

Tutorial 2: Task Design

Human Computer Interaction
Dr Kami Vaniea

October, 2020

1 Introduction: Research Questions and Tasks

There are many different ways to test research questions in a lab study, but a common one involves asking participants to engage in *tasks* that have been designed to balance participant free will against giving them enough instructions to ensure that they engage in the activities researchers are interested in. The idea of task-based lab studies is fairly simple. The participant comes into a lab, or joins a video call, and is then asked to use some software to accomplish a set of provided tasks while the researchers watch. Because the participant has likely never worked with this exact software before, having the tasks helps them know what to do. During normal usage, a user will form their own tasks such as “find the link to join my tutorial”. But if they are in a lab setting and unfamiliar with the software, they will likely struggle to form their own tasks without guidance. But any guidance that they are given will bias how they use the technology, sometimes in ways that help researchers’ ability to answer their questions, and sometimes in ways that hurts their ability to do so.

In this tutorial, we are going to be discussing how task wording can impact participant behavior, which in turn impacts what you can and cannot learn from watching the participant use the system. In other words, we are going to be looking at how tasks and research questions relate to each other.

2 A simple user study with a simple task

To help you get a sense of what a user study looks like and how task wording can effect what people do; we have recorded three people completing the same task. Before recording, the researcher first helped each participant open OneDrive and create a blank folder, so that none of their personal files would be recorded. The participants therefore started the task with OneDrive open in their browser. They were asked to read the task aloud, complete it, and then say when they thought they were done.

The main **research question** was:

When trying to share a Microsoft Word document, what challenges to users experience when trying to find the “share” option and using it to allow another named person to be able to read the document?

The **task** was:

Create a new Microsoft Word document through the OneDrive online interface. Change the file name to “HCI Test” and then share it with the course instructor Kami Vaniea.

2.0.1 Activity 1: Watch the studies

Everyone in your group should watch:

[“HCI Tutorial 2: Task Examples” on Media Hopper](#)

While watching the three users, think about the following questions.

- **Challenges the users had when trying to find the share option and make the document visible to Kami Vaniea.** Focus on the parts where they were trying to share. List the problems they experienced.
- **Other blockers they experienced.** Any situation where they experienced minor challenges that had to be resolved before continuing with the task.
- **How they interpreted the task.** In what ways did they interpret the task differently from each other?

2.1 Task wording constrains participant actions

Task wording helps a participant know what to do, but it can also constrain their choices or cause them to take actions that they might normally not do. For example, some users likely never create Word documents in online OneDrive website, instead they may create them using the Word program installed on their Windows computers and then save the document to a OneDrive folder.

In some ways imposing these constraints is good, maybe we want to test if the OneDrive website is usable by everyone, including people who use it rarely. In this case, we need to tell the user that they must use the OneDrive website, or we will not be able to test what we want to test. However, constraints can also limit what we can measure. If we tell someone to do something in the task wording then we lose the ability to measure it. For example, the earlier task told users to name the document “HCI Test” so we cannot use this task to measure what names people might choose for the file. Because they are not choosing the name, they are following our instructions. Similarly, we cannot use the task to measure if people like to use capitalization in file names, because the participants were shown the task written down, so they naturally used the capitalization written in the task.

2.1.1 Activity 2: what questions can this task answer?

Imagine that the researcher running this study was interested in the following questions. As a group, read each of the questions below and discuss if the researcher can or cannot use the above OneDrive task to answer their questions.

1. Are people able to easily find the “Share” button in the upper right side of the screen?

2. Is it clear that the file name can be edited by clicking on it?
3. Are people able to easily create a Word Document starting from the main OneDrive page?
4. Are people able to easily determine who already had the ability to view the file?
5. How fast can people complete the task?
6. Why do some people choose to first look under the file menu?

3 Slightly more complex Path example

In this section we are going to switch to looking at the Path website used by the University of Edinburgh. Path is intended to be a more friendly version of DRPS, which is the official source of all information regarding degrees and programs of study.

3.1 Task specificity

In Section 2.1 we talked about how task wording both guides the participant while also constraining their actions. One way we can control the balance between guidance and constraint is by controlling how specific the task is. Tasks with more specifics, particularly specifics about what to look for or what buttons to press, are better for measuring the usability of specific features or issues. While tasks that are more broad and contain less specifics about what to do are better at testing questions about what a user would normally do on their own or how the user themselves forms goals.

3.1.1 Activity 3: match tasks and research questions

Table 1 on the next page contains a list of research questions (rows) and tasks (columns). For each combination of task and research question put one of the three marks below:

- ✓ If the task *can* be used to answer the research question.
- O If the task *can* be used to answer the question, but some participants may choose a completion route that bypasses the object of study.
- ✗ If the task *cannot* be used to answer the research question.

4 Write your own tasks for Learn usage (optional)

Imagine that you wanted to test the usability of a Learn course. Think back to some of the interviews last week where people discussed the types of things they do with Learn. Try and use the activities they described to

		Tasks				
		T1. Find out if first year Law and Economics students at the University of Edinburgh are required to take the class ‘Scottish Legal System’.	T2. Use Path to find out if Law and Economics students are required to take the class ‘Scottish Legal System’ in their first year.	T3. Use the degrees feature on Path (https://path.is.ed.ac.uk/) to find out if first year Law and Economics students are required to take the class ‘Scottish Legal System’.	T4. Open the Path website (https://path.is.ed.ac.uk/). Login if needed. Click on the “Degrees” link then click on “School of Law” and finally “Law and Economics (LLB Hons)”. Answer the question: “Are the first year Law and Economics students required to take the class ‘Scottish Legal System’?”	T5. Open the Path website (https://path.is.ed.ac.uk/) using your mobile phone’s web browser. Login if needed. Click on “Degrees” then click on “School of Law” and finally “Law and Economics (LLB Hons)”. Answer the question: “Are the first year Law and Economics students required to take the class ‘Scottish Legal System’?”
Research Questions	RQ1. How well are users able to interact with the Path UI elements? Do UI elements render properly and are buttons large enough to be easily pressed?					
	RQ2. Are users able to find the “Degrees” section of Path without making mistakes?					
	RQ3. When trying to learn about degree program requirements, do users voluntarily use Path?					
	RQ4. When looking for requirements about programs of study, what keywords, terms, or link text do users engage with?					
	RQ5. How many times do users return to prior pages when trying to find if a class is required by a degree program?					

Table 1: Fill in the above table. Use a ✓ if the research question can be answered by the task, a ✗ if it cannot be answered, and an ○ if it can mostly be answered but some participants may choose to bypass the necessary part of the UI.

5 Final discussion (10 minutes)

Your tutor will lead you in a final overall discussion of what you learned today. You should write down questions to ask them while you are doing the activities above. Potential topics of discussion are:

- When watching the videos of people using OneDrive, was there any behavior you found to be unexpected? How did the task wording both create a clear goal while also giving space for unexpected behavior?
- Task writing and research goals are often linked together. Has this tutorial helped you think more about the problem description in your coursework and how it might impact how your designs are tested?