A Checklist for Content Work · An A List Apart Article

A note from the editors: We are **delighted** to present an excerpt of *The Elements of Content Strategy* by Erin Kissane (A Book Apart, 2011), published today.

In content strategy, there is no playbook of generic strategies you can pick from to assemble a plan for your client or project. Instead, our discipline rests on a series of core principles about what makes content effective—what makes it work, what makes it good. Content may need to have other qualities to work within a particular project, but this list is limited to qualities shared across all sorts of content.

Article Continues Below

Job Board

ad block checker. just countin'.

If this looks like theory, don't be fooled. It's really entirely practical: if we consciously refer to principles like these as we go about our work as info-nerds of various kinds, we'll have an easier time making good, useful content, and explaining our priorities when we're called to do so.

Good content is appropriate#section1

Publish content that is right for the user and for the business

There's really only one central principle of good content: it should be appropriate for your business, for your users, and for its context. Appropriate in its method of delivery, in its style and structure, and above all in its

Right for the user (and context)[#section2](#section2)

Let us meditate for a moment on James Bond. Clever and tough as he is, he'd be mincemeat a hundred times over if not for the hyper-competent support team that stands behind him. When he needs to chase a villain, the team summons an Aston Martin DB5. When he's poisoned by a beautiful woman with dubious connections, the team offers the antidote in a spring-loaded, space-age infusion device. When he emerges from a swamp overrun with trained alligators, it offers a shower, a shave, and a perfectly tailored suit. It does not talk down to him or waste his time. It anticipates his needs, but does not offer him everything he might ever need, all the time.

Content is appropriate for users when it helps them accomplish their goals.

Content is *perfectly* appropriate for users when it makes them feel like geniuses on critically important missions, offering them precisely what they need, exactly when they need it, and in just the right form. All of this requires that you get pretty deeply into your users' heads, if not their tailoring specifications.

Part of this mind-reading act involves context, which encompasses quite a lot more than just access methods, or even a fine-grained understanding of user goals. Content strategist Daniel Eizans has suggested that a meaningful analysis of a user's context requires not only an understanding of user goals, but also of their behaviors: What are they doing? How are they feeling? What are they capable of?
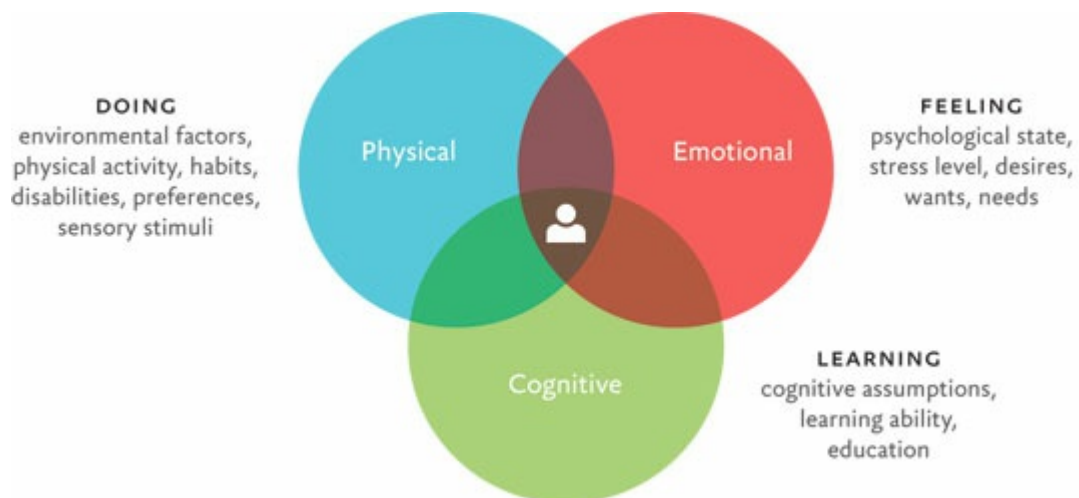
Fig. 1. The user's context includes actions, constraints, emotions, cognitive conditions, and more. And that in turn affects the ways in which the user interacts with content. ("Personal-Behavioral Context: The New User Persona." © Daniel Eizans, 2010. Modified from a diagram by Andrew Hinton.)

It's a sensible notion. When I call the emergency room on a weekend, my context is likely to be quite different than when I call my allergy specialist during business hours. If I look at a subway map at 3:00 a.m., chances are that I need to know which trains are running now, not during rush hour tomorrow. When I look up your company on my phone, I'm more likely to need basic contact info than your annual report from 2006. But assumptions about reader context—however well researched—will never be perfect. Always give readers the option of seeing more information if they wish to do so.

Right for the business #section3

Content is appropriate for your business when it helps you accomplish your business goals in a sustainable way.

