

Usability Test Report for Amazon.com Help

Online help documentation for help and support to customers of
Amazon.com

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this test is to evaluate the usability of online help from the perspective of a customer. Amazon.com customers, sometimes get stuck in situations where the order is late or doesn't arrive at all, or it arrives broken, defective, or with parts missing. To address these issues, customers try to get in touch with Amazon's customer service department. Without calling customer care, if users attempt to locate help, they expect it to be articulate with the exact words that they would use to describe their problem. This usability test was performed to determine whether users can easily and effectively find the desired help in order to complete the by navigating through the help system on the website.

This usability study for Amazon.com's help website was conducted in Raleigh, North Carolina during the dates of October 12–28, 2016. The purpose of the test was to assess the usability of the help website and also to find any challenges that users might face to find the information that they require. The research questions posed during the study, along with insight summaries for each question, are detailed below.

Research Question	Insights from the Study
Can the user find the help link through the homepage of Amazon.com?	Most users tend to look at the top right corner of the website to look for the help icon. They also expected it to be a search bar or search icon instead of a link called "Help". However, being located at the center of the page makes it easy for users to locate in their second attempt at the most.
Can the user find help specific to their problem using the search button?	Some participants found the required help using the help button. Others struggled to find the search bar.
Can the users find the specific help topic for the issue that they are facing?	All participants were not familiar with what keywords to use in order to search the help. Therefore, not all participants could find information specific to the issue that they were facing.
Can users navigate through the help?	Once they landed on the list of help topics, all users could navigate through the topic. The main concern was to find the list of topics that has all the help information. It is located

	at the bottom of the page. Most users did not scroll to look for the help content.
Do users understand all the wording on the website? Are there any translation mistakes or misunderstandings?	All users understood the wording clearly. None of them faced an issue understanding the content of the website.
Do users trust the website? Do they fill out the personal information readily?	Users certainly trust the website. Three participants had their information saved on the browser. However, two users did not have it. In order to check their account details, the website prompted them to enter their information which they readily did without any resistance.
How quickly can they navigate through the on-screen menus?	The test found that the capability of the website to direct users to all the menus was good. However, 100% of the participants were unsure whether the menu would lead them to a help topic or to one of the functionalities of the website. The name for the function and help topic is almost the same for every instance which caused a lot of confusion when users were performing the tasks.
What problems or difficulties did they encounter in trying to find help?	The common problem that most of the participants faced was finding the keyword which exactly matched the one that was used in the help. Searching using any other keyword did not result in finding the correct information.
Which aspects do users like and which aspects do they dislike?	80% of the users did not like the design of the help website. They faced difficulty in navigating because it was designed differently than most websites that they regularly use. However, they liked that the help links took them straight to the task instead of to the information.

Method

Purpose of this Study

This main focus of this usability study was based on concerns identified from the consumeraffairs website and other online forums and the customer feedback for Amazon.com's online help website. This usability study was performed to gather basic quantitative data regarding users' ability to complete basic tasks and their qualitative impressions regarding ease of use, organization, and suitability of content. These qualities were determined by:

- Finding out whether users could easily and effectively find desired help.
- Assessing whether the users were able to complete the core tasks in order to navigate through the help system on the website.
- Identifying challenges faced by the users to locate information.
- Identifying and comparing patterns of search strategies used by different users to perform the same task.

Test Environment

Location

This test was conducted at the D.H Hill Library located on the campus at the North Carolina State University. The facilities provided by the library made the study room an advantageous location for this study.

Setup

As shown in the figures given below, a laptop and video recorder on a table in front of the user. The video recorder was turned ON as soon as the user entered the test room. An email will be sent to the participants mentioning the room details so that they found the way to the room easily. The Camtasia screen recording function was turned ON as soon as the participant took their place in the chair. I sat beside the participant and took notes of most important things and helped the participant with any questions. I also recorded their audio on my phone to avoid noise issues if the camera recorded any. It also helped me time the test for its entire length.

