

Dropdown Menus

Best Practice: How to Implement Dropdown Menus

Before implementing dropdown menus, you have to ask yourself the vital question of “Will they be the best way to organize the content of a webpage or application?”. Do not use dropdown menus when:

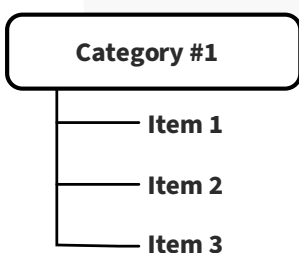
- You wish to show the users where they are within the website or application. When providing the user with such contextual information is important, use navigation tabs.
- The user would benefit from seeing the content of the individual menus together.
- When a category contains only one item.

Follow these steps for the implementation of dropdown menus:



1. Identify dropdown categories and menu titles

Review your content to establish common themes and links between items, options, functions and site/application contents. For vertical dropdown menus, the number of sets of options should be no greater than ten due to the arrangement of menu titles side by side and spanning the width of the user interface. This restricts the amount of space available for presenting the menu titles, since (by their very nature) they drop down; you cannot stack them one on top of the other.



2. Assign a logical and fitting label to each category

This label must not be too long—to conserve the available space along the panel or screen—nor so short that the clarity of the content-defining term is sacrificed. Remember these labels are used to promote awareness of what the users will find when they select a menu item; using ambiguous or unfamiliar terms can be confusing or misleading, wasting the users’ time when they investigate the options offered in a menu.

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Item 1

Item 2

Item 3

3. Determine the order

Depending on the situation, frequency of use can be an appropriate criterion. That is, place the actions that users are most likely to need at the top. In other cases, an alphabetical order can be useful. Obviously, you will not know for certain what will work best for your users, so conducting some usability testing can be useful.

Please select 

Item 1

Item 2 

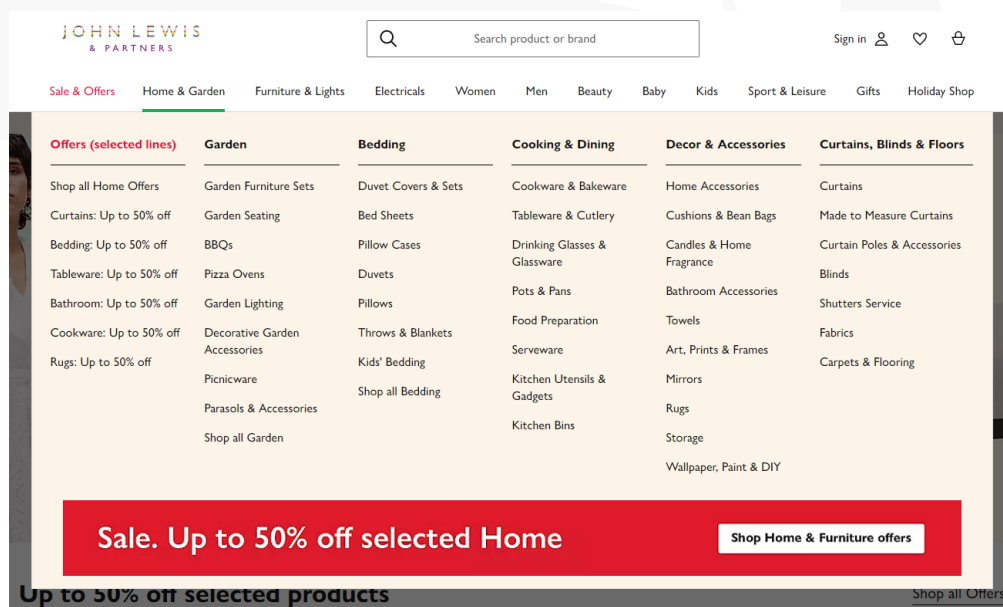
Item 3

4. Add visual indicators

For horizontal menus, use visual indicators such as the right-facing black arrows in this example. These cues inform the user that hovering the cursor over an option with extra options will reveal an associated sub-category in a further dropdown menu. This new menu then appears to the right, with the first possible selection now in line with the corresponding item in the original dropdown menu.

Other visual cues to guide the user are:

- **Background color** to inform them which option will be selected according to the position of the cursor.
- A clear **boundary** around the dropdown menu to help users isolate the group of available options from the rest of the user interface. A clearly defined boundary reduces visual confusion with the surrounding information on an option's selection.
- If you decide to use a mega dropdown menu, getting the visual aspects right involves **using headers and dividers** so the user can immediately determine which category an individual option belongs to. **White space** can also play an important part in helping the user identify groups of options, so include a small amount of this 'dead' space between different groups to avoid confusion and keep the experience agreeable.



An example of a mega dropdown menu from johnlewis.com

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Please select ▾

- Item 1
- Item 2
- Item 3**
- Item 4
- Item 5
- Item 6

5. Choose the interactive elements of the design

- Should the dropdown list appear when the user simply hovers the cursor over the category title? Or should the menu only appear when the user has clicked on the category label? The former method saves the user from having to interact directly; the latter ensures the menu does not appear unless the user expressly wants it to.
- Decide whether the menu should disappear when the cursor is moved to another region of the user interface. Again, removing the menu in this way saves the user from interacting in order to return to the rest of the display. Even so, it can be extremely frustrating if the user moves the cursor away without the intention of closing the menu.

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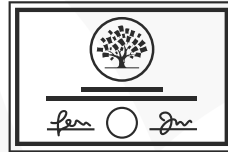


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