

CONTENT MARKETING PLAYBOOK

Master **Content Marketing**.
Boost **Traffic**.
Grow **Your Business**.

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This particular section of the Content Marketing Playbook focuses on writing and creating great content—one of the most challenging parts of content marketing for most people.

The broad table of contents for this section is as follows:

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-----***Writing and Creating Great Content***-----

Creating great content is a kind of magic mix of your skill, your understanding of your audience, and the nuts and bolts of how to write and get things done. Though there are many moving parts to content marketing, this is perhaps the most complex and important.

So how do you go about doing it? In this section we'll share our ideas, our processes, and the tools we use every day to create content worth reading, engaging with, and sharing.

Understand Your Audience

Do you know who you are writing to?

In just about any content marketing article you read today, you'll see the inevitable "know your audience" phrase. It's almost a throwaway line and is not always backed up with an explanation on how you should go about gathering this understanding.

Yet, if you don't know who you are creating content for, you most definitely will miss the mark. According to popular content marketer [Andy Crestodina](#), empathy is the most important marketing skill.

Understanding your human audience means asking the following questions (among *many* others):

- What do they need?
- What are they interested in?
- What makes them happy?
- What do they want to learn?
- Who are they?
- What do they worry about?
- Who do they want to be?

Consider that a short list, really.

The questions you'll ask will vary based on whether you are B2B (business to business) or B2C (business to customer). A B2B list might also include:

- Where do they work?
- Are they the top decision maker?
- Who else influences their buying decisions?

You must create content that fits this kind of list because those are all powerful emotional and psychological motivators for your audience.

Putting A Face On Your Audience

You probably have a good understanding of your niche, otherwise you wouldn't be attempting to create content in it. You understand the general likes and interests and topics of interest. However, when you write, you don't write to a general crowd. You don't write to a niche.

You write to people.

You have to find a way to put a face on your audience.

Content mapping with user personas.

The [content mapping approach](#) aims to inform you of the person who will consume your content, and how close that person is to buying. This starts with creating user personas.

[User personas](#) are similar to buyer personas. They are theoretical readers that you create (usually based on observation or other data) so that you can put a face to your audience. According to [Mashable](#), they are an important key to creating a content marketing strategy because they allow you to customize your strategy, conversion offers, social media activity, and so on all to fit the specific goals and needs of a persona. Don't ignore this crucial first step towards understanding your audience.

Personas are quite detailed, down to an actual name and information about their personal life, their concerns and interests, their limitations, and what they want and need as far as your niche is concerned. On my blog, I've (Sujan) come up with [150 questions](#) you might consider asking in order to create an accurate persona. For example, you might want to answer:

- What is their name?
- Where do they live?
- What do they do?
- What are their hobbies?
- What problems do they need help with?
- What is their worldview?
- What are their goals?

It is easier to write to a specific person when creating content rather than writing to a generic, nameless crowd. It will bring clarity to what and how you write. You will create content to meet specific needs and interests, not just what a crowd would want.

The second part of content mapping, after user personas, is to determine how close a person is to buying. According to [Hubspot](#), this can be broken into three stages:

- **Awareness:** A person is aware of a possible problem or opportunity in their life.
- **Consideration:** A person has clearly defined that problem or opportunity.
- **Decision:** A person knows what the solution is and will look like.

When you mix user personas with the stages each of those personas might be in, you can create nearly unlimited specific content that hits the sweet spot of your audience, and segments of your audience, every time.

Commenters and their blogs.

Readers leave comments on your blog. Do you simply respond with a quick reply, or do you stop to consider the actual person behind the comment?

By making notes of who comments, what topics they tend to comment on, and what they often say, you will learn a lot about not only specific readers, but other readers like them who are not prone to leaving blog comments. Most people are not unique in what they express on your blog. For every blog comment you get, realize there are likely many other readers with the same thoughts that are remaining quiet.

And don't forget to visit your reader's (and social follower's) blogs; they tell you as plain as day what they are interested in and the content that would meet their needs.

Competitors and their audience.