The test was conducted using the same setup on five different days based on the availability of the participants. However, the pictures given below were taken on the first day of the test:

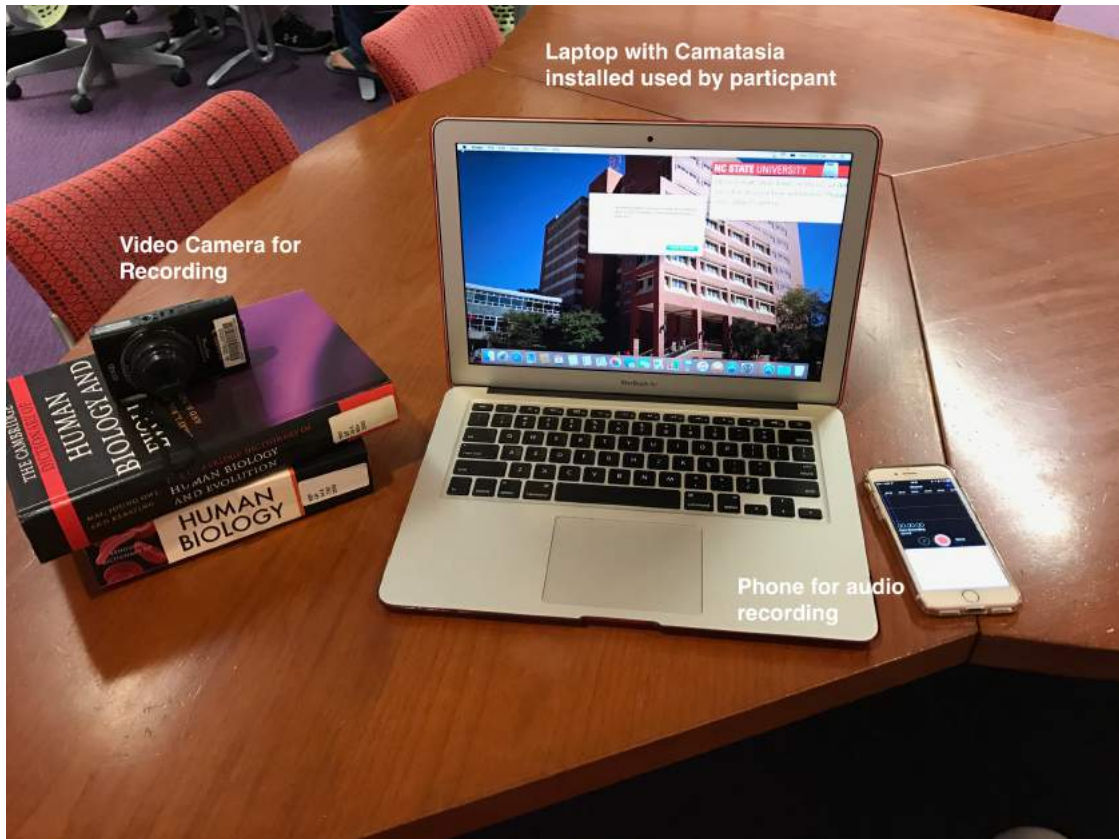


Figure 1: Setup with all devices arranged



Figure 2: Another picture of the setup



Figure 3: View showing position of observer and participant

Participant Characteristics

The selection of participants whose background and abilities are representative of the Amazon's intended end user was a crucial element of the evaluation process. I used different participants based on differences in age, gender, background and familiarity with the website. In all I had five participants. Along with the above mentioned conditions, the participants were also selected based on a screening questionnaire. After the users are identified, a meeting was scheduled with each of them on different days based on their availability.

The table given below summarizes the participants' characteristics:

Research Question	Insights from the Study
Profession	
Technical communicators	3
Mechanical engineer	1
Computer engineer	1

Platform of use	
Website	4
Mobile app	1
Frequency of use	
Once a month	2
Atleast twice a month	2
Atleast once a week	1
Gender	
Male	3
Female	2
Age	
18-25	2
25-35	2
35-45	1

Type of Test

The usability test was a moderated in-person type of usability study. I, the facilitator, shared the study room space with the participant directing them to the tasks and also observing them at the same time. The test was conducted with five participants and each of them were given the same set of tasks to perform. Following is some information about the tasks and sessions conducted for this study:

Sessions

Each session lasted for about 60 minutes. Participants were given a time slot of one hour, so it worked well. I read out the moderator script before each participant to maintain consistency in the instructions being given to them. After preliminary introductions, the participants answered a pre-test questionnaire. Then they were asked to perform tasks in an attempt to fulfill requirements for three scenarios. After completion of each scenario, participants were asked to answer a post-task questionnaire. After completing all the tasks and post-task questionnaires, they took up a post-test questionnaire. In an attempt to avoid using paper copies, I shared google documents of these questionnaires with them. They edited the document by entering their answers in the space provided. Some of them also spoke their answers aloud as they types, which was recorded by the video camera with their expressions.

