



Making Library Web Sites Usable:



A LITA Guide

**Tom Lehman
Terry Nikkel**

Guide #14

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Preface

Libraries no longer have a near-monopoly on providing information. A fairly recent OCLC (2005) study found that 89 percent of college students begin their research on the Internet, while only 2 percent start in library catalogs. Library Web sites contain a wealth of resources and services but, for many users, suffer from usability issues in comparison to search engines. Difficult-to-learn syntax, unintuitive index terms, and poor relevance ranking often leave users confused. Anyone who has watched a first-year student struggle to find articles for a paper on a library Web site can attest to this.

Having a friendly, usable, attractive site is now a base expectation. For impatient users who consider themselves tech savvy, one difficult experience can be enough to send them off to Google, Yahoo!, or another more intuitive information gateway. If their Web sites perplex patrons, libraries risk becoming marginalized.

Through their Web sites, libraries can now provide service to individuals both in their own communities and across the world. Researchers can find out more easily about specialized collections, and full-text collections and databases enable access for both regular customers who are traveling and remote researchers. A user-friendly Web site allows the library to take full advantage of the Internet.

Libraries face some significant challenges in creating usable Web sites, making usability testing even more important. Integrating resources hosted in disparate databases and providing quick and easy access to a diverse and ever-growing range of online information is a formidable task. Most libraries must provide both information and services on the same Web site, something that many other organizations do not yet do. Libraries are also notorious for employing jargon that others don't understand. Usability testing helps site developers understand and identify these and other challenges so they can be dealt with before customers ever encounter them.

Making Library Web Sites Usable is part of the LITA Guides series. Like other books in the series, it combines LITA's ongoing interest in, and promotion of, usability testing with its reputation for expert-authored books that

make technical topics accessible to a wide range of information professionals. The contributors all have practical experience in usability and offer advice based on their successes and failures. They have worked as Webmasters, members of Web teams, and administrators; they also come from academic, corporate, and public library backgrounds, thus offering a broad overview of applications and perspectives.

The chapters of *Making Library Web Sites Usable* examine each step of the usability process, including the formation of a project team, selecting a technique or techniques, attracting subjects, conducting the test in an effective and unbiased way, and applying the results to address problems uncovered in the original site or mockup.

Making Library Web Sites Usable covers the most common usability methods, as well as exploring some of the difficulties of usability testing. The goal is to provide solid grounding for beginners, as well as introduce those with some background in the area to new techniques and ways of refining their skills. Even experienced readers may not be aware of all the ways in which methods can be combined or how techniques more commonly used in businesses can apply to libraries.

Effective usability programs are well designed, supported by administration, communicated to stakeholders within the library, coordinated by a dedicated team, and are ongoing rather than one-time projects. They incorporate more than one usability technique, applying these techniques to the whole site, not just the home page. Testers select subjects to reflect the primary sectors of the library's user community. In *Making Library Web Sites Usable*, we strive to show how this ideal can be possible for all institutions.

Organization

Chapter 1, "Usability for Library Web Sites," introduces usability assessment and its application to libraries. Chapters 2–8 discuss the primary assessment techniques: Heuristic evaluations, surveys, focus group interviews, card sorting, paper prototyping, usability testing, and log analysis.

The next three chapters tackle general issues in testing. Chapter 9, "Attracting Users for Testing," addresses techniques for finding willing participants. Chapter 10, "Low-Cost Usability Recording," explores the strategic use of economical software. Chapter 11, "Communicating Usability Results Effectively," shows readers how best to disseminate their data to the entire library staff and increase support for Web site changes.

Chapters 12–17 present assessment in action. Academic libraries serve as models in three of these chapters, with one each from a public library, corporate library, and a government or special library. Chapter 12 reports on a test at Purdue University, which led to a major redesign. This case study highlights

many elements of an ideal, or classic, usability assessment. Chapter 13 portrays University of Virginia, a library with a commitment to iterative, standards-based testing of all new and updated Web sites. Chapter 14 describes user testing done at Wright State University to gather reactions and input on a proposed new service.

Chapter 15 depicts usability testing at a rapidly growing public library system. Chapter 16 discusses a multi-stage program at a large, distributed corporate library, focusing on the challenges of providing access to both internal and external content in a single interface. Finally, Chapter 17 covers usability testing done at NASA's Goddard Library under the constraint of needing to adopt new systemwide Web page templates.

The bibliography section presents a number of selected resources for those wishing to dig deeper. For each topic, the editors sought to identify two to four journal articles on the tool, one or two Web sites devoted to information on the topic, and one or two of the most important books, if available. The annotations provide brief descriptions to assist in identifying resources that match the readers' needs.

We hope readers will come away from *Making Library Web Sites Usable* convinced of the importance of usability, with an understanding of how best to undertake each type of testing and how to combine a variety of methods effectively. Intelligent planning through usability testing helps libraries ensure that their invaluable information sources remain accessible in the Internet age.

Reference

OCLC. 2005. "Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources." Available: www.oclc.org/reports/2005perceptions.htm



Acknowledgments

This book has its origins in the *MyLibrary Manual*, conceived and organized by Eric Lease Morgan as a resource with two goals: to provide information and guidance for implementers of the MyLibrary software he developed at North Carolina State University beginning in 1997; and to articulate and promote the principals of user-centered design for digital libraries. Terry Nikkel, author of one of the *MyLibrary Manual* chapters and a member of the LITA Publications Committee, proposed that the usability chapters of the Manual be used as the basis for a book on library Web site usability, to serve as a revision of the 2001 LITA guide on library Web site usability. This book would not have come about without both their contributions, or without the chapter authors who generously contributed their time and expertise. The book's strengths are theirs—any weaknesses, the editors'.

