Concept

Progressive disclosure

Organizing an interface so it first shows the few options almost everyone needs and keeps advanced or rarely used ones one step away, visible to whoever looks for them.



In Spanish
Divulgación progresiva

Origin
Several precedents: the Xerox Star (Smith et al., 1982) and Carroll and Carrithers (1984); spread by Nielsen (2006)

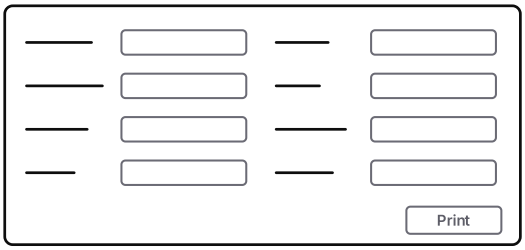
What problem it addresses

Solves a common clash: making a product easy for beginners and, at the same time, complete for experts.

An example

An illustrative example: the window for printing a document.

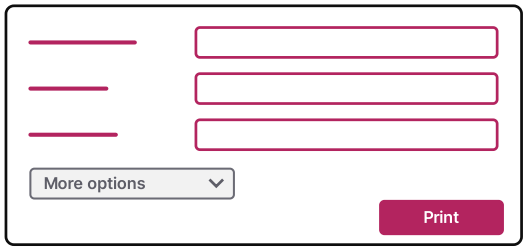
Everything in view



All settings on a single screen

Copies, pages, margins, color, trays and profiles on a single screen. **It is hard to find what you are looking for.**

Essentials first



The essentials in view, the rest one click away

Printer, copies and pages; the rest behind "More options". **You print in one step.**

Beginners don't get lost and those who need more know where to look, as long as the way to advanced options is visible and says what lies behind it.

Why it happens

1 

What you see first tells people what matters.

2 

Beginners focus on what is useful and make fewer mistakes.

3 

Experts find the advanced options without wading through what they rarely use.

Applications in design

✓ Use it like this

Decide what goes first using usage data and by observing people, not by intuition.

✗ Avoid

Hiding something many people need behind “More options”.

Don’t fall for it

More than two levels of hidden options is too many: simplify or gather the advanced options in one place.

Almost 1/4 of the time

What the research says

Carroll and Carrithers (1984) blocked typical beginner errors in a word processor. With that reduced version people learned faster and better; the group using the full program spent almost a quarter of their time recovering from those errors.

●○○ **Single study.** The study is about learning a program, not about any hidden menu. Nielsen (2006) warns that more than two levels of hidden options usually make people get lost.

Connections

Used in

- Form design
- UI design

Related to

- Cognitive load
- F-shaped reading pattern
- Hick’s law
- Tesler’s law
- Paradox of the active user

Authors and works

1982	**David C. Smith, Charles Irby, Ralph Kimball, Bill Verplank and Eric Harslem**	Describing the Xerox Star, they called hiding complexity until it is needed "progressive disclosure", as in its property sheets.
1984	**John M. Carroll and Caroline Carrithers**	Tested a "training wheels" interface that left out what most confused beginners.
2006	**Jakob Nielsen**	Spread the idea in web design and set its conditions: split frequent from rare features well and make the way to advanced options visible.

Sources

Original sources

- Smith, D. C., Irby, C., Kimball, R., Verplank, B., & Harslem, E. (1982). Designing the Star user interface. BYTE, 7(4), 242–282. View source (https://www.guidebookgallery.org/articles/designingthestaruserinterface)
- Carroll, J. M., & Carrithers, C. (1984). Training wheels in a user interface. Communications of the ACM, 27(8), 800–806. View source (https://cacmb4.acm.org/magazines/1984/8/10472-training-wheels-in-a-user-interface)

Secondary sources

- Nielsen, J. (2006, December 3). Progressive disclosure. Nielsen Norman Group. View source (https://www.nngroup.com/articles/progressive-disclosure/)

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