Task Scenarios

As mentioned earlier, tasks were classified into scenarios, that is, each scenario consisted of multiple tasks. Users were asked to read aloud the scenario and task before starting with the operations. Following is the list of scenarios and associated tasks:

Scenario	Tasks (t _i)
<p>You have realized that you have saved your account information on your work PC. The browser does not allow you to clear any history or saved passwords because the browser settings are password protected by the admin. Instead of spending time to contact IT or admin you decide to change your Amazon login information. You have to find information on how to change these settings on the official website.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Log on 2. Locate help page 3. Find the list of help topics 4. Find information to change password
<p>You have received a gift card for \$100 from your friend. You have have a promotional code for \$10 from earlier which you not did not redeem due to lack of information on how to do it. But you will need to find that information in order to redeem your gift card. So you decide to look for it. You first want to try and redeem the gift card of \$100 followed by entering the promo code for \$10 and then check your Amazon account to find the total credit available in your account.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Go to Help page and find information to redeem gift card 2. Find information on promo code 3. Check available credit in account
<p>You have received an email saying that your order was delivered. You go home to find out that there is no package. You wait for 24 hours and check the mailbox, still no package. The tracking shows package as delivered. You have to find out the next steps to perform, in such a situation.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Go to package tracking link and look for information 2. Find help topic for this scenario 3. Read the information given and plan next steps

Session length

Each session lasted about 60 minutes. Each task took about 6 - 10 minutes for completion for the actual operations and about 7 – 8 minutes for each questionnaire. The actual breakdown is given in the table below.

The average for all participants is taken as the time required to perform tasks by each participant. The actual variation was negligible. All values are in minutes. t represents the tasks from the previous table. The total has been calculated and displayed on the last line. There was a very small deviation from the expected time duration.

Activity	Time allocated per task (t in minutes)	Time taken (minutes)
Scenario 1 $t_1+t_2+t_3+t_4 = t$	$1.5+1+1+2.5 = 6$	6.7
Scenario 2 $t_1+t_2+t_3 = t$	$2.5+2.5+2.5=7.5$	7.4
Scenario 3 $t_1+t_2+t_3 = t$	$1.5+2.5+4.5=8.5$	8.6
Questionnaire	NA	24
Moderator Script	NA	17
Total		63.7

Data Collection

During each test, both quantitative and qualitative data was collected.

Quantitative

The quantitative data provided measurable feedback based on users' responses to questions asked throughout the test. Questionnaires, requiring participants to rank ease or difficulty, were administered after each scenario, and at the end of the test. These were known as the post-task and post-test questionnaires respectively. The first part of the post-test protocol included the System Usability Scale (SUS) questions which were tailored for this particular test.

SUS was used to ask participants to respond to questions by rating them on a scale of 1 to 100, where 1 was strongly disagree, and 100 was strongly agree.

Some samples of SUS questions are as follows:

- I think that I would like to use online help frequently.
- I found the help unnecessarily complex.
- I thought the help was easy to use.

The questions were also administered on the participants' computer screens by means of screen recording using Camtasia. The benefit of using SUS questions was that the average SUS scores for all participants proved extremely useful in the study to provide a baseline for comparison to other website usability studies. They can also be used for future studies of this same site.

Quantitative

Qualitative feedback was collected throughout the testing process by observing the video recording from the user's test, including users' remarks, non-verbal body language, and facial expressions. The pre-test questionnaire will help understand what issues users expect to face or have experienced with the site. The post-test questionnaire will help users to assess the help site with a predetermined metric system.

The recording of participants while they responded to these questions was made using the video camera. All their expressions were recorded and analysed for this study.

Results

User Timing and Task Completion Rates

As a group, all participants were mostly successful at finding all the help information using the website alone. None of the users attempted to look for information on Google or elsewhere. Almost all participants, however, landed on the task or operation mentioned in the help information before finding the help on the website. Some users considered this as a positive but others were not happy by having to complete the task while they were only looking for help information about that task.

