

What is it?

This technique involves asking users of a system or interface to carry out a series of activities and observing or recording them as they do. Using this approach, we can find out how intuitive (or not) a website is and identify any problem areas.



Things you need

- Laptop with built-in microphone and Camtasia (screencasting software) installed
- Willing participants - can be individuals or in small groups
- Script and consent forms
- List of activities
- Optional - incentives to take part, e.g. University pens and pencils; vouchers etc.
- Eye tracking glasses so you can see where they are looking on the screen



How to do it

1. Start by devising approximately 5 activities (approximately 20 minutes' worth) for users to carry out based on how people typically use the system.
2. Student participants can be recruited ahead of time by putting a call out for volunteers and setting up appointments - incentives such as vouchers can help recruit students and make them more likely to turn up. Alternatively, if the activity is a short one, set up a table and chairs in an area next to a thoroughfare and ask passers-by if they can spare a few minutes to help.
3. When a student or group of students agrees to volunteer, introduce the activities using the script so all volunteers have the same background information. Emphasise that you are testing the system or interface, not users. Ask them to carry out the activities and to think out loud to explain their decisions and actions. Explain that the screen and conversation will be recorded.
4. If they are happy to continue - make sure they are given an opportunity to back out - ask them to sign a consent form at this point.
5. Ask participants for any relevant demographic details, e.g. year of study, course.
6. Open a web browser and start Camtasia (or an alternative system) recording. Make sure you use Private Browsing mode so that previous participants' details are not saved, e.g. in login boxes. Afterwards, edit your recordings to remove any names in the conversation and blur out any names or usernames on screen.
7. Give the participant a written version of the activities to work from and read each one aloud as they start it for the benefit of the recording.
8. Record subjects attempting activities. Resist offering help when they have difficulties but encourage them to explain their thinking, especially if they get stuck. If they are making no progress on an activity, ask them to stop and move on to the next one.
9. Stop recording and thank participants for their help. Offer to explain anything they had problems with and make a note of any additional feedback. Give them their reward if they have been promised one.

