teaching artists how to fill in the form.

When 68% of your users fail, that is not 68% of your users being deficient. That is a design defect with a very large sample size.

Mean readability of the application: grade 17. The eligibility page contained 'applicants must not be concurrently in receipt of disbursements from a cognate instrument.' Not one of 17 artists could tell me what that sentence meant. Four assumed it disqualified them and closed the tab. It did not disqualify them.

RESEARCH

**68% is not 68% of users being deficient.
It is a design defect with a very large sample.**

WHO COMPLETES AN APPLICATION

Institutions (with grant staff)



Individual artists



METHOD

17 moderated sessions with artists, using their own abandoned drafts.

4 panel reviewers. 1 legal reviewer - interviewed early, on purpose.

41%

of ALL abandonments hit just TWO screens.
They weren't drifting away. They hit a wall, twice.

Grade 17

mean readability. Postgraduate.
Target for public services: grade 8.

61%

of individual applicants started on a phone.
The form was built for a desktop on a Tuesday.

THE FIELD THAT STOPPED EVERYONE

A blank box with no question in it.

BEFORE

Statement of Artistic Intent and
Alignment with Council Priorities



0 / 2000

Artists stared at it. Several left to
"come back when I know what they want."
They never came back.



AFTER

**What do you want to make, and
why now?**

Reviewers say the strongest answers are specific and
plain. Tell us the work, not the theory. Two
paragraphs is plenty.

Type your answer here.

I got that copy by transcribing what the panel reviewers said
when I asked them what they hoped to read. It took one afternoon.

THE STANDARD I SET AND HELD

Grade 8 or it doesn't ship.

Not a guideline. A build check.

Second person. Active voice.

"You'll need" - not "Applicants shall be required to."

No word the applicant wouldn't say.

Disbursement. Cognate Instrument. Aligned with priorities. Gone.

Every question states what it's for.

Not help text. The question itself carries its purpose.

Errors never blame the applicant.

Say what happened, why, and what to do next.

MEAN READABILITY



THE LEGAL NEGOTIATION

I didn't take the rewrite to legal at the end. I brought the legal reviewer into the research - she watched an artist misread the eligibility clause and close the tab.

Legal doesn't need archaic words. It needs unambiguous ones.

Ordered by the applicant's head, not the council's filing system.

one question per screen

BEFORE - 44 PAGES

- 01 Eligibility (legal prose) ————— the wall
- 02 Council priorities
- 03 Organisational details
- 04 Statement of artistic intent ————— the wall
- 05 Budget schedule A
- 06 Budget schedule B
- 07 Prior awards
- 08 Referees
- 09 ...



AFTER

- 01 Can I apply? (30 seconds)
- 02 Who are you?
- 03 What do you want to make?
- 04 What will it cost?
- 05 What have you done before?

Eligibility became a check, not a wall.

No account needed to find out if you're wanted.

About 5 minutes left

What do you want to make, and why now?

Save and continue

ERRORS - WHERE CONTENT DESIGN EARNS ITS KEEP

Say what happened. Say why. Say what to do next. Never blame.



Invalid input in field 7.



That budget doesn't add up to your total -
check line 3.



Error: submission incomplete.



Two things left: your budget, and one
referee. Everything else is saved.



Session expired. Data lost.



You're signed out, but nothing is lost. We
saved your draft 40 seconds ago.

Used under time pressure, by people already being blamed for a great deal. This isn't decoration - it's whether they open it tomorrow.

What I'd do differently.

I should have interviewed the panel reviewers in week one. The single highest-leverage piece of content in the whole application - what a good answer to this question actually looks like - was sitting in four people's heads, and I didn't go get it until month three. The people who READ the thing you're designing the writing for are a research population. I now treat them as one by default.

And I'd have shown legal the research sooner. I spent weeks bracing for a fight that never happened, because I'd assumed legal was an adversary. That assumption cost more time than the actual negotiation did.

CONTENT DESIGN

Fondo

The public arts-grant
application, rewritten.

BEFORE

~~...disbursements from a cognate instrument.~~

AFTER

Are you already getting money from another
Council grant for this same project?

The form wasn't hard. The language was.

self-initiated concept project

Loli Mari Montalvo

Senior Product Designer - research, interaction, content, visual