

# Oral History Online

A Usability Study



Copyright Norman Rockwell "Gossip"

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# Usability Study

Index:	Oral History Online
Website:	<a href="http://alexanderstreet6.com/orhi/">http://alexanderstreet6.com/orhi/</a>
Interface Selected:	Computer with Internet Access in Library with a subscription
Focus Group:	Academic Research in the University by students (graduate and undergraduate) and professors

Oral History Online survives as a testament to perseverance. With more than two-hundred thousand full-text pages of personal narratives, diaries, and interviews of people from all walks of life, Oral History Online gives users an index of historical events from the eyes of the people. The index contains more than four thousand audio and video files.<sup>1</sup> From the nineteenth century until today, the index shows many examples of people writing about their experiences. The plethora of primary documents gives the history scholar the opportunity to understand historical events outside of the confines of history books. Oral History Online exists as a repository of oral history material available online today and in the future. Not only does the site include full-text documents that editors have discovered, but also those available from various sources around the internet from universities to libraries.

History, sociology, anthropology, law, and English students and professors will easily access primary documents for use in research projects and dissertations. I

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<sup>1</sup>"Oral History Online," Alexander Street Press, <http://alexanderstreet6.com/orhi/index.html> (Accessed August 1, 2006).

hypothesize that students will be able to answer the prepared questions with little difficulty. I am trying to learn if the site is easily accessible and usable for a student with limited knowledge of how online indexes work. Therefore I hope to conclude that students will find this database helpful to them in primary source research.

# Research Methodology

College students and professors alike must complete primary source research in order to be successful in their fields. Online databases and specifically indexes have paved the way toward easier accessibility to information. However, were students and professors accessing all the relevant data they needed in order to fully complete tasks? In an effort to discover the answer I have elected to complete a usability study of a primary source index namely Oral History Online. Usability as defined by the International Standard Organization (ISO) is the "extent to which a product can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction in a specified context of use."<sup>2</sup> This usability study aimed to understand how users used the Oral History Online index and it's success in making primary source interviews easily accessible.

In observing students the researcher must keep in mind "individual differences, cognitive style, and differences between new and experienced searchers."<sup>3</sup> An observer should view how users interact with a system/website/database in its many layers and functions.<sup>4</sup> Transaction logs could capture the particular activity, however, in this study direct observation replaces transaction logs. The researcher learns important

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<sup>2</sup>Nicole Campbell, *Usability Assessment of Library-Related Websites: Methods and Case Studies* (Chicago: LITA, 2001): 1.

<sup>3</sup>Richard E. Bopp and Linda C. Smith, *Reference and Information Services* (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2001), 82.

<sup>4</sup>Campell, 1.

information from actually observing the volunteer rather than retrieving a log later. In the questions I posed to test subjects, I desired to witness the usability of the index in a "conscious approach to decision making to solve a problem or achieve an objective."<sup>5</sup> An example of this idea: "Please find the interview with *Genevieve Cochrane Martinelli*." Students normally needed specific information (for projects) on people and by asking such a question I can validate the success of specific searching in the index. Therefore, it was more likely that a student would be looking for a time period or historical event. As a result I asked about the Holocaust which many interviewers made an effort to record. By taking into account the knowledge a college student/professor would have in the realm of researching I have tailored the questions for an introductory level of research ability. I designed the tasks to be completed with ease if the index could be used easily. In an effort to simulate the many approaches a student would approach a topic I asked a variety of questions with different kinds of information given.

I have elected to use a survey and a rating system to test the usability of Oral History Online. Jakob Nielsen, an expert on usability said, "Elaborate usability tests are a waste of resources. The best results come from testing no more than five users and running as many small tests as you can afford. After the first study with five users has found 85% of the usability problems, you will want to fix these problems in a redesign. As you add more and more users, you learn less and less because you will keep seeing the

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<sup>5</sup>Bopp and Smith, 81.

same things again and again. There is no real need to keep observing the same thing multiple times.<sup>6</sup> To that end I have gathered nine people and previously had a colleague run a preliminary test. With my pool being volunteers I did not have to worry about the cost of doing such a study beyond time spent.

As a result I expected to discover that although Oral History Online has a lot of good information it was not always accessible by the search terms normally employed by those using Google and similar search engines. Also I think I will find that students and professors alike were in need of help in understanding how such indexes work to make their searches more fruitful.

