When I heard that Carol Barnum was releasing a new book that was essentially a follow-up to her 2001 book *Usability Testing and Research*, I was delighted. I have had the pleasure of working with Carol’s first usability how-to book as a student and a professor, and it provided a good grounding for my future in the field. However, as with texts in any fast-moving specialized field, Barnum’s first usability textbook was becoming dated. As I’m gearing up to teach usability again, I was glad to know that I have her new book to draw from.

*Usability Testing Essentials* works best when approached as an introduction and how-to manual for readers who will be conducting formal usability research. The book’s chapters are arranged in chronological order that gives readers a step-by-step structure for testing complete with planning meetings, interim deliverables, test scripts and instruments, and post-test analysis and reporting. Throughout this structure, Barnum alludes to the team responsible for planning and conducting the test and suggests important ways to divide the tasks and make efficient use of the labor pool.

For me, the assumption of a distributed team approach to usability is one way the book falls short of matching my experience as a usability consultant. Barnum does provide some good tips for “working solo” (page 230 discusses moderating sessions without a logger, for example), but overall the book seems to suggest that there is at least a small group of people who are part of the usability project at hand. In my experience, collaboration and sharing of ideas are always a part of the testing, but I have often worked in environments that lack the kind of team support and a shared working knowledge of usability practices that the book seems to assume. Still, I think that Barnum is meeting the needs of newcomers to usability who may not have the ability or confidence to approach a project as the sole usability expert.

As I was reading *Usability Testing Essentials*, I was pleased by how the book effectively makes the reader aware of the scope of the text, including what is within and what remains outside the main scope. As a book, it is self-aware of its place in the constellation of research and methodological information that surrounds the pursuit of usability testing. It also helps readers understand where to go for further information when something isn’t specifically covered. (For example, while there is some overview information about developing effective survey questions for questionnaires, Barnum is quick to refer to other sources for more in-depth information on the topic.) The layout and design of the text make these external references accessible but not overwhelming by placing them in the margins where readers can ignore them if they aren’t applicable at the moment of reading.

Barnum’s background in rhetoric shows up when she unabashedly brings Aristotle’s concepts of audience, purpose, and context to bear in her chapter on reporting findings. While this grounding in rhetoric is near and dear to my heart, it may seem out of place to some readers who are approaching this book from training in user experience design or human-computer interaction. That being said, the reference to Aristotle comes so late in the text that Barnum will have already won her readers over with many instances of advice from her first-hand experience conducting usability research.

In terms of reporting findings, *Usability Testing Essentials* leaves a little to be desired when Barnum discusses the role of the video in reporting and presenting. While Barnum suggests that different kinds of video presentations meet different needs for the intended audience, the text does not offer much advice in how to determine what those needs
might be. Instead, she summarizes her approach to picking a video preparing video clips as, “There’s not a right or wrong answer. As with so many things associated with usability, ‘It depends’” (p. 309). Since video editing and preparing clips can consume much of the time in putting together a report or presentation, I would have liked to see Barnum give some good guidelines on how much effort should be invested.

*Usability Testing Essentials* includes a welcome new addition: an almost stand-alone chapter on international usability testing. Her information here is necessarily an overview, but she carefully outlines the nuances involved in testing with an international audience that complicates addressing usability concerns across cultures. While she doesn’t answer every single question for a potential usability practitioner, Barnum clearly gives her readers an advantageous head start in outlining almost all of the potential pitfalls and problems they will face. I would have liked to see a bit more information on the pros and cons of shortcuts to international testing like testing with bilingual users or seeking out test participants in US cities with large immigrant populations. While Barnum certainly brings up the idea of US-based representatives of a particular culture, the chapter largely focuses on the option of testing international users in their countries (by traveling or using in-country agencies) or using remote testing.

*Usability Testing Essentials* offers readers a wealth of knowledge based on Barnum’s experience as a consultant and educator. It provides an uncommonly thoughtful and well-researched introduction to the field of usability and an accessible process for practicing usability research. For me, this text is ideal for students focused on usability or that have a strong usability component. It would also work well for practitioners new to the field who want to read a comprehensive foundational text that introduces them to the common practices and approaches. To me, *Usability Testing Essentials* is an essential book for any library of usability resources.