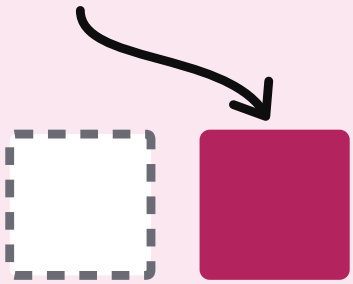
Concept

Slips and mistakes

Two kinds of human error. In a slip the intention is right but the action goes wrong. In a mistake the action goes as planned, but the plan was wrong.



In Spanish
Deslices y equivocaciones

Origin
Norman (1981); Reason (1990)

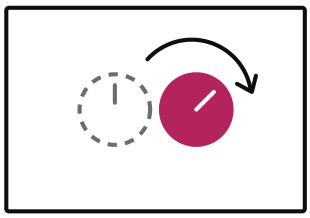
What problem it addresses

It explains why asking for “more care” is not enough. It teaches design that each kind of error is prevented differently: slips, with clearly distinct actions; mistakes, with better information.

An example

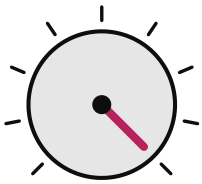
Two errors at home that look alike but aren’t.

Slip



You want to turn down a burner and turn the knob next to it. **You knew what to do; the movement failed.**

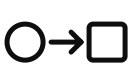
Mistake



You turn the thermostat all the way up so the house warms up faster. **The movement goes fine; the idea is wrong.**

The first is prevented by separating and distinguishing the knobs. The second, by showing how the device works.

Why it happens

1 

Acting has two parts: deciding what to do and doing it.

2 

If the doing fails, it's a slip, especially in tasks we do without thinking.

3 

If the deciding fails, it's a mistake, even if every step is done right.

Applications in design

Use it like this

Against slips, make similar actions distinct and allow undo. Against mistakes, show the system's state and what is about to happen.

Avoid

Blaming the person using it and solving everything with an "Are you sure?" warning.

Don't fall for it

If many people make the same slip, the problem lies in the design, not in their attention.

About 1,000 slips

What the research says

Everyday errors that Norman collected and classified by where the action goes wrong; about 200 were his own (Norman, 1981).

●●● **Solid evidence.** It is not a representative sample, so it serves to sort types, not to measure how often each one happens. Reason (1990) added memory failures, which he called lapses.

Connections

Used in

- Interaction design
- Design for health

Related to

- Nielsen's usability heuristics
- Mental model

Authors and works

1981	**Donald A. Norman**	Classified slips by the point where the action goes astray, from the intention to the movement.
1990	**James Reason**	Separated failures of execution (slips and lapses) from failures of planning (mistakes).
2013	**Donald A. Norman**	Brought the distinction to design and argued that a frequent error points to a design problem.

Sources

Original sources

- Norman, D. A. (1981). Categorization of action slips. Psychological Review, 88(1), 1–15. View source (https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.88.1.1)
- Reason, J. (1990). Human error. Cambridge University Press. View source (https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139062367)
- Norman, D. A. (2013). The design of everyday things (Rev. and expanded ed.). Basic Books.

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