

# iOS AND iPad OS 14 PUBLIC BETA PREVIEW: SOMETHING FOR EVERYBODY

*There are so many new features that it's hard to keep track*

By [Dieter Bohn@backlon](#) Jul 9, 2020, 1:08pm EDT - The Verge

In anticipation of [today's release of the public betas of iOS 14 for the iPhone and iPadOS 14](#) for the iPad, I've been using the developer betas and facing a curious mix of feeling both comfortable and overwhelmed.

Unless you count the big changes to the iPhone's home screen (and I only partially do), neither OS offers a big new vision of what your phone or tablet can be. And yet, both have new feature lists so long that I quail at the idea of trying to enumerate them all, much less give you impressions. Are there *technically* a thousand new features in iOS 14 and iPadOS 14? I don't actually know, but the number is sufficiently high as to be overwhelming.

As I have been using iOS 14 (which is how I'll refer to both platforms unless I need to specify iPhone or iPad), I have had a little story I made up running around in my head.

I imagined that Apple's executives got all of the engineers into a room last year after WWDC and said, "Phew, what's next?" And the engineers looked at each other quietly until one of them said, "Uh, I have this feature you keep making me put on the back burner," to which an executive replied, "Sure, do that."

Then there was pure, glorious chaos as everybody at Apple clamored to get their thing back on the roadmap. Each time, the executive said, "Sure, why not?"



