Usability Testing Basics

An Overview



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About this Document

This document details usability testing basics—how to apply them with any product or prototype and when to apply them during any point in the development process. It also discusses how to conduct, analyze, and report on usability test findings. Then you can learn about how to do it all in Morae 3.

Usability Testing Basics

Usability Testing Defined

Usability tests identify areas where people struggle with a product and help you make recommendations for improvement. The goal is to better understand how real users interact with your product and to improve the product based on the results. The primary purpose of a usability test is to improve a design.

In a typical usability test, real users try to accomplish typical goals, or tasks, with a product under controlled conditions. Researchers, stakeholders, and development team members watch, listen, collect data, and take notes.

Since usability testing employs real customers accomplishing real tasks, it can provide objective performance data, such as time on task, error-rate, and task success. There is also no substitute for watching users struggle with or have great success in completing a task when using a product. This observation helps designers and developers gain empathy with users, and help them think of alternative designs that better support tasks and workflow.

Decide What to Test

Meet with stakeholders, including members of the development team when possible, to map out the goals for the test and discuss what areas of the system or product you will evaluate. In order to gather all of the information you will need to conduct your test, ask for feedback on:

Background: Product description and reasons for requesting feedback

Participants: The desired qualities of participants and characteristics of users or

customers of the product

Usability Goals: What you hope to learn with this test

Key Points: What kinds of actions/features the test tasks should cover—this also

may include a list of specific questions the team wants the usability test

to answer

Timeline: The timeline for testing—when the product or prototype will be ready for

testing, when the team would like to discuss the results, or any other

constraints

Additional Information:

Anything else that needs to be taken into consideration

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Be sure to identify user goals and needs as well. With this information you can then develop scenarios and tasks for participants to perform that will help identify where the team can make improvements.

For example:

- Who uses (or would use) the product?
- What are their goals for using the product?
- What tasks would those people want to or have to accomplish to meet that goals?
- Are there design elements that cause problems and create a lot of support calls?
- Are you interested in finding out if a new product feature makes sense to current users?

Determine When to Test What

Usability testing can employ many methods and work with products at many levels of development. If there is enough of an interface to complete tasks—or or even imagine completing a task—it is possible to perform a usability test. You can test a product at various stages of development:

• Low-fidelity prototype or paper prototype

Hand drawn, mocked up, or wireframe version of a product or web site that allows for a "paper prototype" style test before work begins or early in development.

• High-fidelity prototype

An interactive system that can be used on a computer, such as a Flash version of a product's user interface and interactivity. High fidelity prototypes should include representative data and mimic the experience users would have when using the finished product to accomplish tasks. Usually performed as development progresses.

Alpha and Beta versions

These not-ready-for-release versions often are stable enough and rich enough to be sent or accessed by remote participants for a usability test.

• Release version

A product that has been released to customers, and is especially effective for testing the workflow of the product from beginning to end.

Comparative or A/B

Multiple versions of a design are used in testing (often alternated between participants) to measure differences in performance and satisfaction.

Decide How Many to Test

The number of participants varies based on the type and purpose of the test. Opinions vary, but at least four participants from each group of user types (user types are determined by stakeholders and development team members when determining testing goals) are usually needed to test a product. Different testing techniques require different numbers of participants, as explained in this table.

Recommended Number of Participants by Testing Technique

	BENCHMARK METRICS	DIAGNOSTIC (FORMATIVE) EVALUATION	SUMMATIVE TESTING
How many?	8-24 users	4-6 users	6-12+ users
Metrics and Measures	Focus on metrics for time, failures, etc Tests current process or product	Less formal Increased focus on qualitative data	More formal Metrics based on usability goals
Why	Establish baseline metrics	Find and fix problems	Measure success of new design
When	Before a design project begins or early in development	During design	At end of process
How often	Once	Iterative	Once

Source: Ginny Redish

Design the Test

Document your test plan with a "protocol". You may want to use a test planning checklist to help you track all the details. Examples of each are available on the Morae Resource CD.

Scenario and task design are one of the most important factors to consider. Plan to have participants accomplish typical tasks with the product under controlled conditions. The tasks should provide the data that answers your design questions.

