

Use Scenario

A use scenario, also called a ‘current scenario’ tells a story, synthesized from observations, data and interviews, to illustrate how one or more users interact with a technology in their daily lives. The challenge is to be as realistic as possible, as detailed as possible, and, at the same time, as concise as possible. Begin with real examples of actual events and disguise them or generalize them to create a series of ‘interaction points’ that emphasize the ways in which users interact with objects or technologies in a specific, real-world context. Limit the amount of time covered in the scenario. Unlike a task analysis, which seeks to create an idealized version of the user’s activities, the goal of a use scenario is to capture both ordinary and unusual events; to identify small details that can cause problems or suggest design alternatives.

Use scenarios differ from *task analyses* (from Human Factors). Instead of providing an idealized version of the users’s activities and the functions necessary to support those tasks, a use scenario focuses on interaction in the real world, with specific examples, both typical and unusual, to illustrate how and why people act as they do. Each use scenario offers a very specific, individualized description of a series of incidents in which users interact with technology. It is important to begin with specifics: later, you can develop more general abstractions, but it is important to base them on real-world activities. Note that developing use scenarios requires actual observation and/or interviews with users. Otherwise, they are simply stereotypes of what an outsider thinks is ‘normal’ behavior. Real users are the only ones who can provide real details about what actually happens and these details are essential for developing designs that truly serve the needs of their users.

Each use scenario should include one or more of the *personas* you created, as well as a specific place and time. Be precise: each person should have a real name and a ‘back story’ that informs their actions. You can include personas that are ‘extreme characters’, or try creating two versions of the same basic scenario, one with a ‘normal’ persona and the other with an ‘extreme’ one.

The use scenario begins with a starting situation for a particular user, such as a task to perform, a problem to solve or an event that just occurred. It then tells a story in the form of a step-by-step description of a series of realistic incidents over a period of time. Unlike most stories, the emphasis is on the ‘interaction points’ or events in which people need or want some form of technology. They may describe problems with existing technologies or situations in which a new technology would be useful. Although scenarios should be realistic in the sense that they are based on real-world events, they may compress time, skip over ‘character development’ and emphasize unusual situations. The goal is to highlight a set of design opportunities, not win an Oscar.

The best way to develop a use scenario is to select several categories from a Grounded Theory analysis and generate a sample incident for each. Different group members may be inspired by different examples, so try to include at least one incident from (and for) each group member. One of the primary goals of a use scenario is ‘problem-finding’, to identify situations in which users need a new or improved design. However, it is usually a good idea to include situations in which things go right, not only to ensure that the new design does not create more problems than it solves, but also to consider user innovations which could be converted into innovative designs. Also, be sure to include instances of both planned activities and ‘situated action’, i.e. unexpected events and interruptions.

Exercise: Use Scenario

Group: _____

page 1 of _____

Roles: Appoint a moderator, to keep the discussion on topic and a scribe to record the scenario. Preparation: Everyone should contribute at least one incident that interests them as a potential design challenge.

Preparation Bring coded examples from the grounded theory analysis and the personas you developed.

Procedure: Work at a table and consider placing the different incidents on separate index cards.

1. Choose the key personas or characters in the scenario. Identify a time, place and starting situation. For example: *Marie is student air traffic controller at the Paris air traffic control center. She just returned from two weeks of vacation and has started the 6am shift. Jean is an experienced controller who is currently on duty. Traffic is slow, but there is a storm coming and the rush hour traffic is just getting started.*
2. Choose the categories that you want to explore in the scenario. You may concentrate on a single theme, choosing all the incidents from a single category. Or, you may choose incidents from different categories. The group should discuss how to adapt the incidents to the current situation and set of personas and the most logical order.
3. Group members should work in parallel to describe, in as much relevant detail as possible, each incident. Most incidents involve about a paragraph of text, and may include a series of actions and responses. Use clear, concise descriptions that emphasize the user's behavior.
4. Bring the incidents together and read them as a single story. Adjust the order and any details to make the story more compelling and coherent. Remember to look for problems, breakdowns, and situations in which things went wrong, as well as at least one positive example, a user innovation or simply when things worked as planned. Include both typical and unusual situations and examples of planned and unexpected activities. Make your choices based on what you think will offer the most interesting possibilities for design. The final use scenario should be 1-2 pages long. Keep in mind that while student projects usually concentrate on a single scenario, if you use this technique for a real product or research project, you should develop multiple scenarios that explore different aspects of the design problem.

Resource: The final design resource is a concisely written story that highlights a number of design opportunities, with situations in which people reveal their needs or wants in a real- world context. Use scenarios inform a variety of design activities, serving as the basis for design scenarios, storyboards and video prototypes. They are easy to evaluate: If possible, get feedback from users, not only about errors and misunderstandings but also as a source of additional stories that can enhance your design. Do not be afraid to modify the use scenario as you discover more about users or to help create a more compelling design scenario. Remember that your goal is not to be a sociologist developing theory but rather to *identify opportunities for design*.

Exercise: Use Scenario

Group: _____

Create a use scenario based on a synthesis of the interviews and observations made by the members of your group. Use the categories you identified to specify the events to illustrate. Use a new, indented line for each new 'interaction point'. (Note: This handout is just a model. Please type your scenario.)

Persona name:
Characteristics:

Persona name:
Characteristics:

Persona name:
Characteristics:

Date: time:
Setting:

Situation:

Scenario (organized into a series of **interaction points**):