*New home screen widgets in iOS 14.*

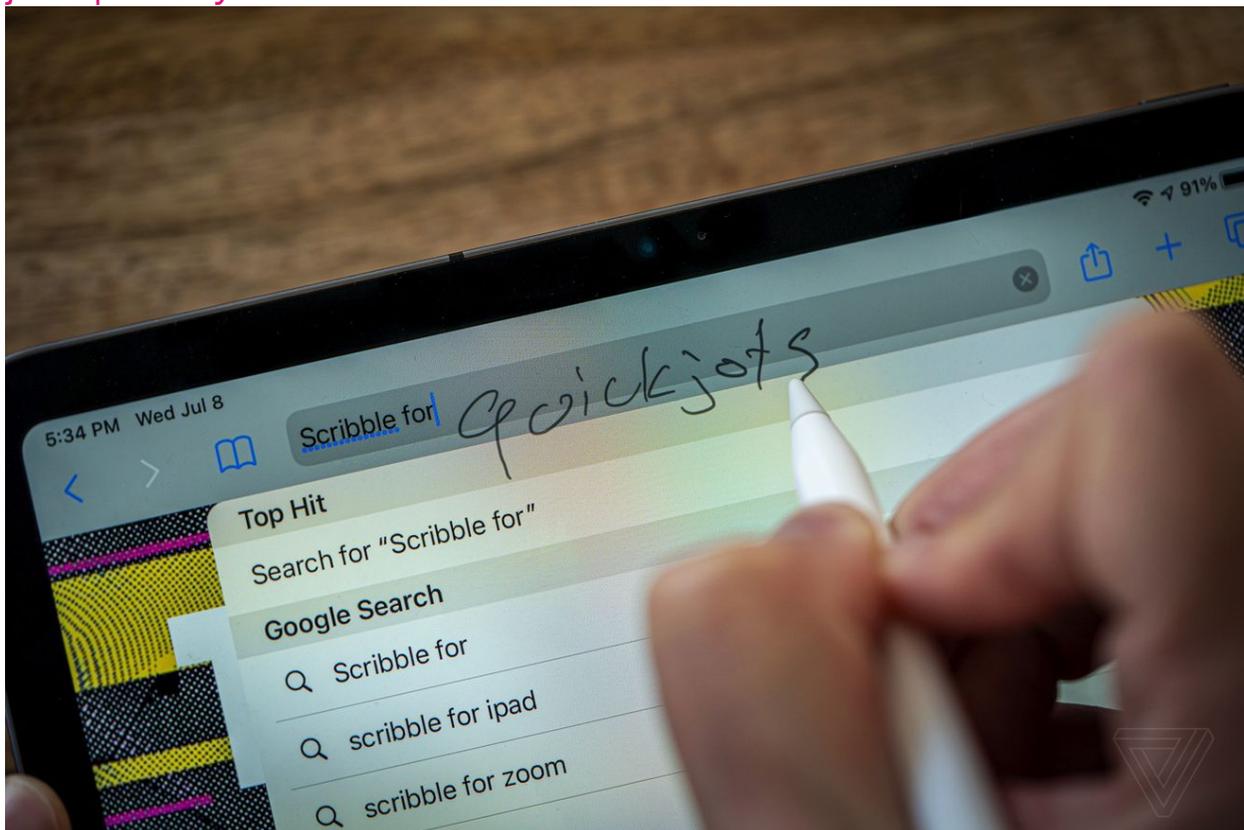
# THE NEW IPHONE HOME SCREEN

The iPhone (but, strangely and annoyingly, not the iPad) is getting three big new feature concepts on its home screen. You could argue that Apple has **borrowed from Android** — or **perhaps Windows Phone** — but all I care about is that the iPhone finally allows for some complexity and customization on the home screen. Here are the big new features:

1. There's an entirely new widget framework that works across iOS, iPadOS, and macOS. On the iPhone, Apple is allowing you to put these widgets on any home screen in any location on the grid. You can also create "stacks" of widgets you can flip through and "smart stacks" that try to put the most relevant widget on top.
2. There's a new "App Library" where all of your app icons appear, auto-categorized (mediocrely) by Apple. This means, for the first time, app icons can appear in multiple places on the iPhone. And for the first time, you can get rid of that annoying "junk" folder of apps you never use. Sadly, you can't recategorize apps in the App Library, you can't move the category folders around, and weirdly, it's not available on the iPad.

3. Finally, you can go into an overview mode and “uncheck” entire pages on your home screen, which effectively lets you set up home screen pages for certain tasks (like work or exercise or whatever) that you can show or hide at will. Unfortunately, you can’t have an app icon appear in multiple places on your home screen as you can on Android, so this feature may not be as useful as it first appears.

I’ve already written a piece and made a video where I go more in-depth on the iPhone’s new home screen and the encouraging trend of Apple allowing (but not requiring) complexity on the iPhone. Rather than repeat myself, I’ll [just point you there](#).



*Scribble lets you jot down quick text, but it's not great for longer writing.*