Consider the Where, When, and How

You will need to schedule rooms, labs and equipment, and know where your participants will be located. Usability tests can take place in a lab, conference room, quiet office space, or a quiet public space. Morae enables you to capture the product or screen and software data, facial expressions, and verbal comments. UserVue, TechSmith's remote testing service, lets participants participate in a test from home or work. Recordings from UserVue import seamlessly into Morae.

Scenarios and Tasks

Tasks are the activities you will ask your participant to do during a usability test; scenarios frame tasks and provide motivation for the participant to perform those tasks. You may have one scenario or several, depending on your tasks.

Both tasks and scenarios should be adjusted to meet goals and should be part of the conversation you have with stakeholders about the test.

Tips for Writing Scenarios

- You may find it easiest to write tasks first, then scenarios, or vice versa. In our examples, we start with writing a scenario.
 - Imagine why your users would want to use your product in general, then specifically what would motivate them to encounter the design elements you are evaluating. Scenarios should be a story that provides motivation to your participants.
- Effective tasks often contain scenario information, which give the test participant an understanding of their motivation and context for accomplishing the task and all information needed to complete the task. A scenario could be given to participants before beginning the tasks.
 - For example, to find out how users use the store on your Web site, a scenario could state, "You have been researching different types of video cameras to buy to record family videos and transfer them on to your computer. You want to use the Web site to find information about video cameras and purchase a camera based on your needs."
- Another method is to fold scenario information into each task.

 For example, a task might state, "Purchase a video camera," but a task with scenario information
 - would give more detail: "You want to purchase a video camera that is small and lightweight, and can transfer video files on to your computer. You have a budget of \$400. Find and purchase a camera that meets your needs."

Scenario Do's and Don'ts

- DO: Create a believable scenario
- DON'T: Create long, complex scenarios consider breaking them up into smaller scenarios for smaller groups of tasks

Tips for Writing Tasks

Tasks can contain as little or as much information as necessary to aid participants and give them context and motivation. Different types of tests require different types of tasks—a paper prototype might seek a more open-ended task where another type of test may need very specific tasks. Tasks fall into three main categories:

- Prescribed tasks as the test designer you determine what the participant will do.
 Example: "You want to enhance your copy of Snaglt. Using TechSmith.com, download and install the "Typewriter" style numbers for Snaglt."
- Participant defined ask participants to tell you something they would normally do with your product, and then have them do the task they described.
 - Example: "Using Snaglt 9, take a capture of something that you normally capture in your work or personal life or something similar to what you normally would do and enhance and share it the way you normally would. Please feel free to customize or use Snaglt in any way that meets your needs."
- Open ended allow participants to organically explore the product based on a scenario you provide. Example: "We are giving you \$100 to buy software that will capture your screen. Using the internet, find the software you want to buy. When you are done you can keep the software you purchase as well as any remaining funds."

The order of tasks will often follow a natural flow of product use. When order does not matter for the user, the order of tasks might need to be varied to avoid testing bias. It may be best to begin with a simple task to ease the user into the testing situation and build confidence.

Task Do's and Don'ts

- **DO:** Use the language of the participant, and write tasks that the participant might realistically expect to do in his or her use of the product.
- **DO:** Identify specific activities that represent typical tasks that your users would perform with your product. The tasks should relate back to the goals for the test and relate to your scenario. There are several types of tasks that you might use based on the data you are interested in collecting.
- **DO:** Provide additional information such as a credit card number for payment transactions, receipts for an expense reporting system, email addresses, etc.
- **DON'T:** Use any of the terms used in the product avoid clues about what to do. Avoid terms like "Click on your shopping cart to check out."
- **DON'T:** Lead the participant by using directions that are too explicit. Avoid language such as "click on the red button to begin."
- **DON'T:** Write so that you describe how to perform the task.
- **DON'T:** Write dependent tasks that require participants to complete one task before moving on; if data or other artifacts from the first task are needed, provide them in subsequent tasks.

Prepare to Measure the Experience

Usability testing tests a product under the most realistic circumstances possible while controlling the conditions. This method of user research lets the researcher collect data, as measured in numbers (quantitative) and documented as part of the test (qualitative). Different data are used to measure various aspects of usability.

