While a large part of this book has focused on the technical aspects of the HTML5 language, there are others aspects you should consider to ensure that your project is usable by the widest possible audience. This chapter covers areas you’ll find useful, such as iterative development methods, participatory design, using focus groups and surveys for research, expert evaluation, and use of personas.

First, if accessibility is mostly about people with disabilities, what is usability?

What Is Usability?

Usability is a subset of human/computer interaction (HCI) that looks at the quality of the user experience and attempts to understand how to improve it. Usability as a discipline attempts to determine how successfully a user can complete a task and how satisfying a device or interface might be to use. This can be determined for any diverse group that you can think of, such as vision-impaired or blind people and older people, but it also can be determined for users without disabilities.

Note  The area of UX, or user experience, is expanding these days. This is largely due to the power of consumer choice, such as potential customers being able to easily access alternatives to your service if they aren’t 100 percent happy with yours.

There are different definitions of usability, and we’ll look at several because they are nuanced and have individual implications. One popular definition of usability is the following:

“A measure of how easy it is for a user to complete a task. In the context of Web pages this concerns how easy it is for a user to find the information they require from a given Web site.”

1www.webarch.co.za/jargon.html
This definition is focused on the user being able to complete a specific task, which is obviously very important. However, is it the full picture?
Another interesting definition is this one:

“The ease with which a system can be learnt or used. A figure of merit or qualitative judgment of ease of use or learning. Some methods of assessing usability may also express usability as a quantitative index.”

I like this one, and I mention it here because it talks about how easily the system can be learned by the user. For me, a good rule of thumb in user-interface design is this: if you have to provide instructions on how to use it, it’s already too complicated!

The user of your web sites and applications ideally should intuitively get it. This is, of course, not possible in many domains. The user won’t just get how to fly a plane, for example. In fact, there are stories of disasters that befell pilots and surgeons, for example (or more explicitly the passengers and the patients) because of complexity in a UI. No one wants to have to hunt for and decipher a manual when the plane is going down in order to figure out what the obscure error message flashing on the dashboard means.

**Tip** For a really interesting read that documents these kind of techno horror stories, as well as discussing the wider need for more “human” technologies, have a look at the book *Leonardo’s Laptop: Human Needs and the New Computing Technologies* by Ben Schneiderman. It shows that user friendly is a far from wooly notion.

This third definition is one of the most interesting because it goes beyond dryly looking at the tasks the user needs to do and mentions the level of satisfaction the user will feel when using a web interface.

“The effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction with which specified users can achieve specified goals in a particular environment. Synonymous with ‘ease of use’.”

This final definition takes the usability ideal to a higher level by looking at the quality of the user experience and not merely taking a mechanical, task-based approach. This is where user testing is very useful because it is a fantastic way of assessing the quality of the user experience.

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2 [www.sqatester.com/glossary/index.htm](http://www.sqatester.com/glossary/index.htm)
3 [www.jnd.org](http://www.jnd.org)