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<sup>6</sup>Jakob Nielsen, "Jakob Nielsen's Alert Box," <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20000319.html> (Accessed Aug 1, 2006)

		Oral History Online						Table of Contents - Repositories		
Home Page	About	Table of Contents						Find Collections	Search Interviews	Help
		Repositories	Collections	Interviews	Date	Places	Historical Events			

## Database Survey

Please log onto the internet and go to <http://alexanderstreet6.com/orhi/index.html> and answer the following questions:

1. Did you have trouble getting to the website? What issues did you have? What do you notice about the index upon first looking at it? Is it well organized? Do you understand what the site seeks to accomplish?
2. Have you ever used this index before or heard of it?
3. Please locate an interview from a survivor of the Holocaust (World War II). Where were they during the Holocaust?
4. Find an interview from during the Civil War (1860s) from a Southern resident. What did they do during the Civil War, is it mentioned?
5. Please find the interview with Genevieve Cochrane Martinelli. What family members of hers died in the Flu Epidemic of 1918? Who was she?
6. Please find a video of a soldier from the Vietnam Conflict.
7. What would you use this site for during research? Why or why not?

8. Did you find any broken links? (Links that you cannot go to) If so list them.
  
9. Did you find the frames at the top of the page helpful?
  
10. Do you feel the Quick Search is effective? What search strategy did you employ?  
Did you use the search box every time or did you try to use the collection links?
  
11. Would you use this index for primary source research? Why or why not?
  
12. What difficulties did you encounter as you completed this task?



Home Page	About	Table of Contents						Find Collections	Search Interviews	Help
		Repositories	Collections	Interviews	Date	Places	Historical Events			

1. While completing your tasks, did you:

feel completely frustrated	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	always knew what to do next
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2. Compared to what you expected, did this task go:

much slower	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	much faster
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3. How confident are you that you found all the relevant information?

Not at all confident	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	very confident
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4. Ease of finding specific information:

very unsatisfied	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	very satisfied
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5. Logic of website's navigation:

very unsatisfied	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	very satisfied
------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

6. Appearance of website:

very unsatisfied	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	very satisfied
------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

7. Speed of content/graphic display:

very unsatisfied	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	very satisfied
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8. Overall ease of use:

very unsatisfied	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	very satisfied
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9. Would you use this site in the future for primary research?

Never	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Always <sup>7</sup>
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<sup>7</sup>Janet Crum, Dolores Judkins, and Laura Zeigen. "A Tale of Two Needs: Usability Testing and Library Orientation." *Computers in Libraries* 53, no. 2 (Jan 2003): 25.

## STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT

I am conducting a usability study on the website:

<http://alexanderstreet6.com/orhi/index.html> to see if it is a good site for undergraduate, graduate, and professors to use for primary source research.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer questions about the index and complete tasks detailed in the survey. These questions will be asked orally before you start. You will be observed when you are answering. Note: Your ability to answer any or all questions is irrelevant as I am attempting to discover the usability of the site and not each person's abilities.

There are no benefits to you for participating, other than what may be an educational experience in using a new index. I hope that the research will benefit you. This research poses no risks to you other than those normally encountered in daily life. All of the information from your session will be kept confidential and be referred to by an ID number. The correspondence between your name and ID number will be kept confidential and treated with the same care as our own confidential information. I will never name you if and when I discuss your behavior in research publications. After the research is completed, we may save the notes for future use by ourselves or others. However, this same confidentiality guarantee given here will apply to future storage and use of the materials.

Thank you so much for your willingness to volunteer and I hope you enjoy the survey. If you agree with the terms please print, sign, and date.

Date \_\_\_\_\_

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Signature & Printed

# Observations

Frustration, impatience, and disorganization plagued each volunteer. I observed each person getting frustrated with the search tools in almost every aspect of the index from the frames to the QuickSearch. Twenty-five percent of the test group gave up if the answer could not be found in the first ten hits. They also could not find the information they sought and complained about the site being disorganized and extremely slow (even with a cable modem connection!). Yet more than 75% of the volunteers loved the way the site looked and felt even when they had such problems.