Key Evaluation Measures for Usability Testing

NAME	WHAT'S MEASURED	WHEN TO USE THIS MEASURE
Task Success	Whether or not the participant was successful, and to what degree. (For example, completed with ease, completed with difficulty, failed to complete.)	Critical when effectiveness of the product is a primary goal.
Time on Task	The length of time it takes the participant to complete a task. May be averaged for all participants, and can be compared between tests.	Critical when efficiency is a primary usability goal, and when efficiency is a primary influence on satisfaction.
Errors	A count of the errors each participant makes in each task. Errors may be categorized or predefined.	Critical to both efficiency and effectiveness, use this measure when you want to minimize the problems a user may encounter in the product.
Learnability	A task is repeated at least once to determine whether the time on task is shorter, fewer errors are made, or the task is more successful.	Important to measure whether the interface will be easier to use over time.
Satisfaction	Enumerates participants' overall feelings about a product before, during and/or after a test.	Allows the participants to quantify and describe their emotional reaction to a product before, during or after a study.
Mouse Clicks	Measures the number of clicks that a participant makes.	Measures the effectiveness and efficiency of a product, suggests that a participant was able to accomplish a task with less effort.
Mouse Movement	Measures the distance the mouse travels.	Measures efficiency, suggests that a participant was able to accomplish a task with less effort.
Problem/ Issue Counts	Records, counts, ranks and/or categorizes problems observed.	Provides an overview of the issues that may be causing other measures to be less ideal. Allows comparison across studies to determine improvement. These are often weighted by how severe an issue may be.
Optimal Path	Observes the path a participant takes to accomplish a task, and compares it to a predefined optimal path.	Measures the variance from the ideal path.
Make Your Own	With Rich Recording Technology ™ data, you can design the study that fits your needs.	Unlimited

Select Data to Capture

Rich Recording Technology ™ will automatically record a wide set of data about user activity and input on the computer. You can set up markers in Recorder that will let your observers log other activity, including:

• Task start and end points (to record time on task)

Places where the participant:

- · Reaches a milestone
- Makes an error
- Fails to complete a task
- Accesses help (or asks the facilitator)
- · Encounters a problem

Capture "Qualitative" Data

Some things are not measured with numbers. Reactions, quotes, facial expressions and participant behaviors (like gesturing, pushing a chair back, and so on) are also important data points that require a human to interpret. Alert your observers to make note when these things happen as well – you'll be able to highlight them later, as you review your recording. Set markers for quotes and behaviors in the Morae Study Configuration for observers to use.

Identify Success Paths

For each task you write, it's good practice to have all stakeholders agree on the success paths so everyone has a common understanding about when participants are successful and when they are not. You might decide that there is only one success path or several depending on your product.

Test observers can then help count errors and problems associated with each task and you can identify when participants are able to successfully complete tasks or not.

Recruit Participants

Recruiting is one of the most important components of a usability test. Your participants should adequately reflect your true base of users and the user types you have decided to test, and represent a range of new and experienced users in a way that would actually use your product.

Recruitment Ideas

- · Use your own customer databases or contacts
- Hire an outside agency: look for market research firms if there are none specializing in usability recruiting, good screeners are vital. There is a cost per candidate
- Post on Craig's List: don't identify your company, just qualifications
- Post something on your web site: start a usability testing page where site visitors can sign up to participate
- Place and ad in the paper: good for local audiences
- When doing your own recruiting you should identify criteria that will help you select qualified candidates. Experience with the product or the field, computer experience, age and other demographics may be important to consider. See **Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Screener.**

When recruiting using an outside recruiting firm, a screener helps you get the right participants. A recruiting screener is used to determine if a potential participant matches the user characteristics defined in the usability test protocol. Include questions about demographics, frequency of use, experience level, etc.

Ask questions that will help you filter out participants that don't match your target users and indicate when to thank people for their time and let them know that they do not qualify. Ask enough questions so that you know you have the right people. For example, qualified participants for a test of an online shopping site should have access to a computer at home or at work and meet the other required demographics (age range, etc).

Compensation

You will need to think about what kind of compensation you will offer participants. Typically participants get cash or an equivalent, a gift certificate, even merchandise from your company.

Prepare for Test Sessions

Now you have your test protocol and your participants, you're ready to get started.

Setting

The most important factors are that the environment be comfortable for participants, similar to their real-world environment, and reasonably similar between participants.

