



User Research Basics

User research focuses on understanding user behaviors, needs, and motivations through observation techniques, task analysis, and other feedback methodologies. Mike Kuniaysky further notes that it is “the process of understanding the impact of design on an audience.”

The types of user research you can or should perform will depend on the type of site, system or app you are developing, your timeline, and your environment.

When to Perform User Research Methods

Guided by the [user-centered design \(UCD\)](#) process, we have provided examples of the types of research could perform at each phase of your project. A methodology may appear in one or in several phases.

Methods	Know Your User	Content	Design	Test & Refine
Card Sorting - Allows users to group your site's information. This helps ensure that the site structure matches the way users think.	YES	YES	NO	YES
Contextual Interviews - Enable you to observe users in their natural environment, giving you a better understanding of the way users work.	YES	NO	NO	NO
First Click Testing - A testing method focused on navigation, which can be performed on a functioning website, a prototype, or a wireframe.	NO	YES	YES	YES
Focus Groups - Moderated discussion with a group of users, allow you to learn about user attitudes, ideas, and desires.	YES	YES	YES	NO

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Heuristic Evaluation/Expert Review - A group of usability experts evaluating your website against a list of established guidelines.	YES	NO	NO	YES
Individual Interviews - One-on-one discussions with users show you how a particular user works. They enable you to get detailed information about a user's attitudes, desires, and experiences.	YES	YES	YES	YES
Parallel Design - A design methodology that involves several designers pursuing the same effort simultaneously, but independently, with the intention to combine the best aspects of each for the ultimate solution.	NO	NO	YES	NO
Personas - The creation of a representative user based on available data and user interviews. Though the personal details of the persona may be fiction, the information used to create the user type is not.	YES	NO	NO	NO
Prototyping - Allows the design team to explore ideas before implementing them by creating a mock-up of the site. A prototype can range from a paper mock-up to interactive html pages.	NO	NO	YES	YES
Surveys - A series of questions asked to multiple users of your website, help you learn about the people who visit your site.	YES	YES	YES	YES

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System Usability Scale (SUS) - SUS is a technology independent ten item scale for subjective evaluation of the usability.	NO	NO	NO	YES
Task Analysis - Involves learning about user goals, including what users want to do on your website, and helps you understand the tasks that users will perform on your site.	YES	NO	NO	NO
Usability Testing - Identifies user frustrations and problems with your site through one-on-one sessions where a "real-life" user performs tasks on your site.	YES	YES	YES	YES
Use Cases - Provide a description of how users use a particular feature of your website. They provide a detailed look at how users interact with the site, including the steps users take to accomplish each task.	NO	YES	YES	NO

Best Practices

During [Project Planning](#) you should:

- Consult the [UCD Guide](#) for a step-by-step visual map to guide you through the user-centered design process.
- Consider when testing can be incorporated in your schedule
 - Test early and often
- Define the target audience(s) for the site. This will assist the UX team in:
 - Creating a [screener](#)
 - Recruiting participants
 - Defining [Personas](#)

- Identifying tasks for testing

References

Observing the User Experience: A Practitioner's Guide for User Research by Mike Kuniavsky