"But How Do I Know if It's Good?" How You Can Evaluate Content Quality (and Ditch Content Anxiety)

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In a post-Hummingbird world, we all know content matters. But many SEOs are still trying to work around this update because we think we don't have the tools to gauge content quality. If you've said, "I'm not a writer," or, "How do I know what will resonate with my audience?" And even, "Content is hard and takes time; do I *really* have to?" You might be suffering from content anxiety.

Content quality anxiety can come in many forms:

1. What *is* content, really?
2. I hired a content team or agency. How do I know if they're any good?
3. How can I calculate the value of content?

Help is available.

Read on for your guide to understanding what makes good content (and improve your SEO in the process).

1. What *is* content, really?

First, just to make sure we're on the same page, a quick operational definition: Content is the sum of all of the words, images, videos, and audio on your site, social pages, emails, and beyond. A good content creator is thinking about everything from the language on your newsletter subscription text to the tone in your order confirmation email or even the wording on your delivery envelopes.

2. I hired a content team or agency. How do I know if they're any good?

In-house or agency, knowing if a content creator or team is up to snuff can be one of the most intimidating things for non-creatives. While there are a lot of tips and tricks to *creating* great content, there is no secret code for *recognizing* great content. Use these guidelines and you'll be golden.

Are the ideas original?

If you want your content to stand out in the crowded Internet (and who doesn't), you're going to need original ideas and content. Before you even decide whether you like the ideas, do a quick pass through your memory. If your content team's first set of big ideas sounds uncannily familiar, dig deeper.

Autumn Wedding Ideas on Pinterest
www.pinterest.com/greenbrideguide/**autumn-wedding-ideas**/
All the **Autumn wedding ideas** you need are right here | See more about wedding shop,
autumn weddings and fall weddings.

Fall Weddings - **Fall Wedding Ideas** - Planning A Fall Wedding
wedding.theknot.com/real-**weddings**/**fall-weddings**.aspx
Fall Weddings - Planning a **fall wedding** is easy with tips and advice online from ...
Design an elegant **fall wedding** with some of our favorite new decor **ideas**.

Fall Wedding Ideas - Ideas for Fall Weddings | Wedding ...
www.bridalguide.com/planning/**wedding**-reception/**fall-wedding-ideas**
From your color palette to your centerpieces to your cake, get tons of inspiration for an
autumn wedding.

Fall Wedding Ideas - Real Weddings - Martha Stewart ...
www.marthastewart**weddings**.com/228925/**fall-ideas-real-weddings**
Browse Martha Stewart Weddings' **Fall Ideas** from Real Weddings collection. Find
wedding decoration **ideas**, seasonal reception themes and color palettes, ...

Real **Fall Wedding Ideas** | Real Simple
www.realsimple.com/**weddings**/**fall-wedding-ideas**.../index.html
Incorporare some **fall** flair into your **autumn wedding** with these inspiring **ideas**.

Fall Weddings – Fall Wedding Planning – **Fall Wedding Ideas**
fall.**wedding**s.com/
Fall Weddings – Planning your Fall wedding? Fall.Weddings.com has everything you
need from **Fall wedding ideas** and information on Fall wedding planning.

Rustic **Fall Wedding Ideas** - Wedding Chicks
www.**wedding**chicks.com/2013/05/14/rustic-**fall-wedding-ideas**/
May 14, 2013 - Rustic **Fall Wedding Ideas** from Red Heels Events that are not only
easy but super stylish.

It's hard to stand out when your ideas are just like everyone else's

The tricky part about this is that every wedding provider in this SERP is trying to speak to a very common need that brides have: finding creative ideas for a fall wedding. But your content team or agency should be able to help your customer find that information in a new and exciting way. It's okay to insist on originality.

Is the content appropriate for your audience?

You also don't want your ideas to be so shockingly original that you and your audience can't relate to them. For example, if I was to suggest an interactive game based around *Waiting for Godot* for your dog food business, I'd expect you to cry bullshit unless your audience is entirely composed of literary professors and playwrights.

Do you feel like the content adds value to your site?

Shiny objects can be great for attracting new visitors to your site. Make sure that big new idea attracts the kind of attention you want.

Big content is an investment. And while it's great to take some risks, your content team should be able to convince you what value that content adds and make a case for how it might be received.

Does your content tell a story?

This one isn't strictly a necessity, but do not underestimate how far a good story can go to making your content memorable. This can take the form of an anecdote that illustrates the point, or the whole page can be a story in itself.

