

English 314 Unit #3: Team Research Proposal

(Worth 15% of your grade; due April 13)

Scenario

You work for a Fortune 100 company as part of the web development team. Recently, your company has decided to conduct a large-scale reevaluation of its web presence. Your team has been directed to select a portion of the company's website and conduct user testing to determine how effective it is, then make specific recommendations to the board of directors for improving the site. Your manager oversees the company's entire web presence, and he is far too busy to sit in on your team meetings. When you asked him for guidance at the beginning of the project, he responded, "I don't care how you do it; just make sure you can back up your recommendations with evidence. Management is breathing down my neck, and we need to deliver some concrete ideas for improving the site within a month." In four weeks, your team will deliver a written proposal to the board of directors and give an oral presentation highlighting your findings and recommendations.

Assignment Details

Step 1. Familiarize yourself with the field of usability studies

The U.S. government's usability website (<http://usability.gov>) defines usability as follows: "In general, usability refers to how well users can learn and use a product to achieve their goals and how satisfied they are with that process." As users of numerous websites, we constantly make split-second judgments about whether or not sites are "usable." In other words, we quickly decide whether a site *helps* or *hinders* our ability to complete a specific task. We tend to return often to sites that are easy to navigate, while we stop visiting sites that are overly confusing or unhelpful. As a team, study the materials on usability.gov until you have a strong grasp on the key terms, concepts, and practices.

Step 2. Select a company

One of the most important decisions you'll make on this project is choosing a website to test. The scenario for this assignment stipulates that you work for a Fortune 100 company, so you will need to select a company from the list on the class website. As you consider candidates for testing, try to follow the Goldilocks principle: look for a site that's not too big and not too small, but just right. It's hard to test a site that has only five pages, and it's even harder to test a site that has 15,000 pages. Because this assignment focuses on improving the usability of a website, you should select a site that you feel has room for improvement. Likewise, because usability tests work best when subjects are seeing the site for the first time, you should select a site that likely will be unfamiliar to your test subjects (your friends, family, neighbors, etc.).

Step 3. Develop a usability test

Once you have selected a site, you can begin to develop a usability testing protocol. For the most part, we will follow the process outlined on Usability.gov. This process includes writing a test plan, developing personas, creating scenarios, piloting the test, and refining the test. We will discuss each of these steps in greater detail in class.

Step 4. Conduct the test

When your protocol is ready and your manager (Quinn) has approved it, you can begin conducting your tests. Again, we will follow the recommendations found on Usability.gov and other usability testing websites. You will conduct your test with at least 10 subjects, taking copious notes as you do so. Your usability tests will provide you with the bulk of your data for this project, so conducting the tests in a uniform, professional manner will be absolutely essential to your success as a team. You will submit the notes from your usability tests at the conclusion of this project.

Step 5. Write the recommendation report

Finally, you will write a substantive report (10-12 pages) detailing the results of your test and making recommendations for improvement. Your report should be written in memo format, directly to the board of

directors. (Your manager will play the gatekeeper role in this scenario.) The report should describe the process you used to test the site, present your findings, and make specific recommendations for improving the site. The most successful reports will include several annotated images, either from the original site or from mockups that you have created to demonstrate your proposed changes. This assignment does not require you to know or learn HTML, so you may choose to create mockups in Photoshop or another image editing program.

Step 6. Prepare and deliver an oral presentation

During Week 13 of the semester, your team will deliver an oral presentation accompanied by electronic slides (e.g., PowerPoint); Quinn will play the role of the manager during these presentations, and your classmates will pretend to be members of the board of directors. Your presentation should be roughly 20 minutes in length, followed by 5 minutes of Q&A. Your presentation should involve all members of your group as equally as possible and should draw upon the presentation strategies we will study in class throughout this assignment.

Step 7. Submit your materials for evaluation

When you are finished with the assignment, save your written report as “Team # Unit 3.doc” (for instance, “Team 1 Unit 3.doc”) and your PowerPoint file as “Team # Unit 3.ppt” (for instance, “Team 1 Unit 3.ppt”), then upload both files to the class website before class starts on Tuesday, April 13. In addition, bring a printed copy of your written report and all notes from your usability tests to class that day.

Evaluation Criteria

Your project will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

Written Report

- Does the report demonstrate your familiarity with the company’s website?
- Does the report successfully summarize the findings of your usability tests?
- Does the report make makes succinct, logical arguments for following the course of action you recommend?
- Does the report draw upon outside research to bolster your claims?
- Does the report feature professional document design, as described in our text and class discussions (fonts, headings, lists, screenshots, etc.)?

Oral Presentation

- Does the presentation effectively blend oral, visual, and technological elements?
- Does the presentation makes a sustained, persuasive argument?
- Does the presentation display a level of professionalism (in terms of dress, speech, etc.) appropriate for a presentation of this type?
- Does the presentation make innovative use of electronic software to create a consistent look and feel throughout the presentation?
- Does the presentation take risks?
- Does the presentation involve all members of your team equally?

Rhetorical Effectiveness

- Do the documents respond to the scenario outlined on the assignment sheet?
- Have all team members convincingly played their roles as members of a web development team?
- Do the documents establish the team’s credibility and authority? Does the team appear competent and trustworthy?
- Do the documents persuade the reader to follow the recommendations contained therein?

Standard Written English

- Do the documents adhere to standard written English (spelling, punctuation, grammar, etc.)?