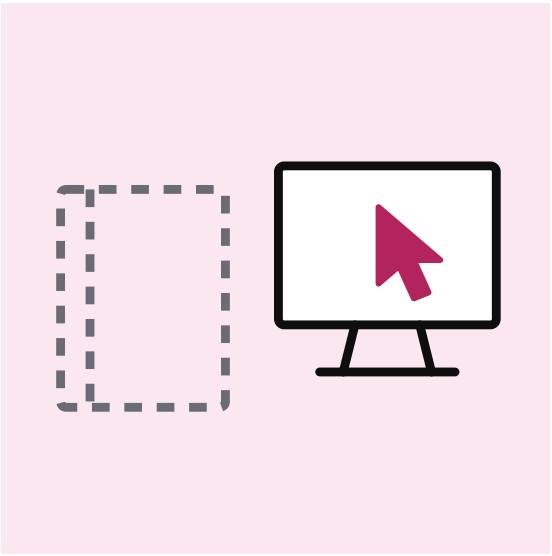
Concept

Paradox of the active user

People who start using a system want to do their task right away, so they don't read the manual and learn just enough, even though learning first would save them time in the long run.



In Spanish
Paradoja del usuario activo

Origin
Carroll and Rosson (1987)

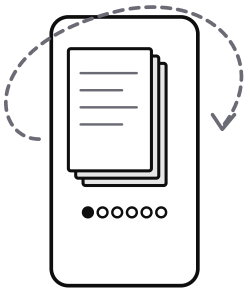
What problem it addresses

It explains why almost nobody reads manuals or finishes long tutorials. It asks design to bring help while the person works, not before.

An example

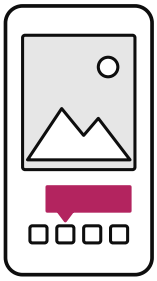
An illustrative example: the first time you open a photo-editing app.

Tutorial at the start



Several screens of explanation before you can open a photo. **People skip them without reading.**

Help along the way



You open a photo right away, and a short tip appears the first time you touch each tool. **You learn while you edit.**

People do learn, but by doing. Help works when it arrives at the moment it is needed.

Why it happens

1 

We come to get something done, not to learn a program.

2 

Learning first feels like wasted time, even though it would save time later.

3 

We learn just enough and stick with what already works, even if it is slow.

Applications in design

✓ Use it like this

Let people start right away and put help exactly where it is needed, like a short tip when using a feature for the first time.

✗ Avoid

Forcing people through a long tutorial before they can do anything.

👁 Don't fall for it

That nobody reads the help doesn't mean they don't need it: bring it to the moment of use.

40% less time

What the research says

People who learned with a minimal manual, designed for learning by doing, needed 40% less time than with a commercial manual (Carroll et al., 1987).

●●● **Solid evidence.** The paradox comes from observing people learning to use computers at IBM in the early eighties; Nielsen (1998) notes that many later studies confirm it.

Connections

Used in

- Learning design

Related to

- Progressive disclosure
- Mental model

Authors and works

1987	**John M. Carroll and Mary Beth Rosson**	Described the paradox with two sides: the urge to produce holds back learning, and what we already know guides us, sometimes wrongly.
1987	**John M. Carroll et al.**	Tested the minimal manual: short, focused on real tasks and on recovering from errors.
1990	**John M. Carroll**	Brought together minimalist instruction design in The Nurnberg Funnel, which lets people learn by doing with little reading.
1998	**Jakob Nielsen**	Spread it among web designers with a clear idea: design for how people act, not for an ideal user.

Sources

Original sources

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- Carroll, J. M., Smith-Kerker, P. L., Ford, J. R., & Mazur-Rimetz, S. A. (1987). The minimal manual. Human-Computer Interaction, 3(2), 123–153. View source (https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327051hci0302_2)
- Carroll, J. M. (1990). The Nurnberg funnel: Designing minimalist instruction for practical computer skill. MIT Press.

Secondary sources

- Nielsen, J. (1998, October 4). Paradox of the active user. Nielsen Norman Group. View source (https://www.nngroup.com/articles/paradox-of-the-active-user/)

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