Business goals include things like "increase sales," "improve technical support service," and "reduce printing costs for educational materials," and the trick is to accomplish those goals using sustainable processes. Sustainable content is content you can create—and maintain—without going broke, without lowering quality in ways that make the content suck, and without working employees into nervous breakdowns. The need for this kind of sustainability may sound boneheadedly obvious, but it's very easy to create an ambitious plan for publishing oodles of content without considering the long-term effort required to manage it.

Fundamentally, though, "right for the business" and "right for the user" are the same thing. Without readers, viewers, and listeners, all content is meaningless, and content created without consideration for users' needs harms publishers because ignored users leave.

This principle boils down to enlightened self interest: that which hurts your users hurts you.

Good content is useful#section4

Define a clear, specific purpose for each piece of content; evaluate content against this purpose

Few people set out to produce content that bores, confuses, and irritates users, yet the web is filled with fluffy, purposeless, and annoying content. This sort of content isn't neutral, either: it actively wastes time and money and works against user and business goals.

To know whether or not you have the right content for a page (or module or section), you have to know what that content is supposed to accomplish. Greater specificity produces better results. Consider the following possible purposes for a chunk of product-related content:

- **"Sell products"**—This is so vague as to be meaningless and is likely to produce buzzword-infested fluff.
- **"Sell this product"**—Selling a product is a process made up of many smaller tasks, like discussing benefits, mapping them to features, demonstrating results and value, and asking people to buy. If your goal is this vague, you have no idea which of these tasks (if any) the content will perform.
- **"List and demonstrate the benefits of this product"**—This is something a chunk of content can actually do. But if you don't know who is supposed to benefit from the product, it's difficult to be specific.
- **"Show how this product helps nurse practitioners"**—If you can discover what nurse practitioners need, you can create content that serves this purpose. (And if you can't find out what they need before trying to sell them a product, you have a lot more to worry about than your content.)

Now do the same for every chunk of content in your project, and you'll have a useful checklist of what you're really trying to achieve. If that sounds daunting, think how much harder it would be to try to evaluate, create, or revise the content without a purpose in mind.

Good content is user-centered#section5

Adopt the cognitive frameworks of your users

On a web project, user-centered design means that the final product must meet real user needs and fulfill real human desires. In practical terms, it also means that the days of designing a site map to mirror an org chart are over.

In *The Psychology of Everyday Things*, cognitive scientist Donald Norman wrote about the central importance of understanding the user's mental model before designing products. In the user-centered design system he advocates, design should "make sure that (1) the user can figure out what to do, and (2) the user can tell what is going on."

When it comes to content, "user-centered" means that instead of insistently using the client's internal mental models and vocabulary, content must adopt the cognitive frameworks of the user. That includes everything from your users' model of the world to the ways in which they use specific terms and phrases. And that part has taken a little longer to sink in.

Allow me to offer a brief illustrative puppet show.

While hanging your collection of framed portraits of teacup poodles, you realize you need a tack hammer. So you pop down to the hardware store and ask the clerk where to find one. "Tools and Construction-Related Accessories," she says. "Aisle five."

> "Welcome to the Tools and Construction-Related Accessories department, where you will find many tools for construction and construction-adjacent activities. How can we help you?"
>
> "Hi. Where can I find a tack hammer?"
>
> "Did you mean an Upholstery Hammer (Home Use)?"
>
> "…yes?"
>
> "Hammers with heads smaller than three inches are the responsibility of the Tools for Home Use Division at the far end of aisle nine."
>
> …
>
> "Welcome to The Home Tool Center! We were established by the merger of the Tools for Home Use Division and the Department of Small Sharp Objects. Would you like to schedule a demonstration?"
>
> "I just need an upholstery hammer. For…the home?"
>
> "Do you require Premium Home Use Upholstery Hammer or Standard Deluxe

Publishing content that is self-absorbed in substance or style alienates readers. Most successful organizations have realized this, yet many sites are still built around internal org charts, clogged with mission statements designed for internal use, and beset by jargon and proprietary names for common ideas.

If you're the only one offering a desirable product or service, you might not see the effects of narcissistic content right away, but someone will eventually come along and eat your lunch by offering the exact same thing in a user-centered way.

Good content is clear#section6

Seek clarity in all things

When we say that something is clear, we mean that it works; it communicates; the light gets through. Good content speaks to people in a language they understand and is organized in ways that make it easy to use.

Content strategists usually rely on others—writers, editors, and multimedia specialists—to produce and revise the content that users read, listen to, and watch. On some large projects, we may never meet most of the people involved in content production. But if we want to help them produce genuinely clear content, we can't just make a plan, drop it onto the heads of the writers, and flee the building.

Of course, clarity is also a virtue we should attend to in the production of our own work. Goals, meetings, deliverables, processes—all benefit from a love of clarity.