In the case of Warrior IPA from Left Hand Brewing, the beer becomes a character. And while it would have been hard to fit a full beginning, middle, and end in one paragraph, hints of this warrior's story pair perfectly with the illustration on the label. This product description is so good that the beer nerd info is purely a bonus.

Does it raise the hairs on the back of your neck?

Probably the best test of content ever: pay attention to how you feel when you first experience the content. Trust your gut. If you're engaged and can't get enough, it's good content. In   this example from the Distilled blog, Harriet Cummings reaches deep into the soul of someone who wants to be a better public speaker and pulls all the right strings to cement that engagement.

You Could be a Better Presenter, Here's How

By Harriet Cummings. Published August 21, 2014 in the Distilled category

When Steve Jobs gave the graduation speech at Stanford University, the audience fell into an awe-like silence. He said nothing earth-shatteringly new. Yet his speech has gone down in history as one of the best commencement addresses of all time.

So, why do the words of some speakers resonate through the years? Read on for advice about how to deliver a knock-out presentation even if you're not a born public speaker (who is?). Many of these tips are from our consultants who present at conferences around the world, as well as our very own SearchLove series.

Speaking directly to the reader's needs, wants, and fears

You don't have to know why a piece of content blows your mind (that's the content team's job), just pay attention to how it makes you feel.

Is it Internet-friendly?

Reading content online is a lot harder on the eyes than reading on paper. Breaking up the text with headings, bullet points, images, and shorter paragraphs helps keep your customers on your page.

Written for Print

11 Lines in a paragraph?

IT'S NOT EVEN nine o'clock in the morning and the Write Bloody Publishing crew is looking a little weary. We're all a little weary after two full days and nights of panels and parties at the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) Conference in Seattle. With a few minutes to go before their presentation starts, Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz is joking around with Derrick C. Brown, founder of Write Bloody, about how many retweets she got on a topless picture she posted of him. Performance poets Taylor Mali, Jonathan Sands, and Mindy Nettifee are slowly gathering behind the tables at the front of the room while Brown rearranges the furniture. In a black T-shirt and jeans, he looks out of place against the beige carpet and faux-marble chandeliers of the Sheraton's Willow Room.

A former paratrooper with the 82nd Airborne, Brow **Serif font**
publisher and author as "A war against the working self
A war for more knowledge that demands speed, so you don't go broke, and a push to be a better businessperson." In the 10 years since Write Bloody was "born out of rejection and other failed presses," he has continued to wage that war, and he's learned a lot along the way.

Aptowicz interrupts Brown's furniture shuffle to ask, "Who do you think you are, Sherman Alexie?" in reference to the way he's taking over the room.

Written for the Web

4 Lines per paragraph, max

Create a style guide

About those guidelines... think of a style guide not as a rigid set of rules that confine your writers to a corporate voice. View it instead as a strong platform that makes sure your writers are all playing on the same field. Once everyone knows the rules, set them free to find new levels of excellence.

→ Headings

You're going to want to include nitty-gritty grammar quirks and also some fun stuff.

Grammar choices to make

If you aren't a copy editor, this bulleted list might read like gibberish. Trust me, it's not. Many people who do know what all of these are care less about which camp you choose than that you are consistent.

- To Oxford comma or not to Oxford comma?
- En dashes or em dashes?
- Smart quotes or straight quotes? **← Bullet points**
- One or two spaces after a period?
- How do you spell industry-specific jargon (e.g. e-book, ebook, or eBook?)

Find a good copy editor and let them help write your style guide. Your blog will achieve a level of consistency and organization that 99% of readers will only appreciate subliminally, but it's worth it.

As for non-text content, make sure your images, video, and audio all load well and as quickly as possible.

Does the writer use proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation?

