



What Is Usability?

Usability is the measure of the quality of a user's experience when interacting with a product or system — whether a Web site, a software application, mobile technology, or any user-operated device.

Usability is a combination of factors that affect the user's experience with the product or system, including: Ease of learning	How fast can a user who has never seen the user interface before learn it sufficiently well to accomplish basic tasks?
Efficiency of use	Once an experienced user has learned to use the system, how fast can he or she accomplish tasks?
Memorability	If a user has used the system before, can he or she remember enough to use it effectively the next time or does the user have to start over again learning everything?
Error frequency and severity	How often do users make errors while using the system, how serious are these errors, and how do users recover from these errors?
Subjective satisfaction	How much does the user <i>like</i> using the system?

Why Is Website Usability Important?

Research shows that people cannot find information they seek on Web sites about 60% of the time. This can lead to wasted time, reduced productivity, increased frustration, and loss of repeat visits and money. If you are trying to sell or market a product via the web and your audience is frustrated by your web property, you can definitely conclude you are losing sales. But you don't know if this is happening if you don't ask your users about it.

Other sources report:

- "There are about 43 million Web sites, and no one knows which ones are usable. The best sites we've found are usable only 42 percent of the time, and none that we have studied are usable a majority of the time" Forrester
- Studies by Forrester Research estimate several costs of bad site design. The two most striking are:
 - Losing approximately 50% of the potential sales from a site as people can't find what they need



- Losing repeat visits from 40% of the users who do not return to a site when their first visit resulted in a negative experience
- "Studies of user behavior on the Web find a low tolerance for difficult designs or slow sites. People don't want to wait. And they don't want to learn how to use a home page. There's no such thing as a training class or a manual for a Web site. People have to be able to grasp the functioning of the site immediately after scanning the home page — for a few seconds at most." Manhattan Research

What Steps Are Involved in Usability?

Getting Started — Planning the Web Site

The first step is to understand:

- why you are developing a site
- who should come to your site
- when and why those people might come

In answering these questions, you establish your objectives for the site. The specific objectives depend, of course, on your organization and your audience.

You should also think about usability objectives for the site. General usability objectives are that a site must be:

- easy to learn
- efficient to use
- easy to remember on subsequent visits
- satisfying, with a minimum number of errors as users go through the site

All the usability objectives are important for most sites, but you may emphasize different ones for different audiences and situations. For example, in a site that is aimed at members of the general public who may only visit once in a while, you should build a site where almost no learning needs to take place to use it efficiently.

Collecting Data from Users

Because the design is to be based on user needs, data must be collected about those needs and how well an existing Web site (if there is one) is meeting those needs. There are a variety of ways to collect that data, including feedback forms and system metrics (log data on an existing site), and usability testing of the existing site.



Developing prototypes

It is easier for a user to react to an existing example than to theorize what would work best. Useful results can be obtained by building a prototype site, with a minimum of text content and no graphics, for a first round of usability testing. The prototype can then be used to elicit user comments and observe the prototype's ability to lead the users through the tasks they need to perform. It can be built on paper or with simple HTML.

Collecting, writing, or revising content

Based on what users need, you must put content into the site. As you consider information that you already have, think about how useful and understandable it is. Reading from a computer screen is slower than reading from paper. Most people want to quickly scan information and read only small sections. If the information you have is in long paragraphs, consider revising it. Break it into small chunks with many headings. Cut out unnecessary words. Use lists and tables so people can find information quickly. Follow these same guidelines when writing new information for the Web.

Conducting usability tests

Usability testing is an iterative process. The goal of usability testing is to ascertain what will help users accomplish their tasks and what may impede them. Using the prototype as a starting point, the usability testers build a set of scenario tasks they will ask users to attempt. As detailed information about user success is gathered and reported, the prototype can be modified and additional aspects of that prototype tested.

Usability testing can be done inexpensively or more formally, depending on the size and budget of the site under development. As the testing team becomes more experienced, testing can be accomplished more quickly.

Usability Studies are as complex or simple as the web property under study. Most firms will recommend two Usability Studies – one prior to code at the stage of overall concept, and one after the internal pages have been loaded in prior to launch.