

Sorry, Microsoft: Three Times We Broke the Style Guide (On Purpose)

By Paige B. Stevens

Let's be clear up front: I use the Microsoft Writing Style Guide all the time. It's a solid, well-reasoned reference, and it settles plenty of debates before they start. It's just not the final word on every screen.

A style guide is a map, not a cage. Every rule exists to help users, and once in a while, the most helpful thing a writer can do is politely ignore it.

Here are three times my team did exactly that. Each one gets the same treatment, because even rule-breakers need structure:

- **The rule:** what the guide says.
- **The context:** what made our situation different.
- **The decision:** what we did instead.
- **The evidence:** why we sleep fine at night.

We said "tap," and we'd tap it again

The rule. Microsoft prefers input-neutral verbs like "select." It's a smart, inclusive default: "select" works whether you're using a mouse, a keyboard, a touchscreen, or your voice.

The context. Our app lived on phones. Only phones. No desktop version, no keyboard shortcuts, no plans to change that. Every single action happened the same way: one finger, one screen.

The decision. We wrote "tap." "Tap **Save**." "Tap the menu icon." No apologies.

The evidence.

- **We didn't have the problem "select" solves.** Input-neutral wording is insurance for users who interact in many ways. Ours interacted in exactly one.
- **"Tap" is what thumbs actually do.** Instructions that match the physical action are faster to follow. On mobile, "select" can even backfire, since it often means highlighting text or picking from a list.
- **The platforms agree.** iOS and Android both say "tap," so our app sounded like every other app on the user's phone, in the best way.

The fine print: if the app ever grows a desktop version or adds voice control, "select" gets its job back.

"Log in" and "Sign up": one door, no wrong turns

The rule. Microsoft says "sign in," not "log in." For new users, you'll often see the dependable but wordy "Create a new account."

The context. In our app, everyone walks through the same front door. New and returning users see the same screen with a single email field. There are no buttons to choose between and no fork in the road. The user enters an email, and the app figures out the rest.

The decision. Above the email field, one line says **Log in or sign up**. Not "Sign in or sign up." Not "Create a new account."

The evidence.

- **Everyone should see themselves in the first glance.** Returning users spot "Log in," new users spot "Sign up," and both know they're in the right place before they type a single letter.
- **"Sign in" and "Sign up" blur together.** Same first word, nearly the same shape. Paired up, they read like a typo or a tongue twister. "Log in" and "Sign up" are different from the first letter, so each audience finds its phrase instantly.
- **"Create a new account" promises a path that doesn't exist.** It suggests a separate signup flow. Ours has one field for everyone, so the label shouldn't hint at a detour.
- **It fits.** One short line sits comfortably above an email field on a small phone screen. "Create a new account" would need its own zip code.

The fine print: it's always "Log in" (two words), never "Login," anywhere in the UI.

Contractions take the day off when patient safety is on the line

The rule. Microsoft recommends contractions. "Don't," "can't," and "you'll" make writing sound like a friendly human instead of a legal department. Usually, we agree.

The context. Our healthcare product includes clinical content where a misunderstanding could affect a patient: medication instructions, dosing, warnings, and steps clinicians must never skip. The people reading it are busy, interrupted, and sometimes running on very little sleep.

The decision. In high-stakes clinical content, we spell it out. "Do not administer," not "Don't administer." "Cannot be undone," not "can't be undone." Everywhere else, contractions are welcome to stay.

The evidence.

- **The most important word shouldn't be the smallest.** In "Don't give this dose," the whole meaning rides on a tiny "n't." Skim past it, and the instruction flips. "Do not" gives the negative its own word and nowhere to hide.
- **It's kinder to every reader.** Spelled-out negatives are clearer for people reading in a second language, readers with lower health literacy, and anyone glancing at a phone between patients.
- **It survives translation.** Full forms translate more reliably than contractions, which matters when content must mean exactly the same thing in every language.
- **Clear beats cozy.** Warmth is great. Being understood correctly the first time is better.

The fine print: this exception is narrow on purpose. In onboarding, navigation, and general help, contractions are back on the clock.

The moral of the story

None of these were rebellions for rebellion's sake. Each one started by asking *why* Microsoft made the rule, then checking whether that reason applied to our users. When it didn't, we picked the words that served the same goal better: clarity.

And every exception got written down, kept small, and given an expiration condition. That's the difference between breaking a rule on purpose and just being inconsistent with confidence.

So keep your style guide close. Just make sure you know why every rule is in there, so you'll recognize the rare day it doesn't fit.