In *Usability Testing Essentials: Ready, Set…Test!*, Carol M. Barnum offers a straightforward and comprehensive approach to the rhetorical art of usability testing. Program administrators will find this book helpful if they are working on curricular development, especially if usability testing currently does not have a place in the course structure or they are looking for ways to offer students a solid foundation in usability testing. From the beginning of her textbook, Barnum argues that simply guessing how a user might respond to a website, product, or mobile application is not enough. Instead, usability testing—the process of learning about users by observing them using a product to accomplish a specific goal—is an essential core. It is also a natural and necessary component of technical communication, a field concerned with managing information to allow users to act.

The credibility of this book—and one of the main reasons program administrators should be interested—is that Barnum offers first-hand accounts of her experiences with usability testing as both a practitioner and a consultant. In addition to her years of teaching at Southern Polytechnic State University, Barnum is a usability pioneer and is often credited with creating the field. She also knows how to present clear, effortless, and en-
gaging writing. At times, her informal tone seems more like a conversation than instruction as she imparts insightful material about usability testing. Her work is simply a must read.

Overall, Barnum keeps the focus of this guidebook on the most important element of usability, which is the end user, not the product. From start to finish, Barnum insists that usability should be invisible to the end-users; they will only notice it when a product is not easy to learn, easy to use, intuitive, or fun.

As with all good usability testing, Barnum’s comprehensive text is easily accessible to the reader in clearly digestible chunks. The chapters outline chronologically all the necessary steps for pre-planning, planning, conducting, analyzing, and reporting. Readers can enter the book at any point to suit their skills level, comfort level, and needs.

Administrators with some usability experience and knowledge may jump into the later sections about actually conducting usability testing or reporting the results. However, program administrators who are new to usability testing should probably start from Chapter 1 as the basic vocabulary is defined and the goals of usability testing are outlined.

Chapter 2 may be most helpful for program administrators reluctant to implement usability testing in their programs because of cost, space, or other concerns. A common misconception, Barnum asserts, is that usability testing is a financial drain or overly time intensive. As this chapter title suggests, usability testing can be conducted “Here, There, and Everywhere.” After outlining the basic necessary equipment, Barnum adds information about specialized equipment useful, though not required, for unique testing situations. Program administrators will be especially interested as she discusses the setup costs and provides a table that shows how constructing a student formal lab can be relatively inexpensive. If programs are still recovering from the economic woes of the financial crisis, Barnum provides alternatives such as informal labs, field testing, or remote testing—methods that can allow the introduction of usability testing into a program before investing in a formal lab.

Chapters 3 and 4 provide information about a toolkit of techniques situated within user-centered design and about an understanding of users and their goals. Chapters 5 and 6 offer planning and preparation advice for the usability testing. These chapters might be nice companion material for research methodology courses because they discuss study participants, survey and questionnaire design, IRBs, informed consent forms, interviews, and so on. These chapters feed nicely into Chapter 7, which concerns itself with the actual conducting of the usability test.
The next steps in the process, analyzing the findings and reporting on them, are covered in Chapters 8 and 9. Especially nice is Barnum’s advice for working with both qualitative and quantitative data, as many technical communications programs utilize both types. Although the focus of these chapters is on the data gained from usability testing, some material may be repetitious for programs that already offer students extensive research methodology courses.

Finally, the book concludes with Chapter 10 on conducting international usability testing. Given the internationalizing efforts of many technical communication programs, this chapter will be a welcome addition for many program administrators. In it, Barnum discusses the subtle shifts necessary in usability testing of international audiences and the possible complications that may arise. At first this chapter seems disconnected from the previous nine; it might have been better to directly integrate its content into sections within earlier chapters. However, from a usability standpoint, if readers are specifically interested in this topic, it is nice to have it all in one place.

Another key feature of this textbook is the extended case study at the end of many chapters throughout the book. The case deals with Holiday Inn China and its usability testing remotely performed in the U.S. on its website. The case study will help readers make practical connections to the individual chapters’ content.

In addition to the textbook, the companion website offers many useful resources. In particular, the site contains an instructor’s guide with sample syllabi and assignments, as well as classroom exercises and discussion questions. Program administrators will find the site useful if they ask instructors, especially those new to usability testing, to teach a course on this topic.

The book will work well as a stand-alone textbook in a course dedicated exclusively to usability. However, because some programs do not have the luxury of entire courses dedicated to this topic, the textbook can also function as a supplemental text, particularly in technical communication, writing for the web, or document design courses that address usability concerns. Because of its organization, an instructor can easily select portions that will be most useful for their course goals and their students of differing backgrounds.

In general, you cannot go wrong with this book. It sets out to offer a comprehensive textbook on usability—for students, for instructors, for program administrators—and it does just that.