## **Example 1**

In particular, question seven asked, "Please find a video of a soldier from the Vietnam Conflict." Not one person clicked on the historical event; volunteers instead preferred to figure out how to find a video. The website did not have a way to search by videos but rather a simple click on Historical Events would have solved the problem. However the index did not give an indication of where to look for videos. It took one volunteer twenty minutes to find a video and they repeatedly continued to try and use the QuickSearch even when it failed. Instead of seeing a problem in the search they believed they were not searching correctly. Volunteer 1 said, "I used the search each time. I found it to be extremely ineffective. I wish I'd known where to go to search for videos. Clicking on the historical events was a total fluke and out of frustration, maybe have places where you

can search for only videos instead of text transcripts only."<sup>8</sup> Volunteers did not understand how to use the index and the layout confused them because they did not know where to find anything. Rather than helping the few clickable links looked more like pictures to the volunteers.

## **Example 2**

Each volunteer did have success finding a specific person and that person was *Genevieve Cochrane Martinelli* who lived through the Flu Epidemic of 1918. Within the question I gave the information needed and each person successfully chose to use the QuickSearch and found the needed information. I asked volunteers to find an interview with *Genevieve Cochrane Martinelli* and find out which of her family members died in the Flu Epidemic of 1918. Ninety-five percent of volunteers used her full name in the "search interviews" and came up with zero hits. In order to have a successful search, one had to put the last name only in the "search interviews."

As in Susan Augustine and Courtney Greene's study, I also found that "success with these tasks was related to educational status (undergraduates, graduates, or professors); There were common patterns in the search behaviors of users who experienced difficulties or who did not succeed in locating the online periodical indexes. Users who succeeded in locating online periodical indexes were discriminating about their choices of

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<sup>8</sup>Volunteer 1, "Usability Survey by Heather Turner," 2 Aug 2006.

index and citation."<sup>9</sup> One-third of my volunteers were professors/continuing education and two thirds were undergraduate and graduate students and this played a large role in their success. Professors/continuing education tended to have a much better success rate in researching the site as opposed to students. Student, especially undergraduates, immediately got impatient and all of the unanswered questions came from that group.

Within the online index was a QuickSearch function. Upon viewing the "search box," most volunteers closed in on the box and just typed in their keywords. They cared little about how the search might work and if there might be other options. Three or four times their keywords gave them nothing yet they kept going back instead of finding another way to find the information. However each volunteer except one used the QuickSearch for every question. They saw the QuickSearch as a search engine which it is not designed to be. In fact, one person said in response to if they would use the site for research, "No. I go to Google. I type Vietnam war video. I choose the 4<sup>th</sup> link. Instantly I find a ton of clips. Total time? 5 seconds! Much faster, and much more effective."<sup>10</sup> Another volunteer said, "I found the search very frustrating, coming up with either no results, or a huge long page of results. Some of them somewhat matched my criteria."<sup>11</sup>

In addition, volunteers failed to notice at the top of the page an option of sorting

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<sup>9</sup>Susan Augustine and Courtney Greene, "Discovering How Students Search a Library Web Site: A Usability Case Study" *College & Research Libraries* 63, no. 4(Jul 2002): 354.

<sup>10</sup>Volunteer 1, "Usability Survey by Heather Turner," 2 Aug 2006.

<sup>11</sup>Volunteer 5, "Usability Survey by Heather Turner," 2 Aug 2006.

by different things such a date and historical event. In particular, I observed that the volunteers failed to notice the headings on the webpages. For example I asked, "Please find a video of a soldier from the Vietnam Conflict." Only one person actually used the historical event link and initially each volunteer also missed the column labeled video in the collections.

Volunteers immediately went to the search box and did not stop and try to figure out what the index could do for them and what information it contained. Volunteer 9 says, "As I mentioned before, most of my difficulties came from an awkward search set up. It might have been easier to navigate if I were aware of what the different collections were before I started, but I'm afraid I was not and am not."<sup>12</sup> Even after the task was complete Volunteer 9 was just as mystified about the contents of the collections at the conclusion of the exercise as when it began. In the attached graphs, you can see that people's comfort in the site was all over the board.<sup>13</sup> They appeared to agree that there was good information in the index but one could not get to the information easily. The graphs also told us that the volunteers really did not know what to think about the site due to their various answers to the rating of the site. In theory, the index has enormously important information potential but if one cannot gain access to that information it is useless.

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<sup>12</sup> Volunteer 9, "Usability Survey by Heather Turner," 2 Aug 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Please see Appendix A pg. 23.

