Search Boxes

Best Practice: How to Implement Search Boxes

Many different designs call for some form of search box, and each one of these occasions will present different constraints, such as the appearance, location, size, and visibility afforded by the particular website, application, program, archive, or database. Therefore, these implementation guidelines are in no way exhaustive or applicable to every specific instance where search boxes are required. However, some qualities must remain the same across all of these different uses; so, we shall focus on the more general nature of search boxes and how to implement them to make the user experience as smooth, quick and efficient as possible, without focusing on any one application specifically.

1 | To distinguish the search box clearly from the rest of the user interface, you must **outline the input field** and make sure the internal color of the box contrasts with the surrounding color. Generally, search boxes are white, so they appear prominent within the design, regardless of the other colors used in the surrounding regions.

2 | Always try to place search boxes *above* the region where the results will be displayed. For this reason, you should **position search boxes at the highest point on a page**, or just beneath the global navigation area.

3 | If the main aim of a design is to allow users to search for content the moment they arrive, you should **automatically place the cursor within the search box**. When users are frequent visitors to a site and they always have to click within the search box before they can start navigating through the contents, it can become frustrating. For example, on the website of Rightmove (shown below), users must first enter a location before they can view properties, but the search box is only active once they have clicked in the input field. It may seem like a small detail, but remember the last time your system was running slow. For some reason, you had to get something done or get answers *now* and you were slowed down because your computer was having a brain freeze or your internet service seemed to be having a stroke. You know the cursor appears automatically in your default search engine's search box, so you type away, expecting to see your words magically appear—and...*eventually*, they do.
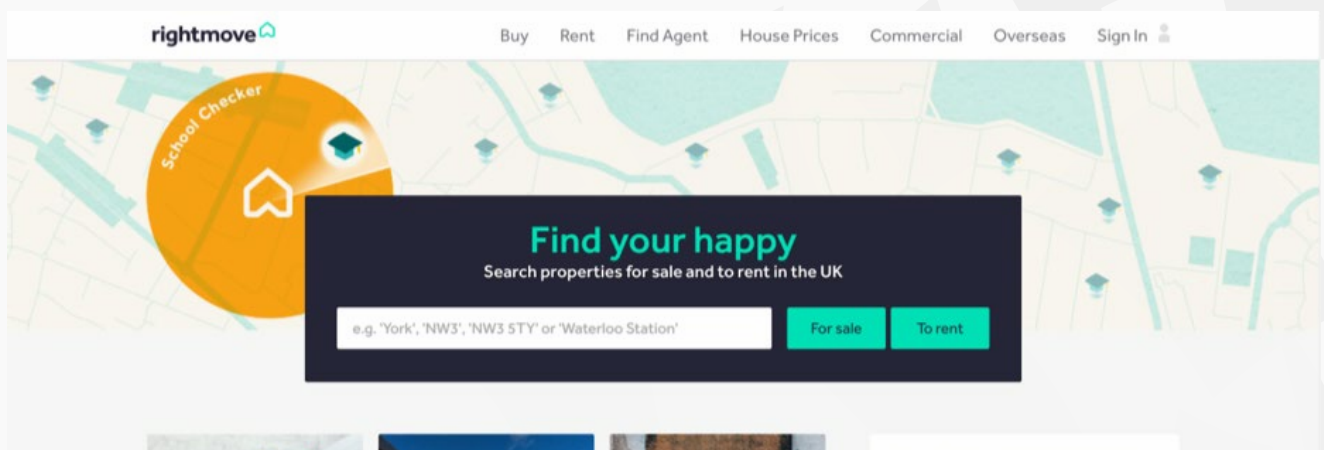
4 | When you are using a search box that directs the user to a new page, **the search term should still appear above the results or contents** on this new page. This way, the users are provided with *confirmation* of their search term, so they do not have to remember what they had entered on the previous page, or wonder if they may have made a typo.

5 | While search boxes are common within user interface design, you should **include a word or icon to show the user that the search field is *editable***. If the input field is blank, the user might assume it is simply an area of dead space within the design. Typically, the word 'search' appears in the search box and there is a small magnifying glass icon either in the right- or left-hand corner of the input field. When the user clicks in the search box, the word or phrase that is put there to trigger users to input text (often the word 'search' is used) should *instantly* disappear, so they do not have to delete the word manually before they can enter their search term.

6 | Where appropriate, **visualize previous search terms in a dropdown menu from the search box**, to help speed up the process when users make common searches. If you implement predictive search options, the dropdown menu should appear once the user has entered a letter or portion of a word. For example, if a user has previously searched for 'pandas' in a web browser, this search term should appear once the user has entered the letter 'p'. Other search suggestions should also appear within this dropdown menu, but they must be displayed after the user's own prior search terms.

7 | You must **provide the user with a clearly visible 'submit' button** or an icon, such as a magnifying glass, that performs the same function when clicked. However, the user should also be able to use the return key to submit the search term.

8 | When the search results are listed, **display them in order of relevance to the term**—from the most related to the least related—or according to the regularity with which the user selects a particular option.