



Archives.gov Redesign

Home Page Usability Testing Findings and Recommendations

June 11, 2009

Version 1.0

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Finding:** In general, users tend to search first using the links on the page itself rather than the main navigation bars. This is true for both the horizontal and vertical navigation schemes as well as the interior pages.

Recommendation: Test a wireframe that is similar to <http://cdc.gov/> in terms of displaying the audiences, top 10 pages, and research topics (similar to CDC's Health & Safety Topics) directly on the page. In this version, drop-down menus should provide a comprehensive view of the site options but all of the most critical links should be visible on the page. This will ensure that the most popular content can be found quickly and that a means exists to dive deeper into the site in those cases where a user's goals are not met using the on-page links.

2. **Finding:** Many users found it hard to differentiate between the role of the "Archives.gov for..." and "Most Requested" boxes. They liked the idea of having these boxes prominently displayed but seemed to think that both boxes contained featured links and not two distinct categories of information.

Recommendation: Secondary text explaining the purpose of these boxes (similar to that employed in the horizontal navigation bar on Scheme 5) along with graphical icons and other visual means of differentiation (e.g. color and placement) should help distinguish the functional differences between the boxes' links,

3. **Finding:** While the "Archives.gov for..." set of links was not confusing, *per se*, only one or two users seemed to make the conceptual leap ("I'm a _____ so I'll use the Archives.gov for _____ to find information relevant to my task.") required to make the "Archives.gov for..." section truly useful.

Recommendation: This may simply be a nomenclature issue. Secondary text (as described above) and further testing should help clarify the box's purpose and ensure its proper usage.

4. **Finding:** Most users relied heavily on the search box when they did not immediately discover what they were looking for.

Recommendation: This underscores the need to ensure that searching is simple and logical and that the results are relevant and clearly presented.

5. **Finding:** Several users used the “Archives.gov for Researchers” link to begin their search for specific documents.

Recommendation: If this section is intended to focus on professional researchers and historians, then the label needs to be changed to reflect this and another link needs to be provided for casual research.

6. **Finding:** The feature boxes labeled “America’s Historical Documents” and “Bill of Rights” were frequently confusing. Users who were searching for an unrelated document (e.g. The Emancipation Proclamation) seemed like they wanted to use one of these links but were thrown by the specificity of “See Today’s Document” and “Bill of Rights” labels. Those who did ultimately choose to click here were able to quickly get where they were going using the left-hand navigation links on subsequent internal pages.

Recommendation: This may have simply been a poor choice of an example to use in the wireframe test. In future wireframes, the “Bill of Rights” box should be replaced with another sample feature. In the “America’s Historical Documents” box two links should be provided. One should read “See Today’s Document” and the other should say “Browse Documents” (or something similar in meaning).

7. **Finding:** One user found the “A-Z Topic Index” very helpful and once discovered, relied heavily upon it to find what she was looking for.

Recommendation: It would be advisable to include this in the top row of global links.

8. **Finding:** There seemed to be some differences of opinion in what a user considered to be a “historical document.” The way the current site is set up, the term seems to relate primarily to documents of historical interest like the Emancipation Proclamation. Some users took a broader view and thought all of the National Archives’ holdings are historical documents (which they are in a sense) and they considered looking for documents like land titles and military records using “America’s Historical Documents” as a starting point.

Recommendation: Once more, this is most likely an issue of nomenclature. Future tests should focus on discovering what users expect to find when they click on “America’s Historical Documents.” The names users mentally assign to a particular category of information may not always coincide with terminology commonly-used internally at NARA. In cases where this is true, the users’ naming conventions should always be employed.

9. **Finding:** Having a site map at the bottom of the page (like in Scheme 3) does not seem to be helpful. This was directly stated by one participant and the other participant questioned whether someone should be expected to know to look at the site map during one of the scenarios (finding information about how to obtain a grant)

Recommendation: Do not include a site map directly on the webpage. A site map, however, could occasionally be a useful tool therefore a link to an index or site map should still be provided somewhere on the page (see point #7 above).

10. **Finding:** Participants had the most trouble completing scenarios in Scheme 3 through links provided on the page and opted to use the search tool on the top as their first choice. It is worth noting that without operational menus or active links on this test scheme, the users tended to look for a relevant topic on the page first and, when they didn't find it, used the search box as a fallback tool. Aside from this, the problem here seems to be more about placement of the links rather than the naming of the links since similar naming is used in Scheme 4 specifically for the boxes "Archives.gov for..." and "Most Requested..." / "Popular Pages". It could also have been that the organization of the website (lists of links and more lists of links) was just overwhelming and intimidating to use.

Recommendation: The small, light blue featured item boxes in schemes 4 and 5 were used during the scenarios. They most likely provided the organization and friendliness that was lacking in scheme 3. These should be used again in the new wireframe.

11. **Finding:** "Most Requested..." may make more sense to use than "Popular Pages". This was stated by one participant and also Scheme 4 was more successful than Scheme 3 in terms of scenarios completed through links on the page.

Recommendation: Use "Most Requested..." as opposed to "Popular Pages".

12. **Finding:** Many participants, when presented with historical research scenarios, seemed surprised that the National Archives contained this information. While the majority of participants recognized that the website's purpose included research, perhaps it is unclear the breadth of research available.

Recommendation: Display a box highlighting on rotation some of the more obscure but interesting information that is available (immigration lists for example). The slideshow may be a good vehicle for this type of information when there aren't topical pieces of information that need to be displayed prominently.

13. **Finding:** The scenario that caused the most problem was finding information about how to obtain a grant from the National Archives. Users did not think to look under “About the Archives” for grant information. In fact, one user thought the topic would be more relevant under the “Research Tools” heading.

Recommendation: Only 1% of users are looking for grant information. And, those users will likely search on the word “grants” and find only relevant search results. Consequently, this usability testing scenario should be discarded.

14. **Finding:** One participant was surprised that the drop-down links had drop-down functionality. In general, the accordion menus seemed to receive more positive reRecommendations from most of the participants, but in many cases when presented with the “Browse by Topic” mega-menu in Scheme #5, users seemed to be able to make better assessments of where something was located by seeing all of their options in one place.

Recommendation: If they are tested again, the drop-downs should incorporate drop-down arrows or some other visual cue to better indicate their functionality.