Library search study

Example research plan · Library discovery team · November 2026

A short usability study to learn how readers move from a broad topic to a useful book. The sessions below are planned; this example does not report measured findings.

Contents: Research question · Session plan · Success criteria

Research question

Can a first-time visitor find a relevant book, check its availability, and decide what to do next without help?

Hypothesis

Readers may understand a familiar subject filter more easily than a catalogue classification. We will watch how they narrow a search before proposing changes to the filter labels.

Participants

Plan six individual sessions with adult library members: three regular borrowers and three people who have used the online catalogue only once or twice. Include both phone and laptop use.

Each session will take about 25 minutes. Ask for consent before recording, avoid collecting borrowing history, and let participants skip any task.

Session plan

Begin with a recent book-search experience, then ask the participant to think aloud. Use the same prompts in each session and avoid naming interface controls.

Tasks

1. Find an introductory book about growing vegetables in a small space.
2. Choose a title available at a nearby branch and explain what its status means.
3. Show how you would save the title or place a hold for a later visit.

If the participant gets stuck, ask what they expected to happen before offering help. Record the point where assistance was needed.

Evidence

- The search words and filters the participant chooses.
- Moments of hesitation, backtracking, or uncertainty about availability.
- Whether the participant can explain their next step in their own words.

Keep observations separate from interpretations. A pause is evidence; "the label is confusing" is a hypothesis to check across sessions.

Next steps

Review the notes together after all six sessions. Group repeated obstacles by the decision the reader was trying to make, then choose one small change to test.

Success criteria

A promising revision should help participants identify an available title and describe the next action without moderator guidance. Compare the revised flow with the original tasks, using the same observation checklist.

This small study will guide a design decision. It will not estimate how frequently a problem occurs across all library members.

Follow-up

Create a prototype for the most persistent obstacle, invite a new set of participants, and repeat the relevant task. Link each proposed change to an observed moment in the session notes.

Before sharing the summary, remove identifying details and confirm that recordings are stored according to the consent agreement.

Return to the research question