# THE APPLE PENCIL STAYS IN YOUR HAND MORE

In its second iteration (blessedly called iPadOS 14 instead of iPadOS 2), Apple is taking a break from trying to teach us all-new metaphors for moving app windows around on a screen. Although I still think the iPad's windowing system is unintuitive, I am relieved that Apple isn't messing with it this year — though **Apple is being a little more strict** about making sure third-party apps work at multiple sizes.

But the iPad still gets a flagship feature: Scribble. That's Apple's branding for the ability to enter text directly into any text field with the Apple Pencil. We've seen other platforms do similar things, but usually, handwriting recognition happens in a separate box.

To use Scribble, you simply place the point of the Apple Pencil in a text entry box and start writing. You don't have to keep your point inside the field, either. Once the iPad recognizes that you're writing (and it's quite good at doing so), you can roam around the screen as you write.

Your handwriting resolves into text in that field after a half-second-or-so delay when you finish a word. That's both impressive and frustrating. It's impressive because iPadOS 14 is as good or better than anything else I've

tried at recognizing my terrifically bad handwriting. (Interestingly, Apple says it is not using real-time on-device machine learning to improve its recognition of your handwriting over time. There's a static model it developed that applies to everybody.) It's frustrating because that delay is just long enough that you won't catch a mistranscription right away, and you'll have to go back and fix it.

Going back and fixing a mistranscription is not quite as elegant as you'd probably like. You can circle words to select them or scratch them out to erase them, but nailing cursor placement and word insertion feels a little haphazard. It's very close to being great, but there's a kind of uncanny valley of interaction it falls into.

All that said, I love Scribble for short bits of text, like jotting a search into the Safari URL bar or a quick text in Messages. It makes it so you can leave the Apple Pencil in your hand more if that's what you're already using in the first place. There's a better "flow" to it, to borrow a term from Microsoft's Panos Panay (who knows a thing or two about pen input on tablets).