# Analysis

"Information by itself is not valuable unless it is accessible. Value is created by pathfinders through the information."<sup>14</sup> The usability study of Oral History Online reaffirms the validity of the quotation by Deborah Grimstead. Intermediation has taken on many new forms during the last two decades including computer-based training, database information literacy, and information evaluation.<sup>15</sup> Indexes formerly only on paper have become searchable online and include full-text. Successful and usable sites have the following in common: they are effective, efficient, error proof, easy to learn and engaging.<sup>16</sup> Oral History Online sets out to be the next best index site, however with closer examination problems quickly mount and the perfect picture is quickly washed away.

At closer inspection of the index, the layout which at first seemed helpful quickly deteriorates into an oversimplified mess as few volunteers noticed the document searches, collections, and interview indexed sections. Carol Barnum, Earvin Henderson, Al Hood, and Rodney Jordan also found this quite evident in their study and wrote,

The results of our test indicate that superior performance doesn't necessarily go hand-in-hand with user preferences in locating information in electronic documents. Here we summarize the results of our usability test.

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<sup>14</sup>Deborah. Grimstead, "Ten tenets of technical communication" *Technical Communication* 48 no. 13 (2001): 13.

<sup>15</sup>Joyce Hommel, "Final Project: Usability Study" IST 605 (2006)

<sup>16</sup>Carol Barnum, Earvin Henderson, Al Hood, and Rodney Jordan, "Index Versus Full-Text Search: A Usability Study of User Preference and Performance." *Technical COMMUNICATION* 51, no. 2 (May 2004): 190.

The hyperlinked index is the more effective look up tool. Users considered the search version slightly more engaging. Users considered the search version slightly more error tolerant. Users considered both the search and the hyperlinked index versions easy to learn. Users slightly preferred the search version to the hyperlinked index version. The average time spent performing a look-up task in the hyperlinked index versions was less than the time spent completing a task of similar difficulty in the search version.<sup>17</sup>

Although they could have found answers in other places all the volunteers chose to use QuickSearch. Almost like geese, they flock to the QuickSearch acting like they had found a friend in the familiar white search box. A mini-Google Oral History Online's QuickSearch was not and it desperately needed to be updated for current search habits. Many volunteers wanted to give up and go directly to Google to find the required information faster and easier. However the information contained in the index would not appear in Google due to the fact that it was a subscription-based material.

Péter Jacsó really understood the problem when he wrote, "Not even the most intuitive search software can make the information content useful if the search results are not displayed in an intuitive format."<sup>18</sup> There is something about computer's organization of the information that never seems to be exactly right. Rarely does a search engine give the desired information on the first search. However, they distract the user with other information. Volunteers did not have the patience or time to try to

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<sup>17</sup> Barnum, Henerson, Hood, and Jordan, 204.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Jacso. "Search software usability issues. (Digital Librarianship)." *Computers in Libraries* 53, no. 2 (Jan 2003): 53.

figure out how the search worked. Boolean search methods were not used by the volunteers whereas librarians and technicians have these tools at their disposal. In particular, the searches are too difficult to get correct results and the collections should be clearly designated with more clickable options.

Oral History Online failed to take into account its audience. This was a common issue among web-based media. The index simplified too much which made finding the correct area of the site nearly impossible unless you had studied it previously. The index had more than two-hundred thousand interviews but they were not sorted and organized. Evidently the authors of the index tried to make the website simple, but they needed to take a few cues from book indexers and clearly define the options. If book indexers and web indexers were to work together, an amazing web-based medium would be created! Carol Barnun, Earvin Henderson, Al Hood, and Rodney Jordan agreed when they wrote, "If our specialty is indexing, we understand that a well composed index is one that matches the thinking process and vocabulary of our users." With books and other print references, such as documentation, the usefulness of the product is frequently dependent on the effectiveness of the index."<sup>19</sup> The problem was that those in charge were giving computers the decision-making power that was better left in the hands of indexers because they knew how people were going to normally search for items.

