

Rules for Usability Test Observers

Everyone who observes a usability test is asked to abide by a set of rules. The purpose of these rules is to minimize stress for the test participants and to maximize the amount of information we get from the usability tests.

Stay for the Entire Test

The goal is to have the users forget that anyone else is in the room. Having people constantly coming in and out is distracting, and users may get the mistaken impression that you're leaving because they've done something wrong (like walking out in the middle of a movie). While you are observing a test, you are not available for any interruption short of an emergency. If you can attend only part of a test, discuss this with the facilitator beforehand to determine whether there is a way to accommodate this.

Please turn off cell phones and pagers!

Remain Silent While the Users Are Working

Usability testing gives you a whole new perspective on the interface. You may notice a problem so surprising that you are tempted to laugh or exclaim out loud. This is not unusual. Unfortunately, the users might think you are laughing at them. Please do your best to keep as quiet as possible. The facilitator will give you opportunities to ask questions after each task and at the end of the test. If you have something to tell/ask that truly can't wait, pass a note to the facilitator. (Exception: If a user intentionally says something funny, it's okay to laugh!)

Be Conscious of Your Body Language

Although most usability tests are interesting, not every moment will be fascinating. If something is happening that isn't of interest to you but may be to others, sit quietly without fidgeting. (If inactivity makes you sleepy, one trick is to write down every word that users say.) But if you already thoroughly understand the issue that the users are stuck on and would like to see them move on to the next task, pass a note to the facilitator.

Don't Reveal How Many Tasks We Have

We may well run out of time before users finish all the tasks. If users get stuck on a task, that means that there is a wealth of information we should be fervently taking notes on. It is often more useful to explore an area of difficulty in detail rather than try to "get through" all the tasks. The facilitator will keep an eye on the clock so that we can cover as many of the important areas as possible.

No Helping

During the test, it's likely that users will have problems using the interface, and it is normal to feel a temptation to help. Please don't. Instead, try to understand why it was that the user got stuck or went down the wrong path. It's the facilitator's role to get users back on track if they get really stuck. And if the facilitator poses a question during the test, he or she is asking the users, not you—please don't answer unless the facilitator specifically directs a question to you.

Avoid "Design Questions"

You will have an opportunity to ask questions after each task. Questions that ask the user their opinions about how to design aspects of the application (such as, "Where would *you* like to see these navigation buttons?") can take a lot of time to answer and produce only limited results. Instead, focus on trying to understand the *problem*—we'll come up with solutions later, outside the test.

Respect Participants and the Confidentiality of Their Data

We have promised the participants that their participation is confidential. This means that we should not include their names in any reports or other communication such as email, and we should refrain from discussing them by name outside the test setting. Do not make negative comments about people—there is always a risk that a derogatory comment could be overheard or otherwise make its way back to the user.