The table below shows task completion rates by the different users:

Scenario no.	Scenario	Completed within expected time	Completed with extra time	Unable to complete	Task success rate*
1	Find information to change account information	2	3	0	40%
2	Find information to redeem gift cards and promo codes	3	0	0	100%
3	Find information on recovering failed delivery.	3	1	1	60%

* Users who did not complete the task within the maximum time criteria were categorized as being unable to successfully complete the task.

Post-task Questionnaire Data Summary

The following table gives a summary of the answers of all participants on the post task questionnaire. The most table comments and feedback has been mentioned in this table.

Evaluation Statement	Rating Count			
	Strongly agree			Strongly disagree
	1	2	3	4
Do you think you could find all the required information?	0	0	3	2
Do you think this task was easy?	0	0	3	0
Do you think you could have achieved this in lesser amount of time?	1	4	0	0
What, according to you was most the challenging part of this task? Why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding information to perform task. • Icons used were not easy to understand • Debating whether to use help topics or search bar • Finding out whether the information leads to the task • Alternative ways of doing the tasks 			
Did you expect to meet the task's goals using any other way?	0	0	0	5
How would you rate the feasibility of the site for this task?	0	2	3	0

Post-test Questionnaire Data Summary

Qualitative data was collected from users from questionnaires and interviews. The following table gives information on the notable answers for the post-test questionnaire.

Evaluation Statement	Rating Count			
	Positive feedback			Negative feedback
What is your overall impression about Amazon.com's online help?	0	0	3	2
How easy was it to find the information that you wanted?	0	0	3	0
How would you rate the look and feel and navigation of the online help?	1	4	0	0
Do you think using online help will save your time?	0	0	3	2

SUS Questionnaire Feedback Summary

Evaluation Statement	Rating Count			
	0-25	25-50	50-75	75-100
I think that I would like to use online help frequently.	0	0	3	2
I found the help unnecessarily complex.	1	4	0	0
I thought the help was easy to use.	2	3	0	0
I think that I would need the support of a technical person to be able to use this.	0	0	2	3
I found the navigation system was well integrated.	0	0	4	1
I thought there was too much inconsistency in the help topics.	0	5	0	0
I would imagine that most people would learn to look for help topics very quickly.	5	0	0	0
I found the help page very cumbersome to use.	0	0	2	3
I felt very confident using the help page.	0	0	1	4
I needed to learn a lot of things before I could get going with the search feature.	0	5	0	0
I would imagine that most people would learn to look for help topics very quickly.	5	0	0	0

List of Findings

Users were also asked to provide open-ended answers regarding what they found useful or not useful about the documentation. Thee positive and negative findings for these answers are documented below.

Positive findings

Well organized and clear.
Easier to accomplish all the tasks than to locate information about accomplishing a task..
Strutred topics.
Easy to find help button.
Help Topic directory.
Search bar for help topics.
Detailed information present.
Links to perform tasks embedded into the information.
Easy navigation.
Consistency in content.

Negative findings

Sign in multiple times while searching information.
Difficult to locate information about accomplishing a task.
Terminology.
Search topics not well categorized.
Gift cards and promo codes must be in the same category.
No information on using help topics.
Search bar located at the bottom.
Most common topics hidden or not present at all.
No phone number or alternative way mentioned anywhere on site.
Quick way of looking for information not present.
Takes too long to find what user is looking for.
Translated information not present.
Help topic hierarchy is not simple to understand.

These observations are interesting as majority of the participants being technical communicators have used online help or documentation several times in the past. The most common issues included topic hierarchy and being able to find information before landing on the page to perform the task.

Findings and Recommendations

Overview

This section provides information on usability issues in Amazon's online help documentation. The most important and common issues faced were finding links for tasks instead of finding the help topic and structure of help topics on the help website. Some of the recommendations provided in the tables are suggestions that can be improve searching and using content. Most of the suggestions are based on the existing content with minor changes with the design. Only the SEO issue, will need significant changes to the existing website content.

