



World Leaders in Research-Based User Experience

Context Methods: Study Guide

Summary: Unsure where to start? Use this collection of links to our articles and videos to learn about ethnographic methods like field studies and diary studies — methods that help you learn about your user's context.

By [Kate Moran](#) on October 24, 2021

Topics: [Research Methods](#), [Study Guides](#)

Context methods (such as field and diary studies) provide insights about a users' real-life environment and behaviors and shed light on how products are used in a natural context.

Here's a list of NN/g's most useful introductory articles and videos about context methods (field studies and diary studies), as well as some related topics. Within each section, the resources are in recommended reading order.

Context Methods: An Overview

Many [UX-research methods](#) involve asking users to pretend they're in a realistic but hypothetical situation. For example, in a usability test, participants may be given the task to buy a new car. While we hope that users will behave as if they really were making this purchase, there might some important contextual details we'd miss out on with this method.

Field and diary studies use a very different approach. They involve observing users' behaviors in their real-life context. Participants are not asked to do

anything special, except perhaps answer a few questions.

In a **diary study**, participants document their experiences (thoughts, feelings, and behaviors) over a set period of time (a few days, a few weeks, or longer).

A **field study** is conducted in the user’s environment (e.g., home or office). Researchers follow each participant around and observe the participant’s normal daily behaviors and activities.

Returning to the car-buying example, a field study may involve observing participants in their homes while they research models of cars and dealerships. A diary study may have each participant log car-shopping activities such as visiting a dealership or discussing options with a partner.

Field and diary studies are particularly useful during the [discovery](#) phase of a design project, when we’re trying to build up our understanding of our users and opportunities to improve their experiences. They’re also commonly used to help [develop customer-journey maps](#).

For more information on both methods, consider our week-long series on [Qualitative Research](#).

Diary Studies

Number	Link	Format	Description
1	Diary Studies: Understanding Long-Term User Behavior and Experiences	Article	When and how to conduct a diary study, plus tips for keeping respondents engaged and motivated
2	Diary Studies	Video	What diary studies are and how they work
3	5 Steps for Effective Diary Studies in	Video	How to conduct diary studies to learn about the user journey

	Customer Journey Research		the user journeys related to your product or service
4	What Could an Intelligent Assistant Do for You? A Diary Study of User Needs	Article	An example diary study focused on how people want to use intelligent assistants like Siri

Field Studies & Contextual Inquiry

The terms “field study” and “contextual inquiry” are often used interchangeably. Typically, a contextual inquiry involves more interviewing and conversation with the participant.

Number	Link	Format	Description
1	Field Studies	Article	What a field study is, when to run one, and how to plan it
2	Field Studies vs. Ethnographic Studies vs. Contextual Inquiry	Video	Differences between these three terms, which are often used interchangeably
3	Contextual Inquiry: Leave Your Office to Find Design Ideas	Video	A particular type of field study that is more interview-heavy and its benefits
4	Contextual Inquiry: Inspire Design by Observing and Interviewing Users in Their Context	Article	When and how to conduct contextual inquiry

5	Field Studies Done Right: Fast and Observational	Article	Tips for running field studies without influencing user behavior
6	Doing Field Studies Remotely	Video	How to run field studies remotely, if needed
7	Field Studies Should Inform Intranet Redesign	Article	Examples of how field studies have helped designers improve intranet systems

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