The following are common usability problems identified in recent LibGuides user studies along with best practices to correct them.

**Issue #1: The Guide’s purpose is unclear**

Because many students have not used a subject guide before (63 percent in Quintel’s study!), they do not grasp its inherent purpose. Librarians consider the function of the guide to be obvious and therefore do not identify it. This leads to confusion when students land on a guide and have no idea of what it is supposed to do. As Sonstey and DeJong state: “Participants often were confused and did not know where to go on a guide; they said the words on the pages did not match what they wanted to do.”

Best practices for addressing unclear purpose include:

- Construct guides around tasks that users need to complete.
- Use a text box in a prominent part of the guide to tell users what the guide is supposed to do.
- Identify Guides and Tabs in terms of function, such as using “Find Articles” instead of “Databases”

**Issue #2: Top Navigation is Invisible**

All of the studies found that side navigation was infinitely preferable to top navigation. The tabs typically used in LibGuides version 1.0 in particular were invisible to students. From Pittsley and Memmott: “The student confirmed that she had not noticed the tab navigation and so was unaware of the numerous resources offered on subsequent pages.” Quintel found that students also do not use drop down menus in guides.

Best practices for addressing invisible navigation include:

- In LibGuides 2.0, use the side navigation option.
- In LibGuides 1.0, create a text box showing the guide’s Table of Contents and put it in the leftmost guide column.
- Avoid using drop down menus.
Issue #3: Too Much Content

It became apparent in many of the studies that students became overwhelmed by lots of boxes, lots of text, and lots of tabs. Gessner et al. found that guides with fewer numbers of tabs tended to get more hits on all of the tabs, making it more likely that all the content on the guide was seen. Harvard librarians streamlined their guides significantly, pointing to selected “best” article databases rather than listing all the databases that might be related to the subject area. Thomgate and Hoden found students preferred a 2-column format.

Best practices for addressing too much content include:

- Simplify the guide. Leave out detailed descriptions and explanations of how to do something.
- Create guides with fewer than six tabs.
- Use one or two columns per guide.
- Enlarge guide text size to at least 16-point type.
- Identify the “best” resources rather than try to be comprehensive.

Issue #4: No Access to Search

Student study participants looked for a discovery-type search on guides. The search provided by LibGuides was confusing for them because they were expecting it to search articles or books rather than other guides. If a guide author had placed a graphic of a search box into a guide as part of an explanation, students tried to click in it like it was a real search and became frustrated when it didn’t work.

Best practices to address access to search problems include:

- Suppress the LibGuides Search, or if you find, as I did, that librarians find the LibGuides search useful, place it at the bottom of the guide template.
- Provide access to a discovery-type search, like your catalog widget or discovery tool widget.
- Do not use images of search boxes in guides—use live search widgets.
Issue #5: Terminology and Language are Confusing or Not Explicit Enough

Stonseby and DeJong found that students had different definitions than librarians of library-related terms like “databases” and “reference sources.” Markman mentioned a different problem related to librarian profile boxes. These elements have a picture of and content information for a librarian and are supposed to encourage the student to contact the librarian for help. But if not explicitly labeled “Ask me,” the Harvard librarians found that students weren’t sure whether or not they could ask, and ended up in many cases not doing it, and thus not getting the librarian’s help.

Best practices to address these problems:

• Use what is known in Web writing as a “call to action.” It is text that invites the user to do something, like “Ask Me!” or “Learn More.”

• Don’t use jargon—include the words “articles” or “journals” on database pages.

• Be consistent with naming conventions across guides. Call your catalog or a database by the same name throughout.

• Be as specific as possible when naming tabs. A more specific term like “Encyclopedias” may work better than “Reference Sources.” Break down general guides into subtopics so students can get to resources for what they are looking for more easily.

• Call them “Research Guides” or “Subject Guides” instead of “LibGuides.”

Issue #6: Anxiety about Who to Contact

For me, this was the most surprising thing that the studies revealed. Markman found that students were “paralyzed” when more than one librarian profile box was included on a single guide. They experienced anxiety about contacting the “right” person, and so ended up contacting neither. This is especially ironic since librarians tend to feel that providing more contact options is providing more access to help. Stonseby and DeJong found a similar reaction to guides that had contact information for both the subject librarian and the general reference service. Students spent time trying to figure out which contact was “best” and ultimately gave up.

Best practices to address contact anxiety:

• Use one librarian profile box per guide

• Use a photo in your profile

• Don’t combine contact information for a librarian with the email, telephone number, or chat widget of the general reference service

Quintel, Denise F. "LibGuides and Usability: What our Users Want." *Computers in Libraries*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2016, pp. 4-8. Conducted at University of Alabama, this study used card sorting, surveys, and interviews to assess how students perceive and use guides.

Costello, Kirsten. "Subject Guides: Are Librarian Best Practices Meeting Student Needs?" LITA Forum, 14 November, 2015, Hyatt Regency, Minneapolis, MN. Costello and colleagues conducted task-oriented usability tests with 8 students and 9 librarian guide authors and gave the librarians an additional pre- and post-test survey.

Markman, Kris. "Usable Design for LibGuides," 10 August, 2015, American University Library, Washington, DC. Invited talk. Kris Markman and Amy Deschenes conducted a task-oriented usability test with students using eye-tracking software. They tested both a version 1.0 and a version 2.0 LibGuide. They have since conducted focus groups and interviews. A presentation on their research given at Computers in Libraries in March 2016 is available at [http://www.krismarkman.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/CIL_Markman_v2.pdf](http://www.krismarkman.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/CIL_Markman_v2.pdf)


Pittsley, Kate A. and Sara Memmott. "Improving Independent Student Navigation of Complex Educational Web Sites: An Analysis of Two Navigation Design Changes in LibGuides." *Information Technology and Libraries*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2012, pp: 52-64. This study at Eastern Michigan University was completed before LibGuides 2.0. The librarians were interested in guide navigation and tested LibGuides 1.0 guide tabs against a template with a side navigation box.