Apple Pencil support in Apple's Notes app has been beefed up as well. Now, you can select text from your handwriting and then copy it as plain text for pasting elsewhere. That makes taking notes with the Apple Pencil a much nicer proposition, as getting that text out to

someplace you might want to is finally easier. It's not a unique trick — Samsung's Galaxy Note was able to do this last year — but it is a necessary feature.



*The new look for Siri in Compact UI.*

## COMPACT UI AND UNIVERSAL SEARCH

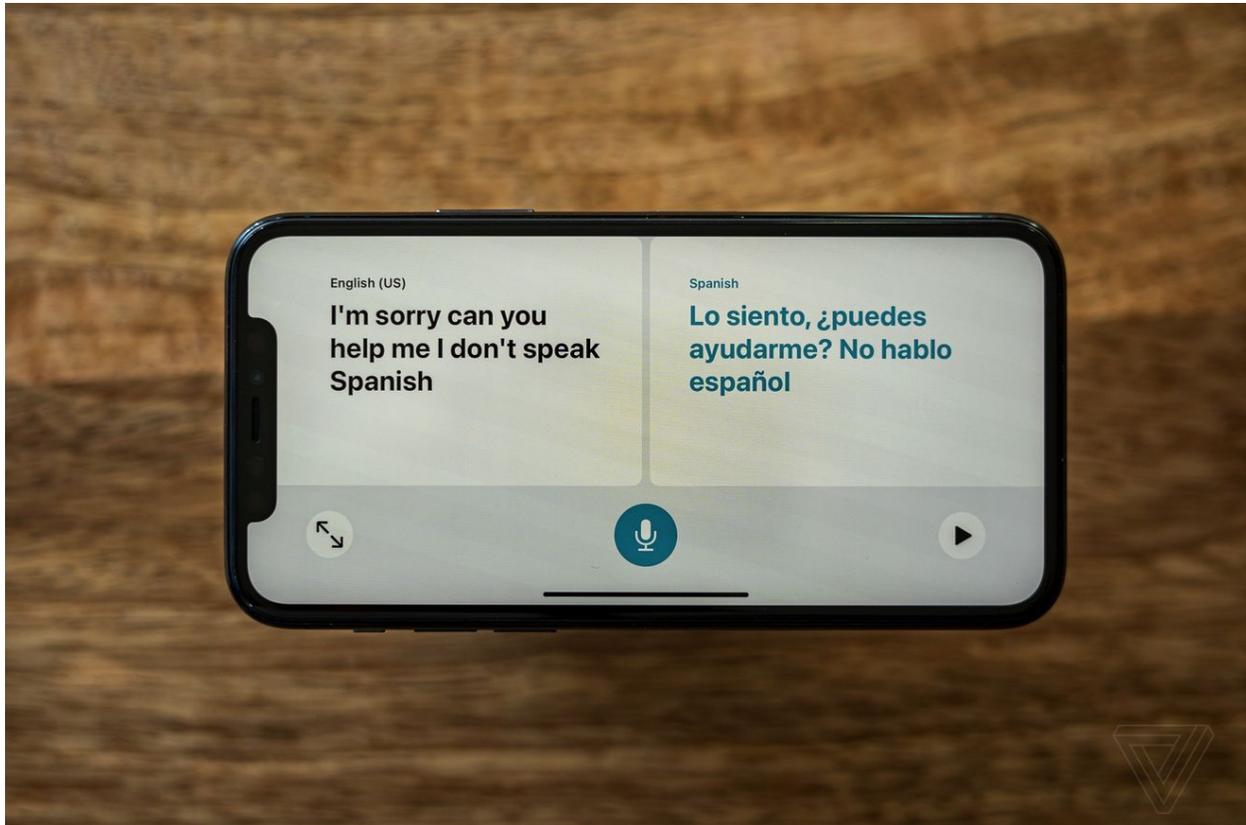
Apple has apparently decided that users won't be discombobulated by things appearing on top of other things on iOS anymore. It's introduced a few new features that fall under the rubric of a "compact UI," which, so far as I can tell, amounts to letting apps show content on top of other apps without taking up the whole screen.

