

Sweet-Talking Clients into Changing Their Web Sites: A Usability Project

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Why create a long-term usability project?

My goal was to create an assignment where students wrote for real clients, and the usability project has worked well. Here teams of students work collaboratively through several different stages of project work, including

- proposals
- professional emails
- status reports
- a presentation
- a final formal report

I find that this project allows students to grow in their professionalism and in their awareness of long-term planning and the delegation of tasks.

What timeline works best for this large project?

I work to secure campus clients for this project in the month before the semester starts. I find that teams of four work best, and that dictates how many clients I need.

Early in the semester I introduce students to the idea of usability and the institutional review board process. By mid-semester they have made contact with their clients and have begun to identify three to four areas they wish to test on the current web site. If your reports are only being used for internal review as “product evaluations,” IRB is not necessary (though you should check with your local IRB). You have a choice. Having these professional, outside readers approve students’ proposals also contributes to the sense of real-life writing that characterizes this project; it also allows for publication beyond the submission of the report to the client.

I demonstrate a test with volunteer students, and then I give my writing students one and a half weeks to focus on their usability testing, since this is a lengthy process. They recruit friends to be the participants.

The final quarter of our course focuses entirely on formal report preparation and how to manage the data students have recorded. We cover presentation skills, and the students prepare for the final deliverables.

During the last week of class, our clients come to hear the teams’ presentations, and students finalize their formal recommendation reports.

What additional resources/readings assist the instructor and students to understand usability?

Rubin, Jeff and Dana Chisnell. *Handbook of Usability Testing*, Wiley, 2008. (for usability samples)
Tebeaux, Elizabeth and Sam Dragga. *The Essentials of Technical Communication*, Oxford UP, 2017.

(for report writing)

Human Experimentation Video (for IRB preparation) <https://tinyurl.com/y8aqnaq4>

How do students interact with clients for this project?

I contact clients before the start of the semester and explain the necessary commitment. After students learn the basics of usability, they have a face to face meeting with the client I assign them. The goal for this meeting is to assess the client's goals for the web site and discuss possible research questions that will motivate the testing procedures. After that, students try to minimize the demands they make on the client's time. They submit a status update part way through the project.

At the end of the project, we invite the clients to a presentation session. Clients have an opportunity to probe more deeply into the students' recommendations following the presentations. Teams submit a written recommendation report based on the results of their findings. Clients take a brief survey so that the instructor can assess their evaluation of the project process and outcomes.

What kind of instruction to students need to understand IRB or working with human subjects?

Explaining the IRB element of usability testing is useful even if you do not plan to submit IRB proposals for approval; students being trained in usability should certainly learn that larger usability projects often require this step.

I show students a brief video about human testing through the ages and a clip from *Jurassic Park* to introduce them to the idea of testing on people. Some universities offer an IRB teaching assistant or administrator who might be able to visit your class. I provide templates from my own past IRB proposals, and students can learn to write briefly but efficiently for the needs of the university's IRB proposal process.