Oral History Index failed to take into account how students and professors alike

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<sup>19</sup>Barnun, Henderson, Hood, and Jordan, 185.

think and research. If those people whose job included research could not find information very few would be able to! Susan Augustine and Courtney Greene wrote,

Students consistently and frequently use the library website's internal search engine to find information rather than navigating through pages . . . problems often arise because sites require too much expert knowledge for users to navigate successfully. Users generally skim Web pages for cues to their usefulness, investing only about 10 seconds per page. An easy fix and important one would be the column headings scrolling down with the text. There are tons of pages of information and many become frustrated having to scroll up to the top because they forgot what the fourth column numbers meant. They need to be able to predict where hypertext links will lead and to readily discriminate between options.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore web developers must accept that the search was going to be used primarily and not the links such as collections. Websurfers go to great lengths to skip any information not pertinent to them. The internet has made for instant gratification and if researchers cannot get the information quickly they will try another website that is tailored to the way they think and research because otherwise it wastes their time.

A redeveloped homepage would help this index tremendously. Although the current one was extremely concise and "pretty" (mentioned by 75% of volunteers) it was not adding to the researching experience. Website developers failed to take into account how the researcher would look at the collection. In particular this index was over simplified because one does not know where to begin to find information. Many volunteers initially stared at the screen trying to figure out where to begin and started with the

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<sup>20</sup> Augustine and Greene, 354.

QuickSearch because it was the most familiar. Collections was one of the options and no more information about it was given. It would benefit the site to have drop-down menus appear when the mouse touched a particular button to limit the vast amounts of information displayed. In addition, the explanation about how the collections and different clickable links work was buried under help.

How to combat an insane amount of results? The index needed to improve its searching capabilities. More than 85% of the volunteers stated that the searching capabilities were horrible and they continuously got discouraged and frustrated. Something as important as slave narratives and holocaust survivor interviews should not be in a medium to make people feel frustrated. Important information existed in Oral History Online however a satisfactory connection to that information did not exist. UIE (Website of User Interface Engineering) discovered people normally used a search engine to find information yet they were successful only 34% of the time. Also 47% only tried once and only 30% tried twice. Therefore we ascertained that people were impatient and unwilling to read numerous hits. Even if sites encouraged the user to continue to search, this did not matter to searchers.<sup>21</sup> Yet even though search engine searches were usually unsuccessful droves of people used them everyday. Therefore if a superior way to search were invented people would use it as long as it followed the criteria of good usability (Effective, Efficient, Easy to Use, Engaging and Error Tolerant).

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<sup>21</sup>Barnum, Henerson, Hood, and Jordan, 188..

Oral History Online tried to treat its site like a book index in which one browsed the back of the book. However, online environments needed a bit of the searching capabilities of search engines such as Google, while still retaining the accuracy of book indexes. In a book index when you looked up dinosaurs you were not going to find the steel industry whereas online you might discover a search result such as that because in the article on the steel industry the word dinosaur was mentioned.<sup>22</sup> Full-text searching as Oral History Online used was not effective for the vast majority of users. Something must be created to improve the results/hits. As Barnum, Henerson, Hood and Jordan said, "To succeed, search engines must emulate human judgement"<sup>23</sup> Students and professors wanted to see familiar items on the website and QuickSearch attempted to fill that hole but did not achieve its potential.

For the most part the index was error proof in terms of going to sites when you clicked on them. Not once did someone have problems with broken or non-working links which can plague indexes this large. However the webdevelopers, in an effort to be helpful, created a frame over every page. Even when you left the website (for a collection at a University or Library website) the frame remained on the screen which made it look as though Oral History Online created the site and volunteers found this deceitful. The full-text interviews that Oral History Online sent the researcher to were

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<sup>22</sup>Barnum, Henerson, Hood, and Jordan, 188.

<sup>23</sup>Barnum, Henerson, Hood, and Jordan, 188.

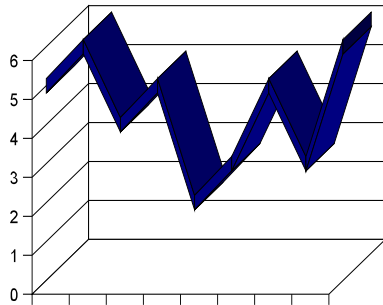
not part of Oral History Online because it was only an index. The one malfunction that did occur happened when volunteers tried to use the back button because the site wanted you to use the frame at the top and traditionally websites were not limiting in that way.

In addition, many volunteers desired to know what they were looking at most of the time. They knew it was some sort of interview or oral history but were not always clear as to how it would be relevant to their research. Designers must gear databases and websites to the least computer and database savvy person. By catering to the least skilled results in all skill levels success.