So incoming calls just appear as a specialized notification at the top of the screen instead of taking over completely. (Finally!) The same feature will be offered to third-party VOIP apps. FaceTime and other apps can spawn a Picture-in-Picture window that persists as you switch apps around — and it can be resized. (Finally!) The PiP feature works great with YouTube in Safari (you have to go full-screen first to get Apple’s more standard video buttons), but I suppose it’s TBD how quickly other video apps take up this feature. If there’s any hope, it’s that Netflix and other video apps have **supported PiP on the iPad** for years, so hopefully they will follow suit adopting it on the iPhone as well.

There’s also a new “compact Siri” interface, which amounts to a little multicolored bubble at the bottom of the screen on both the iPhone and iPad. It’s nice that it doesn’t block whatever it is you’re looking at on the screen, but there’s no interactivity between the screen and Siri just yet.

But for my money, the best new compact UI feature is the new search bar. It does a better job of being universal now, letting you type in apps, documents, and (finally!!) web searches and then just hit Enter to finish your search. It starts searching and filtering down with each letter you type, and the whole thing feels faster and better.

You still get to it by a swipe down on the home screen or by hitting CMD-Space on an external iPad keyboard. That last option is great for my workflow, as the other thing this search can surface is Siri shortcuts. I use them for a few custom web searches, and having fast access to them is wonderful.



*The new Translate app from Apple.*

## NEW APP FEATURES

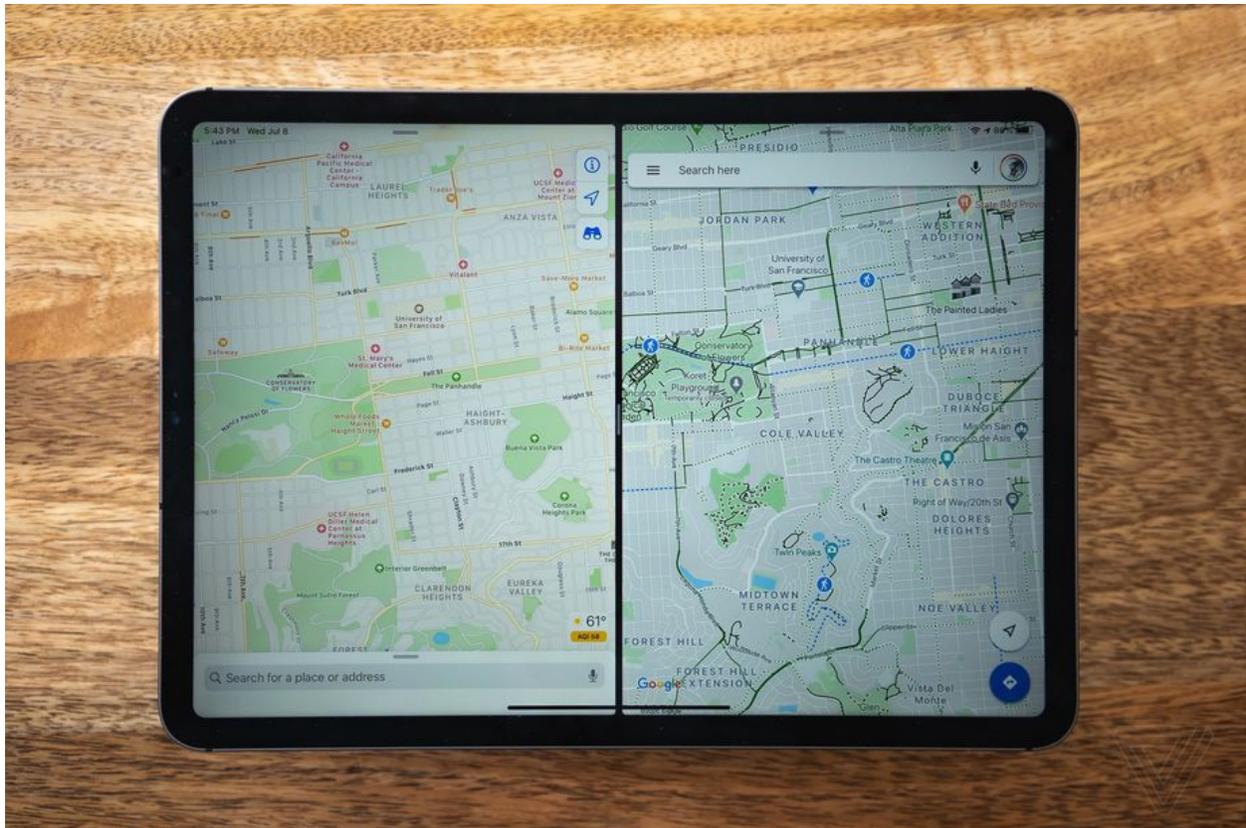
Apple has made a new Translate app for the iPhone (but, again, it's weirdly absent from the iPad). It supports translations between English, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Russian, German, French, Italian, Brazilian Portuguese, and Arabic. In my very brief testing

