Web Usability Testing Guidance

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Introduction

The aims of these usability tests are to be simple and reactive in order for them to be run frequently, easily, and on demand. Using this framework, the time it will take to run the tests should be very quick, enabling you to create tests when needed in a fast turn-around time.

The tests are split up into two main sections and one optional section. These sections are:

- Silent Tasks
- Non-silent Tasks
- Web based tasks (optional)

They all require the user to sit at a computer and navigate round to various part of the website following tasks given to them on a piece of paper or presented on screen.

Because simplicity is the key, the only thing needed for the tests is for someone to sit next to the user to take notes on what they are doing and to write down any occasions where they feel the user has struggled on a particular task. Notes can simply be: if they successfully completed the task, what route they took to completion, where they got lost, what questions they had to ask, how you had to prompt them etc.

The tasks can be anything that a user can reasonably complete on the website in the time given. So examples are: being given a topic to find information about, filling out an online form being given the information to enter or generally giving their own feedback on what they think of the website.

What are Usability Tests?

Usability tests are a way for a website manager to gather useful feedback on their website, from a select sample of typical users. The tests are run with a user using the website with the aim to gather as much information about how the user interacts with the website as possible. This will then provide sufficient evidence and cause, to then make changes to a website in order to make it more usable. It is the only real way to test whether or not your website is actually of any use to a user in the real world.

Notes on users

Research suggests that a sample group of roughly 5 students is more than enough and should point out the obvious flaws with a websites design. Obviously, this depends on various factors, and it is possible to have more if you wanted. But the chances are a lot of information you gather will be repeated. It is also a good idea to obviously get a range of students from different year groups, ages, ethnicities, degree etc. This should be clear as to why.

Also, as the students are taking the time out to complete the tests, some incentive is likely going to be needed to be offered. Recommended prizes are simply small amounts of money for Amazon vouchers for each participant. It is also probably wise that once a group of students have been selected, to have a solid back up list of students and to continually remind students of the tests via email. This attempts to avoid the
issue of no-shows.

Notes on tasks

An interesting point to make would be that when contacting the user or on the task sheets, it is not wise to call the usability tests: ‘tests’. As this is perceived by most people to try and complete the test as efficiently or in the best way possible. This is not what we want to record. We want to record what they would do as though they are doing it in their free time. A better idea is to simply call them ‘tasks’.
Also, try to keep some of the tasks purposely vague. This is not to trip up the user, it simply allows you to record how they attempt to tackle a certain task. For example, if the task you want to ask is: “Find our newsletter/blog”, you may want to word it: “Find where you would find regular updates on what we are doing”, as this could produce different results to what you were expecting. For example, students may go to your Twitter feed instead.
The overall aim of the tasks is to gather realistic information. Ask yourself “would the user reasonably do this in their free time?” and think about the ideal situation in how the user completes the task.

If, for example, you have a particular area of the website you want to improve, or you’ve found from previous testing that users find it very hard to navigate around your website, you can focus the tasks to tackle them kinds of problems. Focus allows you to improve your website in a more methodical way.
It is also possible for you to repeat questions from previous tests to check if the outcome has been improved. This is an excellent way to self-evaluate.

Notes on observers

When an observer sits with a student, it should be obvious when a user gets stuck. Primarily, they should look out for incidents where the user stops concentrating on their tasks and starts thinking about the tool and how they are going to use it. For example, when you are hammering in a nail you don’t think about how to use a hammer; good websites should be the same. Note questioning words, especially where users question their own judgement, “why can’t I find …”, “I expected to see …” etc. as this indicates that the workflow for the task may have broken down.
Also they need to keep an eye on occasions where the user completely fails to do a task. They may need some prompting to unstick them, but the observer should be careful not to bias the test. These should be the highest priority issues for them to fix. If users recover from getting stuck, notes should be made how they recovered. Prolonged periods of silence from the test subject may also require prompting, as they should be talking all the time. Observers need to ask them what they are thinking or looking for but avoid words like ‘try’ (e.g. ‘what are you trying to do?”) as this implies that they are currently failing. If they ask them ‘what would you do at home?’, make sure they note down if they say email or phone or ask another member of staff, and try to get the observers to ask them who they would contact and make a note of this.