Schedule Participants

Schedule your participants to have adequate time to work through the test at their own pace. Allow enough time between sessions to reset, debrief and regroup.

Stakeholders

When working your stakeholders, help them understand how you will conduct your testing. Stakeholders need to understand how you will be interacting with your participant during test sessions. They need to understand that you are there to facilitate the test and observe behavior, not help the participant complete tasks. There are two basic models:

- Facilitator interacts with the participant you often get more qualitative information, especially when the facilitator is good at asking neutral questions and encouraging participants to find their own answers in the product.
- Facilitator does not interact with the participant you can get more natural behavior, but participants are left to struggle or quit on their own. You often will not get as much qualitative data as participants may not talk out loud as much. You may get more accurate measures of time on task and failure, however.

Observers

- At least one person can be enlisted to help you log all of your recordings for the data points you've set out. By having someone else log the sessions, the facilitator can concentrate on the test. At the same time, the recording will capture a rich set of data for later analysis.
- In addition to a designated person to help you observe and log data, there may be a long list of stakeholders who will benefit from observing a test. They commonly include the developers, managers, product managers, quality testing analysts, sales and marketing staff, technical support and documentation.

Watching users actually struggle with a product is a powerful experience. Observing test sessions helps make the team open to making changes.

Remember to warn your observers not to drive changes until you and the team have had an opportunity to analyze all testing and decide upon changes that will address the root causes.

Script

Create a facilitator script to help you and your facilitators present a consistent set of information to your participants. The script will also serve as a reminder to you to say certain things to your participants and provide them appropriate paper work at the right times.

In your script, remind participants that the usability test is an evaluation of the product and not of their performance, that all problems they find are helpful and that their feedback is valuable, and let participants know their data will be aggregated with the rest of the participant data and they will not be identified.

Questionnaires and Surveys

A typically usability study usually has at least two surveys (questionnaires), one administered before the participant starts tasks and one administered at the end of the test, which collects subjective information such as how satisfied participant were with the product and how easy it is to use. You can also administer a survey after each task; these are typically used to measure satisfaction or ease of use for each task.

- Pre-test survey collects demographic and product usage data about participants such as computer
 use, online shopping habits, internet usage, age, gender, etc and should help product teams
 understand more about typical customers and how they are reflected in the test participants
- Post-task survey questions that rate subjective ease of use or satisfaction for each task. Ask other
 questions or other types of questions when appropriate. Limit the number of post-task questions so as
 not to overwhelm participants.
- Post-test survey post-test surveys are often used to measure satisfaction; use SUS for a standard satisfaction measure or use your own questions. See our templates for ideas of questions you might use

Survey Do's and Don'ts

- **DO:** Check with your HR and legal departments to make sure there are no regulations or requirements about the data you can collect.
- **DO:** Use age ranges rather than specific ages when asking participants for their age.
- DO: Include comment fields for questions where you want to hear more from participants.
- **DON'T:** Collect gender information; if you want to collect gender note that information separately based on observation.

Conduct Test Sessions

Good practices for conducting your test start before the participant comes and follows through after he or she leaves.

Begin with a Run-through

- Run through your test yourself or with someone else to make sure the tasks make sense and can be completed with the version of the product you are testing
- Conduct a pilot test with a participant this participant can be a co-worker or someone you have access to that would be part of the target audience
- Allow enough time before the test session to make changes.

At the Test Session

Welcome your participant and make them comfortable

- Use the script to help you remember what you need to do and say
- Ask participants to fill out the consent form (include a non-disclosure agreement if your company requires one)
- · Remember your facilitation skills and start the test
- Allow enough time between test sessions to set equipment and prepare for your next participant
- See Usability Testing and Morae for details on using Morae when conducting your test sessions.

Facilitation

Technique matters: An impartial facilitator conducts the test without influencing the participant. The facilitator keeps the test flowing, provides simple directions, and keeps the participant focused. The facilitator may be located near the participant or in another room with an intercom system. Often, participants are asked to keep a running narration (called the "think-aloud" protocol) and the facilitator must keep the participant talking.