Your competitors have done their homework (otherwise, they wouldn't be competitors). Check out their content. Who are they writing to? What are their blog commenters saying? What kinds of things are people saying on their social profiles?

Your competitor's audience is also your audience.

Social media conversations.

Social media is great for a lot of reasons, but when it comes to learning about your audience, it's fantastic.

You can discover interests that you never realized your audience had simply by seeing what your fans are sharing. You can have conversations with them and learn who they are. You can discover the blogs they read, the articles they tend to prefer -- all from what they share publicly on social media.

Part of your social media activity should be to make note of these things.

Ask your readers.

Use surveys or other direct approaches and ask your readers to tell you about themselves. It's the most direct and obvious route, but some content marketers forget to use it, turning instead towards complex tools and guessing.

What do they do? What are they interested in? What do they need help with? What is their favorite type of content?

Use a survey, talk to readers on social media, or give them a chance to introduce themselves in the blog comments of a blog post. Talk to them in person. Just ask them!

Use Tools To Find Your Audience

The tools you are using to track traffic and engagement can tell you something about your audience in a less-personal way than how you put a name and face on your audience. Tools return broad data, but it is quantifiable and measurable.

Analytics tools, like Google Demographics.

You may be using tools such as Google Analytics or KISSmetrics to track traffic and user behavior on your website. These types of tools tell you a bit about your audience.

Google Analytics, for example, tells you what [market and affinity segment](#) your traffic falls into. While your content might not fit exactly into Google's categories, it is free information that may help you find a pattern about your readers.

You can also learn where your readers are coming from, and what kinds of devices they are using. You'll know if you're catering to a mobile or desktop crowd, and can tweak your content to fit that format best. You can find out if your audience is male or female. Google basically provides you with a [broad sweep of demographic information](#).

If you've created user personas, you can use some of the information from these kinds of analytics to flesh them out. For example:

John likes photography, and has a passion for news and weather. He spends a lot of time on his iPhone.

Social media tools.

Social media networks provide you with information on who is following and interacting with your content beyond the conversations you have on the front end.

Facebook has [Page Insights](#), for example, that tell you quite a bit about your fans and what content they prefer on that network. Twitter provides its own [dashboard for businesses](#), sharing the demographics, lifestyles, and consumer behavior of your followers.

Dig into your social media profiles and you'll discover a huge amount of information about your audience packaged up neatly.

How to write for a specific audience.

After gathering all of the information and data on your audience, it's tempting to think of them as a set of stats. They aren't. Remember, you're creating content for *real people*. They aren't all the same, and they [might even be fragmented](#).

You'd be better off focusing on what needs your readers have rather than who they are. Knowing their demographics helps you better understand your readers, but it is less useful than knowing what your reader's specific needs are.

Write in second person.

Let's start off with the nuts and bolts part of writing directly to an audience. Using second-person "you" is the best way to connect. It's direct, it's conversational, it doesn't sound patronizing, and it makes your content seem as if it were meant for that specific reader.

Write for a specific person.

This is where user personas, or familiarity with actual readers comes in handy. If you write for a specific person, it affects your content in a positive way. The tone is more conversational, the information more detailed -- you're less apt to be careless or broad. Readers react well to content that has been written in this manner.

Be very careful that you don't veer in visualizing who you are creating content for. If you shift to another person, your content will reveal it.

Write for readers, not peers.

It's easy for content marketers to forget that they aren't writing for their peers. Actors on a stage perform for the audience, not for each other. Your writing must do the same. Be careful when you pick that specific person to write for that you pick an audience member and not a peer.

Also, remember that you are not writing for yourself. You are writing to meet other's needs, not your own.

Write in the same language.

All of your audience research might have helped you nail the perfect content topic, but you need to approach that topic in a way relevant to your audience. There are limitless ways to talk about the same topic, but you need to use the illustrations, anecdotes, and language that your readers respond to. You need to use the format they prefer, whether video, image, or text.

Confronting Content Creation Challenges

Every content marketer faces similar challenges, with more than half ([54%](#)) of marketers admitting that simply producing engaging content is the most problematic.

Know Your Content Strengths

Every writer has their own style. It's not something you can really choose because it tends to stem from your natural strengths. The way you approach a topic, the words you use -- this is all part of it.