In conclusion, Oral History Online remained a book index which just happened to be online. With a bit of effort it could become a significant part in primary source research. However, it lacked in many important areas of usability including effective, efficient, and easy to learn. Searching capabilities in the index were extremely limited and in a society of Google and instant gratification this index failed. Collaboration will be the key to the success of this index between the users and the makers. Important information existed in the index, however, one cannot easily access it without expending vast amounts of time and energy figuring out every nuance of the system. Another simple change would be the layout which confused and lacked detail. Simplification is not always the answer and this made the site hard to use effectively. There is great potential in primary resource research on the Internet. This usability study aimed to highlight Oral History Online as a stellar index but a flawed searchable website.

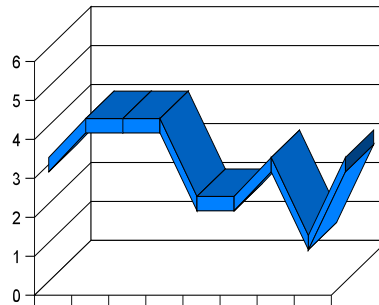
## Appendix A

### Question 1



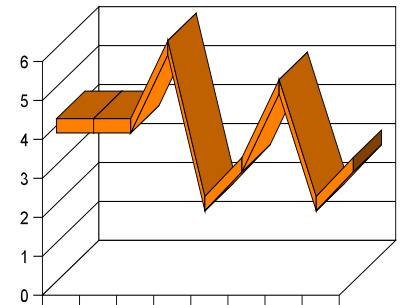
While completing your tasks, did you feel frustrated or confident?

### Question 2



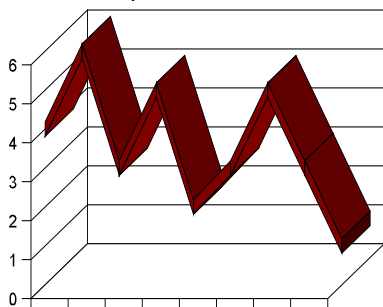
Compared to what you expected did this task go slower or faster?

### Question 3



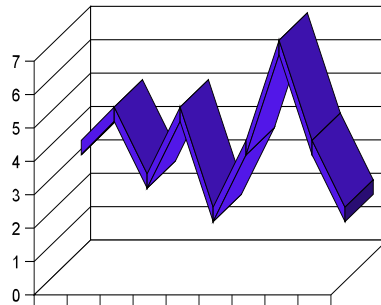
How confident are you that you found all the relevant information? (1-7)

### Question 4



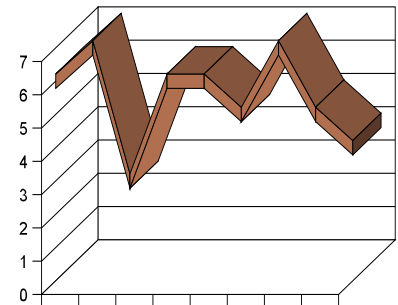
Ease of finding specific information (1-7)

### Question 5



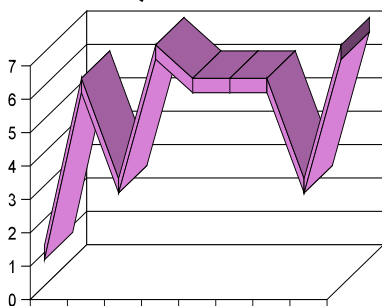
Logic of website's navigation (1-7)

### Question 6



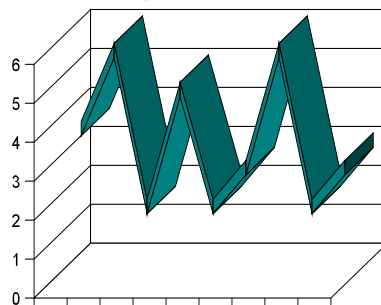
Appearance of website (1-7)

### Question 7



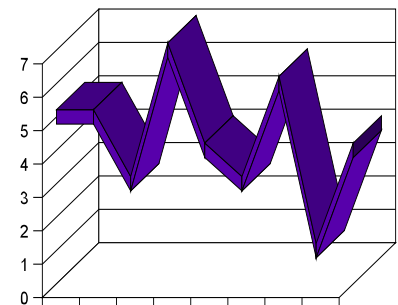
Speed of content/graphic display (1-7)

### Question 8



Overall ease of use (1-7)

### Question 9



Would you use this site in the future for primary research (never or always)?

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