Test Session Do's and Don'ts

- DO: Ensure the participant's physical comfort.
- DO: Ask open ended questions
 - o What are you thinking right now?
 - o What are you trying to do?
 - o Is there anything else you might try?
 - o Where would you go?
 - o What did you expect to happen?
 - o You seemed surprised or frustrated...?
 - Exactly how did that differ from what you expected to happen?
 - o Would you expect that information to be provided?
 - o Please keep talking...
- DO: Provide open-ended hints only when asked: "Do you see something that will help you?"
- **DON'T:** Provide direction or tell the user how to accomplish the task.
- **DON'T:** Offer approval or disapproval with words, facial expressions or body language.
- DON'T: Crowd the participant physically; allow the participant to move, take a break or quit.
- **DON'T:** Make notes only when the participant does something interesting...keep the sound of your keyboard or pen consistent so that you avoid giving clues to the participant.

Techniques for Task Failures

Occasionally, a participant will fail to complete or will outright quit trying to complete a task. Indirect hints or encouragement such as "is there anything on the screen to help you?" may be used to encourage the participant to explore, but at some point he or she should be allowed to fail.

If a participant fails a task but needs the information from that task to continue, a recommended technique is to count the failure but have the participant try the required portion of the first task again. Doing this lets you understand better how long it takes participants to "get" a particular interaction. You can then gage how easy or hard it is to learn to perform the task and more about where they might be confused by your product.

Provide a more direct hint only as a very last resort.

After the Session

Reset your machine, clear data and save the participant's work, if appropriate.

- · Debrief with observers to note trends and issues
- · Clean the environment for the next participant.

Analyze Your Study

Analyzing is a three step process:

- Step 1: Identify exactly what you observed
- Step 2: Identify the causes of any problems
- Step 3: Determine Solutions

Source: Whitney Quesenbery

Step 1: Identify exactly what you observed

Your analysis following the test lets you find the critical problems and issues that help you design a better product. Review what you've seen and note:

- How did people perform? Were they successful?
- How long did it take them to complete a task?
- What mistakes were made?
- What problems did they encounter? Where?
- How often and how many problems did they have?
- How did they feel? What did they say? What significant things did they do?
- · What worked well?

You can begin with a review your recordings for those measures that you selected when you designed the test. Create your project, import the recordings of each participant, and look for the data you defined when you planned your test.

Step 2: Identify the causes of any problems

Ask yourself and the team a series of questions about the problems observed.

- Was there a problem with workflow? The navigation? The terminology?
- How severe was the problem? Did the participant fail or was the participant significantly delayed? Did it present an obstacle? How difficult was the obstacle to overcome?
- "Why? " Why did the participant have a problem? After you ask that question, ask "Why?" again. Repeat that process until you reach the fundamental, underlying problem.

Step 3: Determine Solutions

In some cases, the researcher is tasked to make recommendations. In other environments, solutions are determined by designers and/or development teams. The researcher can mentor solutions that address the root causes of a usability problem and meet the needs of the user.

One technique is to have all stakeholders meet to review the findings and determine recommendations at a debrief meeting. Diagramming problems, listing them and discussing each can produce a shared understanding of how to address the problems.

Even when working alone, it is essential that you discuss your usability recommendations with your team – developers, marketing, sales – to learn what works and what doesn't work from a business and technical point of view. If you are the person from whom recommendations are expected, solicit other opinions and be prepared to set your ideas aside.

Tips for Great Recommendations

- Use your data to form conclusions and drive design changes.
- Remember to note that good things have happened; mention them first.
- Make sure your recommendations address the original problem noted, and limit the recommendation to that original problem. Create solutions that address the cause of the problem, not the symptoms.
- · Keep them short and to the point.
- Make your recommendations specific. For example, rather than recommending a change in a workflow, diagram the optimal workflow based on the test findings.
- Address the needs of as many users (or types of users) as possible.
- Recommend the least possible change, and then recommend a quick usability test to see if you've solved the problem. If not, try another tweak, or move on to a larger change.
- A picture or video is worth a thousand words: enhance your recommendations with wireframes, video clips and annotated screenshots.
- Use the language of your audience: executives, developers, etc.
- Show an interest in what happens to your great recommendations. Ask follow-up questions if your
 great recommendations are not followed. Maybe you can learn something.