By understanding what your strengths are as a writer, you'll know what approach you'll naturally take when creating content, the approach that comes easily. Additionally, you are also able to freshen up your content by writing in a style that you (and your readers) aren't used to as you foray outside of your strengths.

1. You love to teach.

Perhaps you like to write how-to and review posts, because you like to teach people about something and help them learn. You're good at research, and you're good at breaking a process down into logical steps. You're good at using anecdotes, illustrations, and examples that help clarify difficult concepts.

You want to make sure the audience knows what you're talking about.

2. You have a platform.

As an insider and an expert, you know you have a platform. What you write will be paid attention to. While what you write is teaching others, you write from a confident position of authority, clarifying important topics, correcting wrong information. As an expert, you likely find it easy to write on your specific area of expertise without a lot of time devoted to research and learning.

You already know what you're talking about.

3. You know how to sell.

Your skill is that you can write in a way that can sell anyone on anything. You have somehow managed to figure out the psychology behind selling, and know just how to write in order to tap into that.

You use the words that convince the audience.

4. You are a great wordsmith.

Your skill as a writer is that you are good with grammar and the mechanics of writing. You have a good vocabulary and find writing easy and natural. This skill allows you to write about many different topics, even if you aren't familiar with them, because you have the ability to understand and package information with clear writing and logical thinking.

You use the words that match the audience's language.

5. You know how to ask questions.

Whether you are new to a topic, an expert, an outsider, or full of emotion, you have the ability to not only ask the questions your audience is asking, but also questions they had not thought of. You write in a way that insists on finding answers to tough questions.

You use the words your audience needed to hear.

6. A little bit of everything.

Most writers have a mix of the strengths listed here. If your weakness is as a wordsmith, you may need to find someone help you until it becomes a strength. If you are not great at selling with your content, you'll need to find help or instruction on how to do it right.

Know what you're good at, and what you can naturally do. Then get better at the things you lack.

Stay Agile With Your Content

The inability to make changes on the fly can damage your content marketing efforts. Audiences, tastes, trends, and technology are always changing, and your content has to be able to make adjustments to fit.

[David Burn](#), founder of Bonehook.com, encourages content marketers to take an agile approach to what they do. The agile approach, which combines constant iteration, feedback, and testing to deliver the right product on time, is well-suited to content marketing.

Burn pinpoints the key reasons that agile is an appropriate approach as being that iteration, but also the flexibility, customer-centeredness, and high-value priorities. What does this look like for you?

- i. **Start.** You start with simple and basic content, knowing that it will need improvement. The key here is that you must *start*.
- ii. **Publish.** Get your content published and out there, even if it isn't perfect. You can't make changes unless you've published.
- iii. **Get feedback.** Get feedback from your audience, you stats, your content team -- anyone involved, and begin making improvements based on that feedback.
- iv. **Make changes.** What does your feedback tell you? Make content changes according to that feedback.
- v. **Repeat.** Keep doing this. You will stay flexible as you make changes to suit your audience.

Agile development recommends starting with a minimum viable product. For you, the content marketer, the goal is to start with a minimum viable audience.

Planning Your Content

You can know all you want to about the power of content marketing, but if you don't put it into practice, it doesn't matter.

Planning your content all along the way is how it actually gets done for most content marketers. Without planning, you'll be hit-and-miss, and your topics and audience focus will be all over the place.

Creating A Content Marketing Strategy

According to [Forbes](#), by simply planning your content marketing, you'll have a significant advantage over your competition, nearly half (42%) of whom haven't bothered to document their content marketing strategy. Perhaps that lack of willingness to document a strategy explains why [70% of marketers lack a consistent content strategy](#), and why [34% struggle](#) to develop a consistent strategy.

And let's not forget the need to actually write down that strategy. Content marketers who document their strategy are [64% more likely](#) to have a dedicated budget for it.

By simply having and documenting a content marketing strategy, you're ahead of the game

Your strategy should be focused.

A content marketing strategy must have a focus. There must be a reason it exists.