with my very (very) bad Spanish, it seemed to work about as well as Google Translate in conversation mode.

Apple's version of the app is a little more bare-bones, but to me, that might be a feature, given in a situation where you'd really need a translation app, you'd want it to be as simple as possible.

Siri picks up new languages it can translate between, and Safari is picking up native webpage translation for English, Spanish, Simplified Chinese, French, German, Russian, and Brazilian Portuguese. Here, too, it seems to work about as well as Google Translate for getting the gist of an article.

Messages now has support for threading, which seems like overkill to me. Then again, I'm not in any massively big iMessage group chats. You can also specifically mention people in those chats, which is helpful for people who turn off all notifications for them. Both features degrade gracefully if you're texting with people who are on an older version of iOS.

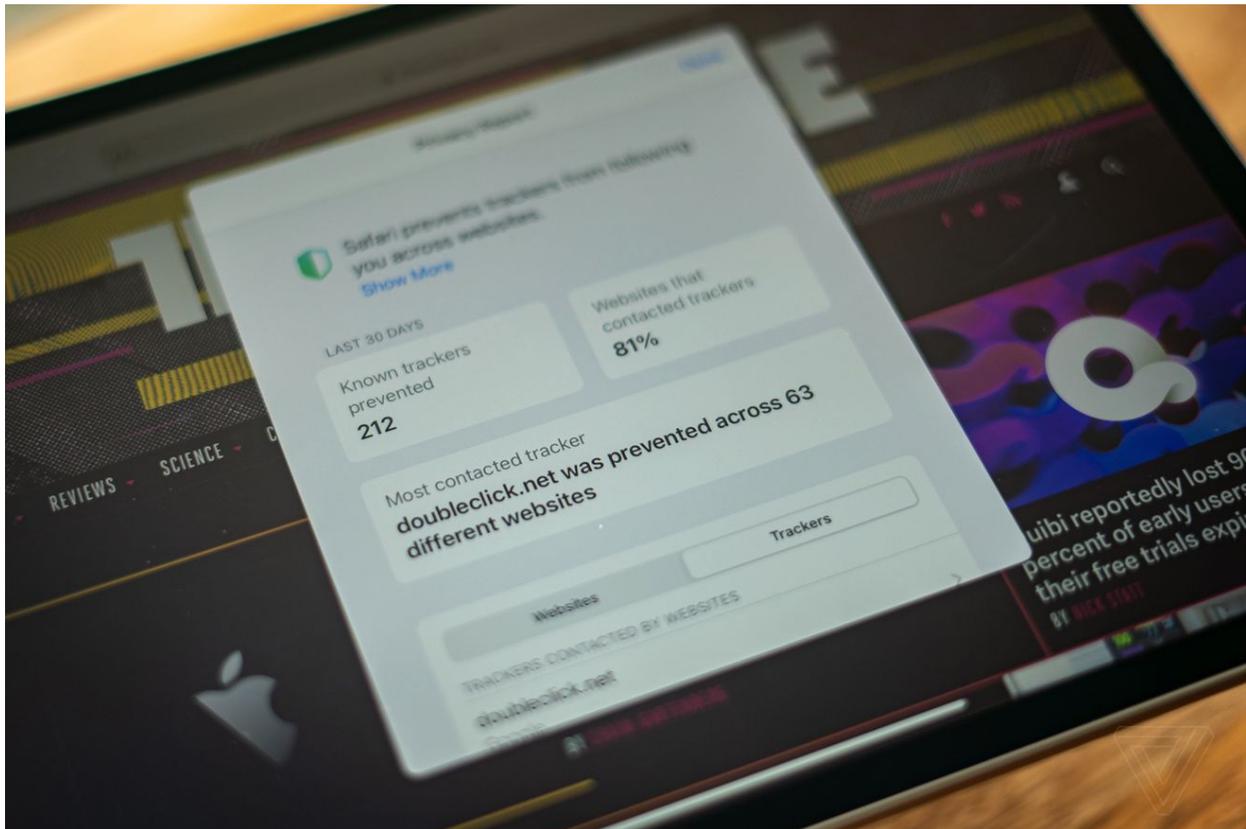


*Apple Maps adds biking directions, but there's no overlay of what streets have bike paths like you can get on Google Maps.*

Apple's Maps app will pick up its new, more detailed mapping information for Canada, the UK, and Ireland. Living in the Bay Area, I can tell you it makes a world of difference. I'm less impressed with the new "guides," which seem like little more than an opportunity for quick content partnerships. Speed cameras, congestion zones, and electric vehicle routing are also coming.

But the headline feature for Maps is biking directions, and Apple's done a passable job with it. You get a view of the elevation on your route and some detail on what exactly the bike-friendliness of each road will be.

However, Apple Maps doesn't support overlays in the way that Google Maps does, so you kind of have to just trust the route that Apple provides instead of using your own judgment from what Google can show you. Biking in the city is stressful, and being able to see all of the bike lanes on the map is important information. Apple already lets you toggle between traffic, transit, and satellite overlays. It needs a bike one, too.



*Safari will tell you how many trackers have been “prevented,” though it’s not clear what you’re supposed to do with that information.*

## EVERYTHING ELSE

Normally, this section is the place where I’d list a bunch of interesting but perhaps not consequential features and

updates. But this year, “everything else” feels like it constitutes the *bulk* of what makes up the new stuff in iOS and iPadOS 14. There’s a lot here (some of which I haven’t been able to really test yet), and it’s difficult to give you big thematic buckets.

On a system level, the biggest changes might be in privacy. Apple is requiring apps to request permission for certain kinds of tracking, and it’s requiring app makers to make an RDA nutritional data-style fact sheet for the kinds of privacy policies their apps have. It’s also popping a warning when apps look at your clipboard — which has already caused some apps to clean up their acts. All will exert pressure on the app ecosystem to change.

Similarly, Safari is now going to show a report of the trackers it has “prevented.” Note the word here is “prevented,” not “blocked,” as fully blocking some web technologies would break a lot of things. The effect is largely the same, though: Apple’s more aggressive Intelligent Tracking Prevention framework will go much further than Chrome in stopping tracking on the web. The number it shows you isn’t anything you can *do* anything with beyond using it to shame websites. (I think the number doesn’t tell the whole story, but that is... another story.)

That’s just a *few* of the privacy features, but I’m also pleased to see so many accessibility features. Apple has

