Introduction to user stories

How user stories can be used as a valuable project communication tool

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User stories are a **plain-language description of business or functional requirements for a system, process, service or product, expressed from the end-user's perspective**. Like personas, they are discussion points that we use to help us see our work through the eyes of the people we aim to serve.

Jumping straight in, the basic syntax of a user story is:

As a {persona}
I can {activity}

Using the persona of Joseph, a sustainable home improver (as featured in our introduction to personas), a relevant user story might be:

As a sustainable home improver
I can find out how much I can save with a "green" loan

Sometimes user stories are extended to include further information about the user's objective or benefits received. For example:

As a {persona}
I can {activity}
So that {objective}

Again, using the Joseph persona as an example:

As a sustainable home improver
I can find out how much I can save with a "green" loan
So that I can work out how long it will take recoup my investment in sustainable improvements

Business and functional user stories

Extended user stories can get a bit cumbersome to write and manage, so an alternative method for linking stories to a user's objective is to use two different types of story — ***business user stories*** and ***functional user stories***.

Business user stories reflect a "bigger picture" perspective, describing the persona's objectives and focusing on the ultimate goal/benefit that we are aiming to support. Functional user stories, on the other hand, zoom in to the specific touchpoints, features or functionality that manifest in a system, process, product or service to support the user's goals. Business stories may be supported by one or more functional user stories.

The following examples illustrate the difference between the two types of stories and demonstrate how multiple functional stories can contribute to addressing a broader business user story.

BUSINESS STORY:

As a sustainable home improver
I can evaluate the cost-effectiveness of my sustainability improvements

FUNCTIONAL STORIES:

As a sustainable home improver
I can use an online calculator to determine the payback period of a sustainable investment

As a sustainable home improver
I can see a table explaining common methods of recouping solar panel installation costs

As a sustainable home improver
I can calculate monthly repayments and savings for a "green" loan

What are they useful for?

Once formed, **user stories support many aspects of our work**, from branding and strategy to product development. We continuously refer back to user stories throughout the project lifecycle and evolve them as new learnings or requirements come to light. They provide a valuable tool that enables the project team **to express a shared project vision in a common language — one that is understood across disciplines, from subject matter experts to technical specialists**.

User stories also **provide a common thread that weaves through** the variety of artefacts that support our work, such as **project priorities and work estimates, system specifications, flow diagrams, touchpoint design, quality assurance and acceptance testing, user interface designs, and more**.

It should be noted, that, like personas, the discussion that occurs around the creation and refinement of these documents is often as important as what's actually documented — they are **living documents and serve as launch-pads for analysis and discussion**, not a "finished product", set in stone.

As **user stories can be interpreted in a variety of ways**, they are by themselves insufficient to describe a system, process, product or service. However, this seeming ambiguity also represents a key strength: user stories **allow the project team flexibility in how to respond to a particular design challenge** — allowing for innovative ways of creating value — while still achieving **clarity on overall project vision and priorities**.

Prioritising using business user stories **keeps the focus on what is valued by end-users, rather than the implementation detail**, while still taking into consideration a variety of factors, including effort estimates, business and user value, and risk. Functional user stories can also be prioritised, as part of project work plans, to help ensure that implementation tasks are targeted at high-value activities.