That reason, of course, isn't to celebrate you. Your content marketing strategy must be about how great your customers are, not how great you are. The [Onboardly blog suggests](#) that as long as you rid your strategy of "I'm great" and turn the focus to "let me help you", you'll stay on track.

Your strategy will emerge and change.

Do you have a strategy for what you want your content marketing to do? Do you even need one? The [WordStream blog](#) suggests that you don't need an overt strategy right off the bat, because your strategy will emerge as you go.

If you are trying to get started and creating a complex content marketing strategy is holding you back, forget the strategy and get started. You'll start to learn more about your audience and your own content marketing creation abilities, and create a strategy from that understanding as you go along.

At some point, however, you must have a content marketing strategy. That's where an editorial calendar comes in.

Using analytics to determine strategy.

[Using your analytics](#) to help you find and define your content marketing strategy will help take the fear out of making that strategy. You'll be using actual data that shows what does and doesn't work, building on the success that emerge from that data.

[Hubspot suggests](#) that you use your analytics data to look for:

- Content that is popular with your readers.
- Content that drives conversions
- Content that performs well (traffic, social, etc.)
- Content that drives sales

As you can see, such an approach hits all the big “wants” most content marketers have: sales, conversions, audience growth.

Using a social media audit to determine strategy.

The [Social Media Examiner](#) suggests taking a unique approach, and using a social media audit to help determine your content strategy. The general idea is quite simple: take a serious look at what’s happening on your social media to determine what direction your content should head. This is especially useful if social engagement is high on your list of goals for your content.

Some of the metrics you’ll be looking for are:

- Conversation: Determine how many conversations each post generated across all of your social networks.
- Amplification: Find out how often each post is reshared or retweeted.
- Applause: How many people liked, favorited, or +1’d your post?

Make note of how many total posts you are looking at when you compile these metrics so you can see the rate. Next, do the same process for a competitor to determine what is happening with their social media.

Do a deeper dive and segment your content into types and topics and see which content gets more engagement. Maybe your infographics killed it, or your long list posts. Do the same for your competitors.

If it makes it easier, setup a spreadsheet so that you can see your rates alongside a few competitors. You will see how you hold up next to your competitors, which social networks you excel at, which social networks your industry in general does best on, and what content types do well with your audience.

An audit like this takes time and effort, but when you are done you’ll have the information you need to plan your content, knowing which content on which networks will give you the most bang for your buck.

Using An Editorial Calendar

A lot of bloggers and content marketers treat content marketing as something to do by the seat of their pants. They don’t put a huge amount of energy into planning their content, which

probably explains why [50% of content marketers](#) struggle with creating consistent content. An editorial calendar helps close that consistency gap.

An editorial calendar does four key things that help you be more consistent:

- i. **Know what you're going to write ahead of time.** By planning in advance, you put a stop to the frantic last-minute rush to create content. When you know what you'll be writing a week or more before you have to, you can gather research or see how content you're reading for fun might tie into future planned content.
- ii. **You can coordinate all your marketing.** By planning your content on a calendar, you can tie it into other marketing you may be doing, such as sales, advertisements, and so on.
- iii. **Themes become possible.** It's almost impossible to have themes across a broad swath of content (blogs, social media, ebooks) and other marketing if you aren't using a calendar.
- iv. **Your team is on the same page.** Editorial calendars help your team understand what content is on the schedule, what they should all be thinking about, and it also helps you say no to last-minute ideas that don't fit with what the strategy is. Without a plan, it's more difficult to focus a team full of ideas.

Using an editorial calendar is not the same thing as a strategy, though the two are closely linked. The calendar is the tool that helps you lay out your strategy in a way that makes sure it will actually happen. Strategy is the broad plan of attack, while assigning those strategic ideas a date and time is tool that puts that strategy into motion.

Choosing an editorial calendar.

Editorial calendars can be as simple or as complicated as you want them to be, whether paper calendar or digital app.

Your editorial calendar will be where you will plan:

- Blog content
- Social content
- Content campaigns
- Ebooks, white papers, etc.
- Guest posts

An editorial calendar that will pull its weight is an editorial calendar that:

- i. **Your whole team has access to.** Your entire content marketing team must have access to the editorial calendar. They need to know what has been assigned them, of course, but also put themes and content into context.