Given below is a list of issues marked based on the severity and frequency that they appeared in the participants' remarks. The values for severity and frequency are as follows:

Severity Ranking		Frequency Ranking	
1	The issue is an irritant but does not usually impede the user from completing his task.	1	0-24% of users will be affected
2	The user will have to exert moderate effort to use the help, but will eventually find the information to complete his task.	2	25-49% of users will be affected
3	The issue will severely limit the user's attempt to find information. The user will have great difficulty in task completion.	3	50-74% of users will be affected
4	The user will not be able to use or will not want to use the online help because of the issue.	4	75-100% of users will be affected

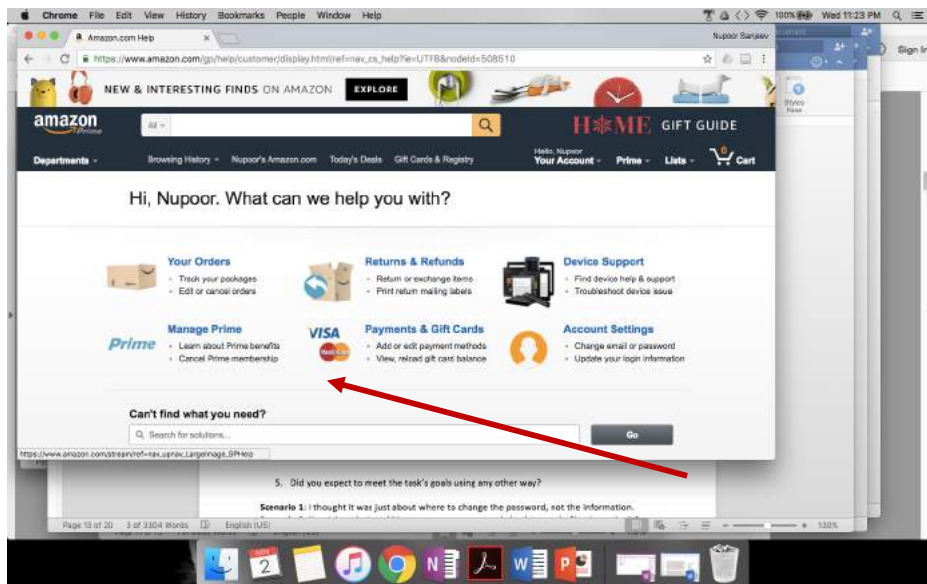
The list is therefore arranged in a sequence with the most pressing issues first followed by less severe ones.

Usability Issues and Recommendations

Issue		Conduct further research on how the topics should be placed in the help topics hierarchy.
Severity		4
Frequency		4
Comments from Participants		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “None of these headings look like they will have this information.” • “I am not sure which one of these is right.” • “I might have to look through each of these topics.” • “This has nothing to do with the topic that I have been looking for.”
Explanation		Four out of five participants faced a problem in finding the correct topic to look for in the list of search topics. Some of the topics like ‘Account information’ are easily understood, but some others like ‘lost package’ are difficult to locate. The topic for gift cards and promo codes is not listed under any main heading and can be found only by using the search feature.
Recommendation		The most common topics that users can look for must be found and placed into broad categories. This can be done using web analytics. The most important topic being searched by users can be found and tagged as the most critical issue. The topics should be arranged by both, the frequency as well as the severity. The category that the topic falls under must be relevant and easy to understand. If not, more number of categories should be created. A detailed listing like a table of contents can also help find the right information.

Issue		Bring the Search bar to the top of the topics page and have the topics aligned on either side of the website.
Severity		4
Frequency		3
Comments from Participants		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The main page has no way to search.” • “I should have found this search bar earlier.” • “The search was useful, I wish I had seen it earlier.”
Explanation		Two issues were noticed in this scenario.

1. The first issue was that the when participants clicked on the help link, the links provided at the top, that cover almost half of the page, reference to the tasks that can be performed.



