

## Step 8: Conduct usability tests

### Conduct usability tests with typical customers. You will need a reality check.

At the beginning of your project, make it clear to your sponsors that you will want to test your plain language drafts with people who would typically read them.

This technique, called usability testing, is now being used routinely by many organizations and is the best way to know if your draft will work in the real world. You may need a modest budget for recruiting and to pay participants.

### What is usability testing?

Usability testing doesn't ask typical customers "what they think" of your plain language draft, or how they feel about it. Instead, it has four to six typical customers – one at a time -- actually *use* the document while you observe and listen to their train of thought, which they've been asked to verbalize.

For example, the usability test may involve asking participants to fill out a form or find information on a web site, using only your plain language instructions as their guide. Can they do the task, or not? That's the real question that can't be answered by questionnaires, interviews, or focus groups.

This enormously interesting and helpful technique almost always reveals gaps in your instructions or simple misunderstandings your team had not anticipated. Sometimes just listening to the test participant talk about the experience of doing the task can reveal valuable information about how your organization is perceived in the community.

There are many firms that can professionally recruit the type of people you will need. The important thing to remember is that they must be unfamiliar with the document you are working on, but match the type of person who would use it. You want your document to work for someone brand-new to an issue in the real world, such as a worker in a high-risk injury who has never filed a workers' compensation claim or a person about to open a small business who has not been exposed to the paperwork.

### Resources

- The [Usability Professionals Organization](#)'s website links to many resources that will help you understand user-centered design and testing.
- [US Department of Health and Human Services Usability Website](#)
- [The User Edit Method for Evaluating the Usability of Documentation – Society for Technical Communication](#)
- [Usability in Web site and Software Design](#)