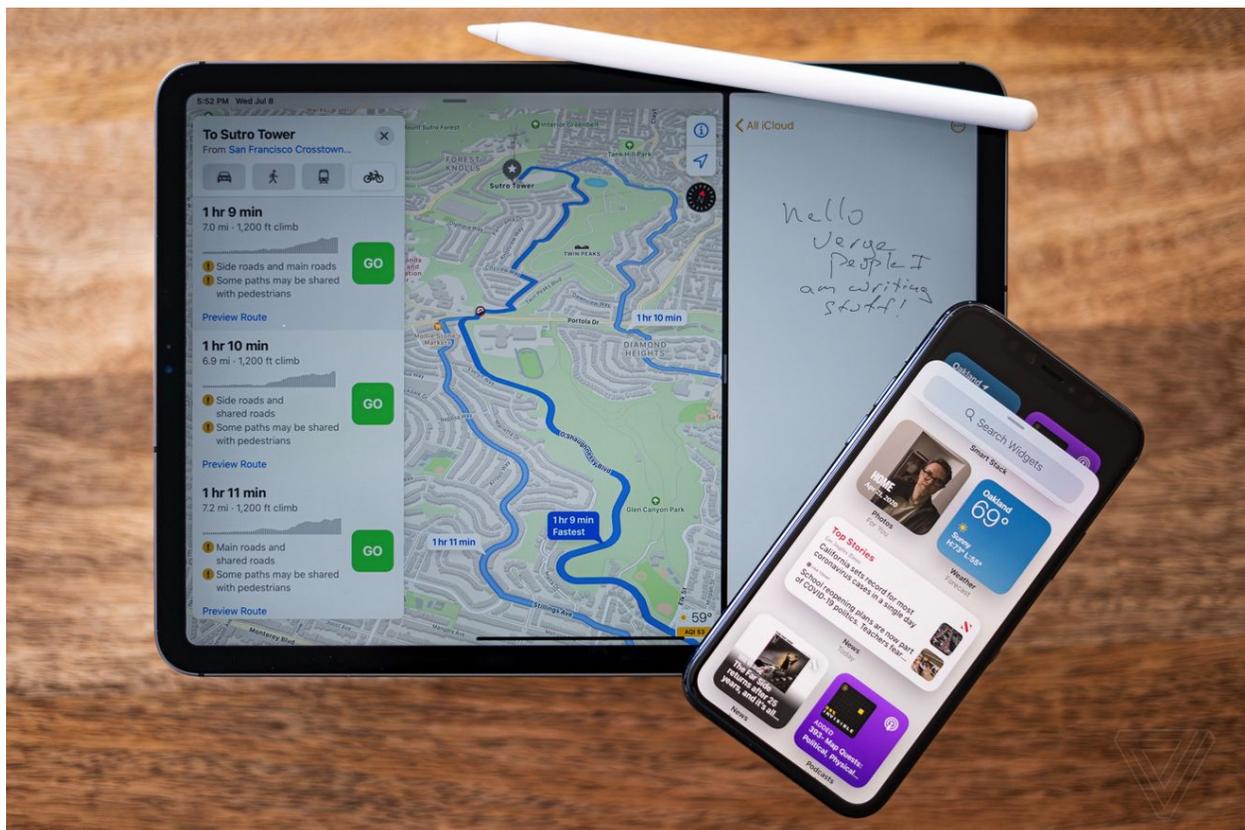
added machine learning to its VoiceOver accessibility feature so it can read the screen in apps that haven't been updated to support it officially (just like Android 11 will). There are also headphone accommodations, spatial audio for AirPods users, and "Sound Recognition," which can alert you to the sound of a fire alarm or doorbell. The Back Tap feature has garnered a lot of attention, too. It lets you tap the back of the iPhone to trigger certain actions. It's fun, but in the early betas, I triggered it accidentally all the time.

Beyond that, like I said at the top, the list of features is so long it seems like everybody at Apple was given permission to just go ahead and ship their pet feature. We're finally going to get the ability to set alternative browsers and email apps as the default. (I haven't been able to test this yet.) The clock app has a nice bedtime feature, Memoji have been enhanced, the camera is able to take photos faster after the first shot, you can lock exposure for longer, there's a redesigned image picker, you can use your iPhone as a car key for certain cars, and just far, far too many other things for me to get into here.

Hell, I haven't even mentioned App Clips, which are small, temporary versions of apps that will either be little-used curiosities (as Instant Apps for Android seem to be) or a major shift in how we think about apps and their

permanence on our phones. What if an app was as easy to use and dismiss as a browser tab?

Here's another example: photo captions. This is a big deal for me because it means I can label certain photos I am constantly searching for (the local train map, the one good photo of a haircut to show a barber, etc). It'll make finding those photos much easier. As feature 637 (or whatever), though, it just gets lost in the shuffle.



*iPadOS 14 and iOS 14 should be available this fall, but the public beta is available now.*

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