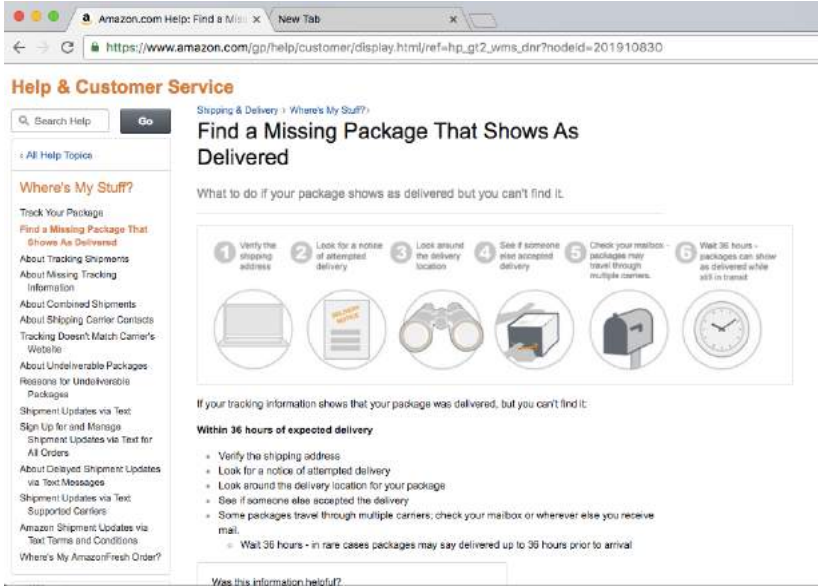
All the links in the above image point to the tasks and not to the help topics.

2. The second issue search bar is located at the center, which is not the most common location for search bars on websites. Participants were used to find the search button on the top, or in the right top corner. This position of the search bar made it difficult for users to figure out what the search results would be: tasks or information.

Recommendation

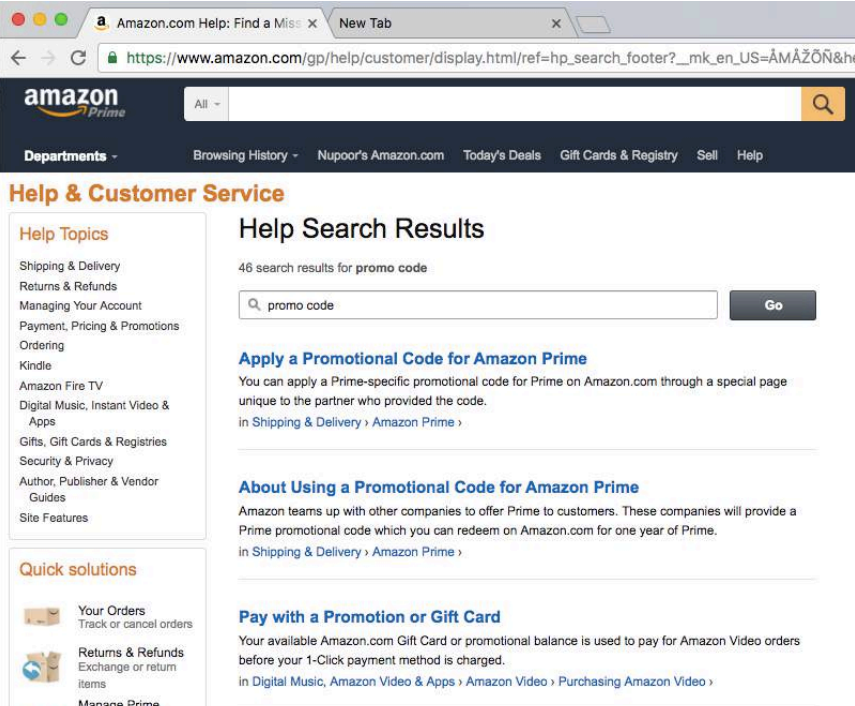
I recommend creating a search bar just after the welcome message at the top of the screen. This way the users can read the message “Hi, ____ . What can we help you with?” followed by the search bar where they can type their search keywords and get instant feedback.

Issue	Provide contact information on most crucial pages so that users can call the customer care in case they do not follow the instructions given.
Severity	4
Frequency	3
Comments from Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What should I do if I have done all these things.”