- ii. **Alerts team members to tasks.** A content team has members who are responsible for different tasks, many which are contingent on other team members complete their tasks first. You'll need a system that handles tasks and duties in an organized manner, whether through your calendar, or the workflow that you use to implement it.
- iii. **Gives you a place to plug in strategy.** Devoting time to strategy, content audits, and tracking metrics in order to determine future content is well-served by a calendar where you can turn that discovery into concrete content plans.
- iv. **Lets you plan multiple content types.** There are a lot of different approaches to content. Your calendar should allow you to plan social posts, blog posts, graphics, ebooks, and more.

If you are a solo content marketer, an editorial calendar is still helpful. It will keep you ahead of the content curve, and help you see a birds-eye-view of where your content is headed.

If you're weak on your editorial calendar abilities, take the [advice of Krista Neher](#) from ClickZ, and simply focus on posting great content without the fuss of a calendar. Let a goal of great content be the habit you make, and worry about formalizing it later, once you're in that habit.

Plan your publishing frequency.

Publishing frequency across the broad spectrum of content marketers varies greatly. [For example](#), 16% of B2B marketers publish new content every day. 26% prefer to publish new content several times a week. 17% publish something new once a week, and 19% only aim to publish new content at least once a month. Your schedule may vary and fall anywhere in this list, but keep in mind that 91% of top-shelf bloggers publish *at least* once a week, usually more.

What dictates your publishing frequency?

- i. **Content type.** Depending on what kind of content you will create, you may fall into any of those brackets. If you only produce high quality videos, once a month may be all you do. Case studies take time to acquire data. Each content type has a different time load required to make it.
- ii. **Team size.** Being realistic means taking into account what you or your team can handle. Scheduling four posts a day and then missing that goal sets yourself up for failure.
- iii. **Budget.** Your budget, both in regards to money *and* time, plays a role in how frequently you publish, particularly if you've never bothered to set a budget up. Allotting money and time to content marketing both makes sure it happens as well as that it happens without a negative impact on the rest of your business.
- iv. **Goals.** What do you hope to achieve from your content? According to the [2014 State Of Inbound survey](#), brands that create 15 blog posts each month will average about 1,200 new leads in that same time period. If leads are what you are after, you'll need to publish more frequently than not.

Using an editorial calendar.

Once you have decided how frequently you will publish content, you can start using your editorial calendar. While there is no right or wrong way to approach your calendar, here are a few suggestions.

- i. **Plan broad themes.** Some content marketers have broad themes that cover a larger chunk of time in the coming year. For example, you might have a different focus topic for each month, or for each quarter. Write these themes on your calendar for the coming year or other extended time period.
- ii. **Plan cyclical content.** These include holidays, product launches, contests, events and conferences, and so on. You may want to work with your advertising and marketing teams to be sure that you have content that fits with these cycles. Mark down the events, holidays, etc. on your calendar, and note which types of content need to be created for them. You don't have to have specific headlines, but just note the type of content that you'll need to plan for (e.g. video).
- iii. **Plan special content.** Creating ebooks, infographics, white papers, guest posts, and other similar content that takes a bit more time than a typical blog post or is outside of the "usual" realm of what your team does. You will often use this content as an incentive for reader action, so you want to make it a regular part of your calendar schedule. Plan when you will be releasing this type of content and write it on your calendar.
- iv. **Plan team events.** Key among this would be meetings or brainstorming sessions where you and your team will work on planning the specific content a week or more ahead of time. Plan when you and your team will analyze metrics and do social media audits. Put these meetings on your calendar. These are part of your content strategy, and should be on the calendar.
- v. **Start collecting ideas.** Create a place where you can collect, store, and organize the ideas you will be coming up with. Now that your team can see the themes and types of content they will need to create, they can add content ideas to the pool. Make sure everyone can access both the calendar and this idea collection.
- vi. **Put the content on the calendar.** How far ahead you plan is up to you and your team, though you should be at least planning a week ahead. The larger your team and the more complex your content, the more you should plan ahead. Refer to the content publishing frequency that you determined to help you decide what to put where.