After each user session, the observer then needs to restarts the web browser the user was using and clear all website data. The observer will also need to allow a few minutes after each session to write up their thoughts into a more readable form. After an observer has completed all their allocated sessions, ask them to maybe summarise their thoughts into three concise points/issues they thought were the most important after observing.
When organising staff to volunteer to observe a student for you, make sure they read this document so they have a clear understanding of what is expected from the tests and what their role is. Also, set out some criteria that needs to be followed by the observer when a user does a certain action. Examples are when a user continually uses just one method for finding information, such as the search bar, ask them to repeat the task but this time not using the search bar. Ensure the observer has seen the task sheets so they know the expected results of the tests themselves. This is so they can help when the user gets stuck.
Also, when helping a user, remember the point of the tests are to help you improve the website. So don’t help the user too much when they get stuck. Especially if a user is completely lost as you may want to go away and improve the website and then reuse the task on the same user to check for an improvement.

There is a template ‘Observer Checklist’ attached which gives an overview to the observers and a format for them to fill out the notes they take on each task. Feel free to edit this to fit in with the tests but remember to keep it simple and unrestrictive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Expected Result</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home Page Tour</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 1</td>
<td>SSO/ SOO FEMALE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 2</td>
<td>SSO/ Safety</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 3</td>
<td>SSO/ Study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 4</td>
<td>SSO/ Exam Time/ Timetables</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 5</td>
<td>SSO/ Council/ Tax</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 6</td>
<td>SSO/ Pregnancy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 7</td>
<td>SSO/ Recall/ Pin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 8</td>
<td>SSO/ Exams/ Calculator</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 9</td>
<td>SSOS Sheffield / Sheffield Student Handbook</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student _______________ Observer _______________ Date ____________

*fig.1 Observer Checklist*
Non-silent tests

The aim of the non-silent tests is for the observer to watch what the user does and try to get an understanding of the users thought process. The main outcome is for the observer to write down how they think the user reacted to the website. With the option of also adding what the student thinks too. Try and encourage the user to talk you through what they are doing as they do it.

The tasks should be casual, and where possible, try to use relaxed language as if you were asking your friend on the street. This is to mimic a student’s thought process or the process in which students relay information to one another. Continue to talk to the user throughout the tasks to get a feel for what they are doing but try not to influence their actions or distract them too much.

The tasks should be short, and if necessary, target a particular focus on the website. Example tasks are:

| You know the exams timetable is out soon but you’re not quite sure when. |
| How do you find it? |

This task is a simple navigation task which will show if the information you want the user to find is accessible. It is also a good way to test keywords and terminology. An example would be using the term ‘exams calendar’ or ‘examination timetable’ instead and see if the user responds as responsively when finding the information.

An example note the observer might take could be:

| Home->Exams->Timetables->Current Timetable |
| - User took a long time to find initial Exams link on homepage. |
| - Had to clarify if current timetable meant the future timetable to be released, or old one on link heading. |

This comment shows the route through the website the user took, as well as some comments on how the user tackled the task and what questions they asked.

This tells us a lot of information about the link placement for the initial Exams page on the homepage and the terminology used for Current Timetable. This is all valuable information for improving a websites usability.

Attached is an example of a Non-Silent task sheet for you to edit and use.
Silent Tests

The aim of the Silent Tests are to gather information on what the user thinks are the main issues with the website. Being impartial to the process of the website's development, the user is more likely to point out things that may require a lot of heavy work and things that staff don’t necessarily want to have to do. They also don’t understand the restrictions with website design as much so may suggest ideas that are more creative with less bounds.

The format of these tests are very similar to the Non-Silent tests except the observer is not required to write anything down. The observer does not necessarily even have to sit with a user. This can allow time for the observer to go and observe another user if you organised it that way.

The task sheet below allows space for the user to make comments. After doing the Non-Silent tests, the user should have a good idea of the type of things they should be writing down. But if they are unsure you can show them a few examples.

**Usability Testing Non-Silent Completion**

Whilst completing the tasks you are to talk to the observer about your thought process and about each step you take and why you took it. Try to talk as much as possible to the observer.

Firstly you are simply to navigate from the desktop to the SED website. You can do this in any way you want. Once you have done this wait for an observer to ask you some questions.

**Task 1**

You are having trouble in your relationship with your partner.

**Where can you find help?**

**Task 2**

Before you go to Sheffield your parents want you to read some information about safety in Sheffield so they can have a bit of peace of mind.

**Where would you find that information?**

**Task 3**

Your personal tutor has said that you need to go and see MASH but you are unsure what this is and too embarrassed to ask.

**Where would you find out?**

**Task 4**

You know the exams timetable is out soon but you’re not quite sure when.