Good content is consistent #section7

Mandate consistency, within reason

For most people, language is our primary interface with each other and with the external world. Consistency of language and presentation acts as a consistent interface, reducing the users' cognitive load and making it easier for readers to understand what they read. Inconsistency, on the other hand, adds cognitive effort, hinders understanding, and distracts readers.

That's what our style guides are for. Many of us who came to content strategy from journalistic or editorial fields have a very strong attachment to a particular style—I have a weakness for the *Chicago Manual of Style*—but skillful practitioners put internal consistency well ahead of personal preferences.

Some kinds of consistency aren't always uniformly valuable, either: a site that serves doctors, patients, and insurance providers, for example, will probably use three different voice/tone guidelines for the three audiences, and another for content intended to be read by a general audience. That's healthy, reader-centric consistency. On the other hand, a company that permitted each of its product teams to create widely different kinds of content is probably breaking the principles of consistency for self-serving, rather than reader-serving, reasons.

Good content is concise#section8

Omit needless content

Some organizations love to publish lots of content. Perhaps because they believe that having an org chart, a mission statement, a vision declaration, and a corporate inspirational video on the About Us page will retroactively validate the hours and days of time spent producing that content. Perhaps because they believe Google will only bless their work if they churn out dozens of blog posts per week. In most cases, I think entropy deserves the blame: the web offers the space to publish everything, and it's much easier to treat it like a hall closet with infinite stuffing-space than to impose

So what does it matter if we have too much content? For one thing, more content makes everything more difficult to find. For another, spreading finite resources ever more thinly results in a decline in quality. It also often indicates a deeper problem—publishing everything often means "publishing everything we can," rather than "publishing everything we've learned that our users really need."

There are many ways to discover which content is in fact needless; traffic analysis, user research, and editorial judgment should all play a role. You may also wish to begin with a hit list of common stowaways:

- **Mission statements, vision statements, and core values.** If the people within your organization are genuinely committed to abstract principles, it will show in what they do. The exception is the small number of organizations for whom the mission is the product, as is the case with many charities. Even then, this kind of content should be supplemented with plentiful evidence of follow-through.
- **Press releases.** These may work for their very narrow intended audience, but putting them undigested onto a website is a perfect example of the how-we've-always-done-it mistake.
- **Long, unreadable legal pages.** Some legal awkwardness is acceptable, but if you want to demonstrate that you respect your readers, take the extra time to whittle down rambling legalese and replace needless circumlocutions with (attorney-vetted) plain language.
- **Endless feature lists.** Most are not useful to readers. The few that are can usually be organized into subcategories that aid findability and comprehension.
- **Redundant documentation.** Are you offering the same audience three different FAQs? Can they be combined or turned into contextual help?
- **Audiovisual dust bunnies.** Do your videos or animations begin with a long flying-logo intro? Do they ramble on for 30 minutes to communicate ten minutes of important content? Trim, edit, and provide ways of skipping around.

Once you've rooted out unnecessary content at the site-planning level, be prepared to ruthlessly eliminate (and teach others to eliminate) needless content at the section, page, and sentence level.

Good content is supported#section9

Publish no content without a support plan

If newspapers are "dead tree media," information published online is a live green plant. And as we figured out sometime around 10,000 BC, plants are more useful if we tend them and shape their futures to suit our goals. So, too, must content be tended and supported.

Factual content must be updated when new information appears and culled once it's no longer useful; user-generated content must be nurtured and weeded; time-sensitive content like breaking news or event information must be planted on schedule and cut back once its blooming period ends. Perhaps most importantly, a content plan once begun must be carried through its intended growth cycle if it's to bear fruit and make all the effort worthwhile.

This is all easy to talk about, but the reason most content is not properly maintained is that most content plans rely on getting the already overworked to produce, revise, and publish content without neglecting other responsibilities. This is not inevitable, but unless content and publishing tasks are recognized as time-consuming and complex and then included in job descriptions, performance reviews, and resource planning, it will continue.

Hoping that a content management system will replace this kind of human care and attention is about as effective as pointing a barn full of unmanned agricultural machinery at a field, going on vacation, and hoping it all works out. Tractors are more efficient than horse-drawn plows, but they still need humans to decide where and when and how to use them.

Of theses and church doors#section10

One of the great images of the history of the Protestant Church is that of a German priest standing in the cold in front of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on All Saints Eve, nailing his manifesto to its wooden doors.

The reality of the publication of Martin Luther's 95 Theses is messier, and whether the church doors were really involved at all is the subject of academic dispute, but one thing is clear: Luther published his theses to begin an open, public conversation.

Our industry doesn't lack for manifestos, some of them even explicitly modeled after Luther's. This article, and the book from which it's extracted, is not one of the firebrand, nailed-to-the-door attempts at full-scale revolution.

But it is intended to continue conversations we've been having for years, and to spark new ones, about the shared principles and assumptions that underlie our work, and the weird and interesting things we can build on top of them.

I'll bring the coffee and doughnuts. See you on the church steps?