Editorial Calendar Tools:

[CoSchedule](#): A robust WordPress-integrated editorial calendar that also has easy social publishing and strong teamwork features built in.

[Google Calendar](#): A robust general calendar that can receive incoming calendars and allow for collaboration. Attaching documents and inviting team members help it to function as an editorial calendar.

[Sunrise Calendar](#): By integrating with many services and apps, such as popular to-do apps like Trello or Asana, you can create a powerful editorial calendar that pulls all of your team planning together in a read-only calendar.

How To Organize Your Ideas.

You've just brainstormed a ton of ideas. Now what will you do with them? Do you have a system in place to handle those ideas, deciding which will be used and when? Part of the trick of making an editorial calendar and all of that planning work is to find a way to organize and sift through the ideas that you come up with.

Organization will make or break you. You might be great at creating ideas and content, but if you can't organize them, you'll never be able to really put them to use.

There is no one system for idea organization that works for everyone. You must determine your own system. However, there are a few factors that all systems will have in common.:

- i. **They work how you do.** Whether you prefer paper or a digital app to capture your ideas, the system that will work the best for you will use the tools you are naturally inclined to use. If you like to make lists, find a tool that is geared for list-making. If you like to type more copy, find a tool that will let you do that.
- ii. **They can't be too complex.** Simpler is better. The more complicated and fussy your system is, the less likely you'll continue to use it. Complexity comes from too many steps and too many tools. Pare it down.
- iii. **They must allow for categorization.** Your ideas will not all be on the same topic or content type. Whether through tags, color coding, or another method, your system should allow for categorization.
- iv. **They have a date and time factor.** Ideas easily sink to the bottom, forgotten, and when they are finally found, are outdated. Your system must have a method for regularly refreshing your ideas, bringing the bottom up to the top and ascertaining if it's something you'll use.
- v. **The must allow for deletion.** What seems like a great idea one day might seem less so when you refresh that old idea. Your system (and you, yourself) must be able to identify and delete ideas that aren't good. Otherwise, they simply clog up the gears.

Indefinite storage of ideas is not the goal. The goal is a place where you can quickly dump an

idea when it comes to you, and a system that lets you go back regularly to re-evaluate and either use or remove.

Tools For Organizing Content Ideas:

[Trello](#): A free project management tool that you can use alone or with a team to organize ideas, projects, and campaigns using a “card” system that customizes to fit how you want to use it.

[Asana](#): A free project management tool that takes a different approach to organization. If the Trello card-based system isn’t your thing, Asana may be more to your liking.

[Podio](#): Project management on steroids, this tool lets you create custom apps, embeddable forms, and is flexible enough to bend to fit any team or need.

[Google Keep](#): Create simple notes and lists that can be color-coded and shared with team members. An easy mobile app makes it easy to record both text and audible notes (which are automatically transcribed).

Creating Successful Content

When it comes down to actually creating content, there are a few common questions that content marketers often end up asking.

How Should You Write?

There is no right or wrong way to write in regards to the tone and style. Good writing, though, has few typos, grammatical errors, and presents ideas clearly and logically.

Choosing your style.

You don’t choose your style. Your style chooses you.

Your style is uniquely yours. You might write copy that cajoles or confronts, that seems like a pleasant conversation or borders on bombastic. All of these have a place, depending on your brand and your audience.

Regardless of what style your writing takes, be sure your content is “humanized.” Get rid of stiff business-speak with clunky words and phrases and the jargon or buzzwords that no one cares about. One of the easiest ways to humanize your writing is to write in second person (you, your, yours).

This leads to the next point: make sure your style is not about you, but is about the reader. If you find that your copy has a lot of “I” or “we”, you might have lost focus on the reader and instead made everything about you.

Readers are easily turned off by copy that makes the author out to be higher, smarter, better, or smacks of pretension. While there are exceptions (e.g. an expert making big claims of success

in order to establish credibility to the reader), your job isn't to isolate your reader or make them feel like less than you. You create barriers to your reader when you:

- Try to be too obscure or clever.
- Make them feel stupid.
- Get too personal with stories not for reader enlightenment, but to make you look better.
- Veer too often into the crude, profane, or insulting.

