

“Things a therapist would say”

While the participant is doing the tasks, to maintain your neutrality you’re going to be saying the same few things over and over, which turn out to be the same kind of non-directive things a therapist typically says to a patient. Here’s a handy chart of “permissible” phrases.

When this happens:	Say this:
You’re not absolutely sure you know what the participant is thinking.	“What are you thinking?” “What are you looking at?” “What are you doing now?”
Something happens that seems to surprise them. For instance, they click on a link and say “Oh” or “Hmmm” when the new page appears.	“Is that what you expected to happen?”
The participant is trying to get you to give him a clue. (“Should I use the _____?”)	“What would you do if you were at home?” (Wait for answer.) “Then why don’t you go ahead and try that?” “What would you do if I wasn’t here?” “I’d like you to do whatever you’d normally do.”
The participant makes a comment, and you’re not sure what triggered it.	“Was there something in particular that made you think that?”
The participant suggests concern that he’s not giving you what you need.	“No, this is very helpful.” “This is exactly what we need.”
The participant asks you to explain how something works or is supposed to work (e.g., “Do these support requests get answered overnight?”).	“What do you think?” “How do you think it would work?” “I can’t answer that right now, because we need to know what you would do when you don’t have somebody around to answer questions for you. But if you still want to know when we’re done, I’ll be glad to answer it then.”
The participant seems to have wandered away from the task.	“What are you trying to do now?”

There are also three other kinds of things you can say:

- **Acknowledgment tokens.** You can say things like “uh huh,” “OK,” and “mm hmm” as often as you think necessary. These signal that you’re taking in what the participant is saying and you’d like them to continue along the same lines. Note that they’re meant to indicate that you understand what the participant is saying, not that you necessarily agree with it. It’s “OK.” Not “OK!!!”
- **Paraphrasing.** Sometimes it helps to give a little summary of what the participant just said (“So you’re saying that the boxes on the bottom are hard to read?”) to make sure that you’ve heard and understood correctly.
- **Clarifying for observers.** If the user makes a vague reference to something on the screen, you may want to do a little bit of narration to make it easier for the observers to follow the action. For instance, when the user says “I love this,” you can say, “The list over here on the right?” (Since you’re sitting next to the participant, you sometimes have a better sense of what they’re looking at.)