

# **Heuristic Evaluation of Coursera.com Help Systems**

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## Overview

This study's objective was to review the usability and efficacy of help systems on Coursera.com. The study had one evaluator to judge the website's success in providing help, who filled out a heuristic evaluation form to report results. The user's sample question was: "How can I tell if a certain course offers a Course Certificate?"

## Summary of Results

The evaluator was initially unable to find an answer to the initial question, yet her response to Coursera.com's help systems was overwhelmingly positive. Despite being unsuccessful using the static help pages, she noticed and used the website's Chat Help function.

### Positive Feedback

- The evaluator was pleased that the website's help pages included a link to a survey allowing her to give feedback.
- The evaluator learned something new from a help page that was relevant to her interests. (The evaluator was looking for Course Certificate information, and found some information about Specialization Certificates, which she had not previously heard of.)
- The evaluator was very positive about the organization of the help pages. She liked the use of headings, subheadings, bullet points, and hyperlinks for ease of navigation. "I like that the writing is very brief and direct. It doesn't feel like I'm reading the fine print. It feels like it's talking to me."
- The evaluator found the answer to her question while using the Chat Help.
- The evaluator found the Chat Help to be extremely easy to use. The Chat Helper sent a screenshot to help her find the information she was looking for, and she had very positive feedback about this. "I've never seen a help desk do this before, and it's so helpful."

### Negative Results

- The evaluator was unable to find the answer to the question promptly (5-10 minutes).
- The evaluator believes that questions related to Course Certificates are important enough to merit a category on the front page of the help system.

## Results and Recommendations

Although the evaluator had strong positive feelings about the nature of Coursera.com's help systems, she was unable to find the answer to her question by herself. Although she did eventually find her answer via the Help Chat, she needed about 11 minutes to find it, from starting on the website's home page to feeling satisfied with her understanding of the answer.

The evaluator felt that the help system was oriented to her as an audience. She thought it was easy to read ("It feels like it's talking to me.") and well organized for her use. She liked the design and the writing of the help pages themselves, and found the Chat Help staff to be friendly and helpful.

However, the help systems have **high severity problems**, as indicated by the evaluator's struggle to find the correct answer. Although the heuristic evaluation form makes the website look almost flawless, it actually conceals the user's failure by focusing on her emotional reactions. Though she marked that the website was well designed, easy to navigate, and well written, she did have some suggestions for how to improve.

## Recommended Changes, In Order of Importance

1. Course Certificates are a major appeal to consumers, verifying their hard work and knowledge in a way that can make them more attractive to employers. Similarly, the evaluator believes that the **course pages need to prominently advertise their certificate**. She said she wouldn't even need to use the help systems if the certificate option on the page was more prominent and specific.

2. The evaluator believes that **Course Certificates need their own category on the front page** of the help systems. She appreciates the simplicity of having only four visible categories to start from, but she believes that certificates are important enough to merit a fifth.

3. The evaluator had a very strong positive response to using the chat, but she believes that **Chat Help should be easier to find** on the page. She suggests placing the option in a persistent margin rather than at the bottom of the help page.

## Effectiveness of the Evaluation Process

The evaluation was challenging to process because it was unusual for the evaluator to struggle to find the correct information and yet have a positive response to completing the task. In the future, I would modify the Heuristic Evaluation Form to address success and failure more specifically, when applicable.

To validate these results, the evaluation requires more evaluators. Hopefully, other evaluators would be more frustrated with their difficulties and would have more feedback about how to address these problems.

# **Appendix**

## **Source Material**

<https://learner.coursera.help/hc/en-us>

## **Evaluator Profile**

This study's only evaluator is a white woman who is very familiar with the internet. She holds a B.A. and has completed several Continuing Education courses from community colleges and on the internet. She has used the Coursera.com website before, but she had not previously used Coursera's help systems.

## **Completed Heuristic Form**

See attached page below.

# Heuristic Evaluation Form

## Rating Scale

Severity Rating	Definition
3	Impedes task completion (either product or information seeking)
2	Creates annoyance
1	Obscures a product feature or capability
0	Raises questions for further study

## Cycles

1. Efficiency
2. Recognition
3. Familiarity
4. Readability and aesthetics
5. Consistency
6. Clarity

## Cycle 1: Efficiency

Criteria	Severity Rating	Problem
The user finds that frequently-sought information is at high levels of the structure.	3	Did not find an answer to the initial question
Within headings, the most important words come first.	Good	
Layered information and branching provide minimalist paths through information.	Good	
Related information is positioned where most easily noticed.	Good	
The user can easily identify how to access online help or the online manual	0	“Help” is not immediately obvious, but it is in a typical part of the page (bottom

(or additional help)		right)
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## Cycle 2: Recognition

Criteria	Severity Rating	Problem
Titles inform without the context of surrounding information.	Good	
Index keywords are easy to recognize and distinguish.	N/A	
Symbols and color reinforce information structure.	0	Information is very well structured, but does not use symbols or color

## Cycle 3: Familiarity

Criteria	Severity Rating	Problem
Titles represent real-world concepts and tasks.	Good	
Symbols do not conflict with other common uses, such as international symbols.	0	No use of symbols
New terms are defined at every occurrence.	0	New terms are hyperlinks to pages with more information

## Cycle 4: Readability and Aesthetics

Criteria	Severity Rating	Problem
Information is presented in a size and color easy to read.	Good	
Different levels of headings are easy to distinguish.	Good	
Information is pleasing to the eye.	Good	

## Cycle 5: Consistency

Criteria	Severity Rating	Problem
Headings at the same level in a section use parallel structure to help users	Good	

identify the information they cover.		
Presentation of information on various pages is consistent so that differences between pages are meaningful.	Good	
Words have the same meaning from one use to another.	Good	

### Cycle 6: Clarity

Criteria	Severity Rating	Problem
Information pieces can be read in any order, or a guide to the order is provided.	Good	
Reused information retains meaning in any context.	Good	
Meaning holds no matter how the user combines the information pieces.	Good	