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “This is not what I was looking for. Whom should I ask for help?”
<p>Explanation</p>	<p>There were several occasions where users were stuck and did not know how to proceed. No where in the help section has the customer care centre number mentioned. The users have to look separately on google or in the search box in order to contact the support. This can cause unnecessary workload on the user which might lead to frustration.</p> <p>For example, on the help page of ‘package lost’ the ultimate solution is to call customer care and notify of the missing package. But it is not mentioned anywhere on the site.</p>  <p>This topic shows all the steps but the most important step of calling customer care is not mentioned.</p>
<p>Recommendation</p>	<p>I recommend having the customer care information or a live chat system enabled on each of the help pages so that users can feel confident about not losing their money or items owing to some discrepancies in the system. It will make it easier for users to locate issues and that way the company can also record these issues and make the website better.</p>

Issue	Enable translation and localization to reach out to areas which are far from cities and can benefit most from Amazon's delivery service.
Severity	3
Frequency	3
Comments from Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I wish I could tell my mom to look for this." • "I could not do this before."
Explanation	<p>This issue was not very common but I mentioned it here since most of the users felt this would add to their shopping experiences. If users could have most products and the help translated for them, it will make it easier to find those items on the website and also solve their doubts.</p> <p>Most of the information on websites is technical which makes it difficult to non-internet users to follow and understand. If there were specific directions conveyed to them in their native dialect that will help attract more customers and give the current customers a pleasurable experience.</p>
Recommendation	I recommend to adopt localization policies for content for the most commonly used topics like 'Locating a lost package', 'Canceling an order', 'Changing account and payment information', and so on.

Issue	Conduct further research on which topics need authentication, in order to look for information or perform the task.
Severity	3
Frequency	3
Comments from Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Why do I have to enter my password." • "I am so glad my credentials are saved on this browser"
Explanation	Some topics sent the users to the login page before opening the information topic. This can be very frustrating when users are stuck with an issue.
Recommendation	I recommend that the authentication should be strictly restricted for users wanting to perform the task instead of looking for information. It will save users' time and they can decide whether they really need to perform the task beforehand.

Issue	Use Search Engine Optimization on keywords that the users are most likely to use for common terms.
Severity	2
Frequency	3
Comments from Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It does not understand promo code.” • “This did not give me any results.”
Explanation	<p>One of the participants tried using the term ‘promo code’ to complete the second scenario, but could not find the required topic for a very long time. She struggles with different keywords, but still no luck. Therefore, she had to visit every single topic and reached the required topic after 8 clicks. This was very frustrating and took a long time.</p>  <p>The screenshot shows a web browser window with the Amazon.com Help page. The search bar contains 'promo code' and the results show 46 search results. The top results are: 'Apply a Promotional Code for Amazon Prime', 'About Using a Promotional Code for Amazon Prime', and 'Pay with a Promotion or Gift Card'. The page also features a 'Help Topics' sidebar with categories like Shipping & Delivery, Returns & Refunds, and a 'Quick solutions' section with links to 'Your Orders', 'Returns & Refunds', and 'Manage Prime'.</p> <p>The above figure shows the top search results when searched for “promo code”.</p>
Recommendation	I recommend implementing a search engine optimization on topics that can have different combinations of keywords. It is very likely that users can use different search terms based on their understanding of concepts. It will be beneficial to use an SEO which can handle demands of different users.

Conclusion

Amazon.com is the largest Internet-based retailer in the world by total sales and market capitalization. In order to be able to address all the issues faced by their customers and to reduce customer support calls, it is important that they provide better help documentation on their website. I came across participants who have never placed support call to Amazon and returned the products as they could not find information on the website. To avoid such occurrences, it would be a good idea to maintain the help documentation so that it gives the users detailed information about what their next steps should be when they face an issue. This will not only encourage users to use the help, but also create a safe place for users to rely on when they are stuck with any problem.

The usability issues in this report must be addressed in the following order:

1. Enable translation and localization to reach out to areas which are far from cities and can benefit most from Amazon's delivery service.
2. Conduct further research on how the topics should be placed in the help topics hierarchy.
3. Use Search Engine Optimization on keywords that the users are most likely to use for common terms.
4. Conduct further research on which topics need authentication in order to look for information or perform the task. If these two things are separated then it might be easy to provide security features to the content.
5. Bring the Search bar to the top of the topics page and have the topics aligned on either side of the website.
6. Provide contact information on most crucial pages so that users can call the customer care in case they do not follow the instructions given.

Users noted many features that they liked and appreciated, including:

- The topic directory for search topics which includes all the topics that they would look for.
- Ease in using the website's navigation.
- The ability to perform tasks for the information that they are looking for without wasting time looking through the content.

These changes in conjunction with the above-mentioned updates will result in a better, more usable website and documentation help that will benefit users.