Writing Great Usability Test Scenarios
First Fridays Product Testing

Thanks to Steve Krug, author of *Rocket Surgery Made Easy*, for some of these ideas.

We recommend creating test scenarios in two steps:
- Choose tasks to test (e.g., Update your passport; register for a course; file a complaint)
- Expand the tasks into scenarios by adding some details that help the participant do the task. For example, "You need to book a physical therapy appointment for your 11-year-old son. It needs to be after school, and he gets out at 2 p.m. Book the appointment online."

    Note: You don't always need details; sometimes the task is simple, like "Increase the font size in this text." Use your best judgment.

1. Pick the most CRITICAL tasks

Jot down 5-10 important things people come to your site to do. Then narrow this list to the things that are most critical for people to complete successfully. Remember, you can't test everything every time. If you have a long list of things to test, consider planning a second (or third) test.

2. Review customer feedback

Obviously, if customers have told you something is confusing or poorly designed, that's the first place to start looking for tasks. Review surveys, web comments, and emails. Look for what's bothering your customers.

3. Craft your test scenarios

Good test scenarios
- Are real-world tasks. For example, "Find information about …" isn't a real task. "You're writing an article about the Office of Natural Resources Revenue. Find out when this office was created" is a real task.
- Avoid word-matching. Rephrase the task, if possible, to avoid word-matching between the wording of site buttons, labels, and headings and the goal of the task.
- Have a clear end point. You should be able to tell if the participant has been successful or not.

4. Ask them *not* to use the site search

For most of the tasks, ask test participants *not* to use search when completing tasks. This will go a long way in showing you how your customers view the site. If you want to give the site search a brief workout, select 1-3 tasks and tell the test participant that for these tasks, they can use search or browse to complete the task.

5. Pilot test the tasks

When you have your list of task scenarios, pilot test them with a friend who's not that familiar

with the site, and time the test. Any wording that isn't clear to them is a red flag that you can fix or clarify for the real test.

6. Aim for 35 minutes of tasks

Each test session lasts about 50 minutes, with ten minutes in between sessions to reset the screen and for observers to take a quick break. If you aim to have 35 minutes worth of tasks, you'll have time to conduct a homepage walk-through at the beginning and ask
some follow-up questions at the end. You can always have a couple of extra questions handy for fast test participants.

7. Cut down on wait time

Test time is valuable, so if test participants have wait for a long time for pages to load or to receive confirmation emails, consider having multiple browser tabs open with each step of the task ready on them. This way, when someone clicks on something that normally initiates a waiting period, you can switch to the next tab and say, "OK, you clicked on Register and now you seen this screen. Let's go on to the next part."

8. Two printed versions

When you're ready to test, print out two versions of the test scenarios: One with all the tasks on one sheet for you and observers, and another set for the test participant with two tasks per page, in large easy-to-read type. Cut the sheets in half and hand the test scenarios to the participant one at a time.

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