Avoid making recommendations that:

- · Are based on opinions.
- · Are vague or not actionable.
- Only list complaints.
- · Create a new set of problems for users.
- Are targeted only to a single type of user, for example, a design targeted for expert users at the expense of other types.

Source: Rolf Molich, et al

Deliverables

Deliverables – reports, presentations, highlight videos and so on -- document what was done for future reference. They often detail the usability problems found during the test plus any other data such as time on task, error rate, satisfaction, etc. The Usability Test Report on the Morae Resource CD is one template you might use to report results. Generally speaking, report or presentations will include:

Summary

Description of the product and the test objectives

Method

- Participants
- · Context of the test
- Tasks
- Testing environment and equipment
- Experiment design

What was measured (Metrics)

Results and findings

- How participants fared (Graphs and tables)
- Why they might not have done well (or why they did do well)

Recommendations or Next Steps

Depending on the project objectives and stakeholders, the report can also take the form of a presentation. Morae makes it easy for you to include highlight videos at important points, to illustrate the problem in the participant's own words.

Resources

A Practical Guide to Usability Testing, Revised by Joe Dumas and Ginny Redish, Intellect, 2nd Edition, 1999

Usability Testing and Research by Carol Barnum, Longman, 2002

Handbook of Usability Testing: how to Plan, Design and Conduct Effective Tests by Jeff Rubin and Dana Chisnell, Wiley 2nd Edition, 2008

References

Usability and Accessibility - STEC Workshop 2008 Whitney Quesenbery

Recommendations on Recommendations, Rolf Molich, Kasper Hornbaek, Steve Krug, Jeff Johnson, Josephine Scott, 2008, accepted for publication in User Experience Magazine, issue 7.4, October 2008

Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Screener

The usability test of the X Product requires 12 participants from 2 user groups.

USER TYPE	NUMBER	CHARACTERISTICS
Experienced product users	6	Current product users/customers who have used X Product for at least 1 year and use it at least 3 times a month 3 males, 3 females
New product users	6	People who have no prior experience with X Product, but do have at least 1 year's experience using similar products (e.g. data processing tools). 3 males, 3 females

Participation: All participants will spend about 60 minutes in the usability session. Incentive will be \$50 in cash.

Schedule: The usability tests will be conducted from May 5-7, 2008. Use schedule of available testing time slots to schedule individual participants once they have passed the recruitment screener.

AVAILABLE TIME SLOTS	TUES. MAY 5	WED. MAY 6	THURS. MAY 7
9-10 am			
10:30-11:30 am			
1-2 pm			
2:30-3:30 pm			
4-5 pm			

Recruitment Script

Introduction

Hello, may I speak with ______. We are looking for participants to take part in a research study evaluating the usability of the X Product. There will be \$50 cash in compensation for the hour long session, which will take the X Building located downtown. The session would involve one-on-one meeting with a researcher where you would sit down in front of a computer and try to use a product while being observed and answering questions about the product.

Would you be interested in participating?

If not: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me. If you know of anyone else who might be interested in participating please have them call me, [Name], at 555-1234.

Screening

I need to ask you a couple of questions to determine whether you meet the eligibility criteria—**Do you have a couple of minutes?**

If not: When is a good time to call back?

Keep in mind that your answers to these questions to not automatically allow or disallow you take part in the study—we just need accurate information about your background, so please answer as well as you can.

Have you ever used X product?

If yes:

How long have you used it for? [criteria: at least 1 yr.]

And how often do you use it? [criteria: at least 3 times a month]

If no:

Have you ever used any data processing products, such as [list competitor or similar products]? [criteria: Yes]

If yes: How long have you used it for? [criteria: at least 1 yr.]

And how often do you use it? [criteria: at least 3 times a month]



Self-identify participant gender via voice and name and other cues.

Scheduling

If participant meets criteria: Will you be able to come to the X Building located downtown for one hour between May 15 and 19? Free parking is available next to the building.

How is [name available times and dates]?

You will be participating in a one-on-one usability test session on [date and time]. Do you require any special accommodations?

I need to have an e-mail address to send specific directions and confirmation information to. Thanks again!

If participant does not meet criteria: Unfortunately, you do not fit the criteria for this particular evaluation and will not be able to participate. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me.



Use the screener questions in this script can in an email address for written recruitment.