We've all seen examples of a gorgeous, well-planned infographic that's perfect except for just a few typos. You may not be one of those sticklers who judges the work of others based on proper grammar, but you can bet that someone in your audience is using grammar, spelling, and punctuation as a measure of the quality of your content.
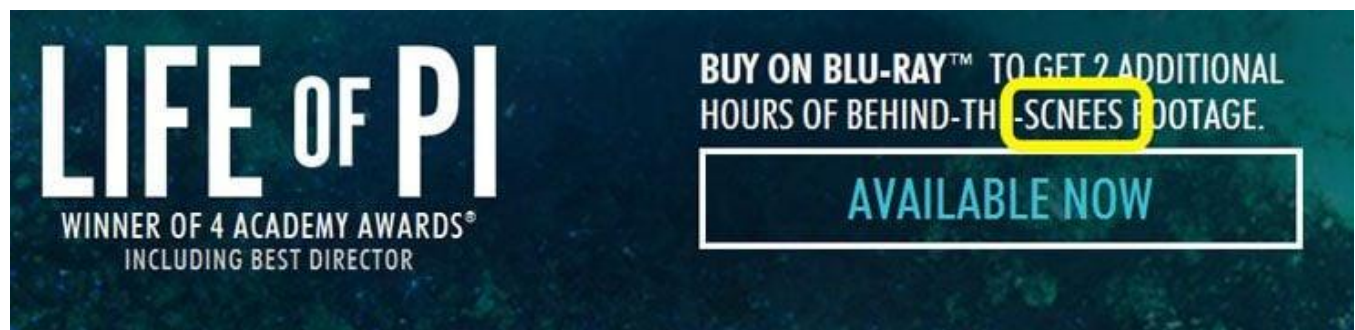
This is my final impression of one of the most gorgeous interactives I ever saw online. Sad face.

Do you immediately want to share the content?

One of your goals involves social shares, right? Or at least you wouldn't be sad if you got a bunch of them. If you're excited to share whatever you're reading, others will be too. If you find it dull, well...

3. How can I determine the value of content?

How do you prove the value of something that's everywhere, anyway? There are lots of possible answers. As an SEO, you probably understand most of these measures already, but here's how to tweak them to evaluate content. You'll likely want to use overall traffic plus a combination of the things below depending on what type of content you're focusing on.

Attribution modeling

While content is everywhere on your site, the things most of us think of as content (blog posts, landing page text, and yes, even infographics) are rarely the last touch before a conversion. Attribution modeling helps you assign a portion of the value of a conversion to all the pieces of content that a visitor sees before converting.

For example, if they read a blog post, click through on an email, and read an FAQ, you can give each of those touches partial credit. Read more about   attribution models.

A/B testing

A/B and multivariate testing are great ways to measure the value of some forgotten areas of content like the text in form fields and pop-ups. These tests can also tell you when you don't actually need content in those areas. Don't forget that less can be more.

Social shares

Engagement matters and social shares are definitely one way to measure engagement. Of course social shares are probably a better measure of blog posts and product descriptions than of the copy you use in the checkout process.

Links

In a perfect world, great content earns links. Don't assume your content is valueless if you aren't earning links, but do celebrate when it does. Use Open Site Explorer to find and keep track of links.

Comments

Yes, it does seem like fewer people are commenting on blogs these days. But, as with links, this just means the comments you do get, usually a signal that a reader is deeply engaged, are all the more valuable. Dan Shure explains this in depth in   The Broken Art of Company Blogging (and the Ignored Metric that Could Save Us All).

One Metric

Our blog editor, Trevor Klein, has developed and refined a personalized metric for Moz called the One Metric. This system combines a variety of the signals above and then weights them to give a quick overview of what's succeeding and what's failing. We've already been using that information to inform decisions about future content efforts.

Caveat

The success of content cannot always be measured in numbers, and if you invest only in projects that have a predictable rate of return, you're missing opportunities. Rand calls this [serendipitous marketing](#). Just make sure as you're considering the value of your content that you leave room for Serendipity.

Is this SEO?

Yes. Remember how I mentioned the Hummingbird algorithm up above? I know that this is the algorithm update most of us would like to forget, because we think it's so much easier to spot spammy links than quality content. But it's really a lot simpler than that. Google is looking for content that answers users' queries. And according to [Marie Haynes](#), "Google's goal with all of these algorithm changes (Panda, Penguin and Hummingbird) is to encourage webmasters to publish content that is the best of its kind."

So if you're an SEO (or anyone else) with content anxiety, let it go. You have the tools to tell when content is good and to select a team that knows what makes it great. Go ahead and let that team try to sell you on an idea. You can trust yourself to make the final call on whether or not it's actually worthwhile.

And if you're part of a content team that's trying to make the case for your big ideas, please join me on September 9 for "[The Storytelling of Content Strategy](#)." This Mozinar will cover one method of creating more engaging (and persuasive) strategy docs.

Do you ever experience content anxiety? What are your measures of content quality? Has a particular experience with content made you either gun shy or wildly enthusiastic about content? I'd love to hear your stories in the comments.

The author's views are entirely their own (excluding the unlikely event of hypnosis) and may not always reflect the views of Moz.

Written by

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Isla uses her MFA in creative writing to organize words into forms that resonate with an audience and incite action. She co-authored [Clear Out the Static in Your Attic: A Writer's Guide for Turning Artifacts into Art](#). Connect with her on [Twitter](#).