**How do you find it?**

*fig.2 Non-Silent Task sheet*
Web Based Tests (optional)

In the Usability Tests that were run at the end of 2014, a web based method of Usability Testing was also used as a trial run. Using the web service, Usability Hub, tests were created that allowed the users to follow some on-screen instructions and provide feedback through clicks on the web page.

The advantages of this is that you can get a lot of responses from users in not a long amount of time and with not much effort needed. The tests are fairly simple to set up, and a free account on the site lets you create unlimited private tests which allow a URL for the test to be sent to users or copied to the task sheet.

However, the method of delivery for this does need improving, so it is advisable that this method only be used as a small part of the testing or not at all. The main issues are:

- Copying the test URL to the task sheet means the user has to type it in manually which is prone to error. A suggestion to help this would be to use a URL shortener but it is still not ideal.
- Once a user completes one test, it takes them to another random test from the website that is not relevant. The user needs to know to stop after doing the one test and enter the URL for the next.
Because the tests simply provide static images of the website, things like drop down boxes, search bars, and other dynamic elements on the page are not usable by the user. So this method does not always provide the most accurate results in that respect.

Once you have collected all the results from the users, if you go back onto Usability Hub you should have a result like below. This shows where the users have clicked on the screen via a heat map.
How to run the tests

**Preparation**

Before you run the tests, the first step is to prepare all the questions and the test material. Using the templates provided, and the information on this document, you should be able to think of a selection of suitable questions. Remember to make the tasks as engaging and realistic as possible.

**Observers**

You will then need to source staff members or observers to volunteer to help with the tests. They will need to be free for the full period of time needed for the tests which estimated take about 30-40 minutes not including a brief beforehand. You will also need to brief them on the aims of the tests and exactly what they need to do.

**Location**

You will also need to find a suitable location to run the tests. Depending on how many users you decide to use, you will need a computer per user and a room that is big enough to allow sufficient space between users and that is quiet enough. Suggestions would be dedicated computer rooms that can be booked out for blocks of at least an hour.
Gathering users

Getting student interest could possibly take the longest part of the preparation and you will most likely need to leave roughly two weeks after sending out an advertisement for it. The suggested way would be to email the potential users and give them access to an online form to register their interest. Once you have a decent sample of students, you can then go through selecting those that will be most beneficial to the tests. Remember to think about which groups you want to target, age range, year group, specific faculty etc. You will also most likely need to advertise some sort of reward for taking part in the tests such as vouchers or a free lunch.

Test Day

On the day of the tests, make sure you arrive to the location in plenty of time to be able to organise the room as necessary and log into all the computers using dummy accounts if you want. Ensure all task sheets are printed off and that all the observers are prepared and have read the Observer Checklist thoroughly. The way to schedule the tests is really down to you. But here are a few suggestions:

1. Run the tests on just one group going through the tests in order with one observer sitting next to one user. Simply greet the users, give a quick introduction and welcome and then get started.
2. Run two groups of testers at the same time but doing different tests. Split the users into two equal groups with one group sitting with the observers to complete the Non-Silent tests, whilst the other group sit on their own and complete the Silent tests and Web based tests. This means a smaller number of observers are needed. There will then be a rotation point halfway through where both groups switch.
3. Same as above but with three groups with the extra group doing the Web Based tests separately. The computers should be set up ready with the tests bookmarked on the web browser for quick access.

Once the users have completed the tests, make sure to take their details to check attendance and get them to sign at the bottom of the Observer Checklist. Thank them and then let them leave.

After the tests

Debrief

After the tests you should collect all the sheets in and debrief the Observers. Ask them to sum up some of the most important things they found from the tests and make sure to note these down. This kind of instant reaction feedback is great and normally forms a large part of the results. This is also a good time to ask for feedback on the actual tests and how they were run while it is fresh in the Observer’s minds. Once you have collected all this it is time to start writing it all up into some kind of report so you can decide what things to do next.
Results Report

Ideally, you will have a list of precise things to change on the website which you can simply list and then send off to the developers or respective web content editors. However, this is not always the case. So it is up to you to decipher what needs to be done by looking for any occasions when a problem was found multiple times and rank the problems somehow. Then you may need to come up with a list of suggested ‘fixes’ which can be used.

Trying to keep the results report as simple as possible leads to a higher chance of something actually being done about it. Bogging it down puts people off from actually acting upon the feedback. So try to keep it short and simple with only the key points being highlighted.

Finishing off

The last step is to ensure all the users that took part get their reward and that you have thanked the observers for volunteering. Then it’s off to getting the feedback actually implemented and moving onto preparation for the next tests.