Your content is there to help, encourage, lift up, and show readers that what you are selling or claiming is completely possible for them. It is not there to establish that you are a really great and impressive person.

The writing process.

Not everyone writes in the same way, so you will have to adapt your own system of writing content. However, there are a few basics that will get you started and may even become a regular part of your own writing process.

- i. **Write quickly at first.** When writing content, don't self-edit. Write as quickly as possible. You can go back and clean it up later. The important thing is to do away with the blank page and get the ideas out of your head as fast as you can before you lose any of it.
- ii. **Go back and clean up.** Go back to that first rushed (and messy) draft and clean it up. This is more than just looking for typos; you are also looking to tighten up the logic and flow of the copy. Do not be afraid to cut out sections of copy, even (or maybe, especially) if you love it. Remember, your copy is a slave to clarity for your reader; it's not about your beautiful purple prose.
- iii. **Wait, and go back again.** Write your second cleaned-up draft, and let it sit a day or two. Read it with fresh eyes. You'll find the mistakes you missed the first time.

Editing and proofreading.

Content that is riddled with errors not only doesn't look professional, but it also dings your reputation as a reliable expert.

But not every team has a professional editor or proofreader. Solo content marketers, especially, have to rely on a system to edit their own work. When it comes to editing and proofreading your copy, there are a few things to keep in mind.

- i. **Automation doesn't always work.** Spellcheck and grammar check in word processing programs will only catch so much. One of the reasons it's important to plan and write in advance is because you have time to go back and read a draft before publishing.
- ii. **Read content out loud.** Hearing the words you've written out loud is the fastest way to find awkward phrasing or missed words. It's the best tool anyone can use to self-edit their copy.

- iii. **Watch out for fluff words.** An easy edit anyone can do is to go through copy and cut out fluff words that don't need to be there. Most adjectives and adverbs, for example, or cliches or phrases that could be said in a simpler manner. The phrases "I think" or "it's my opinion" aren't necessary, either. You are the author. The reader knows it is what you think.
- iv. **Look for reruns.** Watch out for repetition that isn't planned. Sometimes you use alliteration in sound and word for effect, but often it is accidental. Find the sentences or paragraphs that rehash what you already said. Find the words that pop up more than once in the same sentence or paragraph. Cut or rework.

By avoiding multitasking and distraction during each part of the writing process, you'll cut down on errors and ultimately make your editing and proofreading much easier.

Tools For Writing:

[Evernote](#): For both writing, jotting ideas, and saving and organizing ideas.

[Inbound Writer](#): Monitor topics and discover whether or not the content you want to write will have an impact on your audience or not before you write it.

[Hemingway Editor](#): A low-distraction approach to writing your copy.

[Word2CleanHTML](#): If you write in various word processing programs or apps, you can get clean HTML before pasting it into your site.

[WordCounter](#): Count the words in your post before submitting it.

[Grammarly](#): Find mistakes and errors your writing software might have missed.

[Correctica](#): Find writing errors on your site or documents so that you can fix them.

How Long Should Your Content Be?

First, before getting too far into how long your content should be, let me be clear: it depends. It depends on a lot of factors, from audience, platform, network, budget, time, team, content goals -- all of that and more. Though there is much research available, it doesn't all agree.

Look at these suggestions instead as guidelines that can help you determine where to start and what might be the best fit.

Ideal headline, email subject line, and social post length.

With traditional media, headlines were shorter and matched patterns that readers expected, using information-rich keywords.

That has changed somewhat, particularly because of social media. I included email subject lines and social post length in the headline section because the headline you use on your blog post content often do double duty as social posts or email subject lines.

First, let's start with social media. The [Buffer blog](#) pulled together data to determine what the optimal length was for social posts. They discovered:

- Twitter: 71-100 characters
- Facebook: 40 characters
- Google+: 60 characters
- LinkedIn: 80-120 characters, or 25 word longer posts.
- Email subject lines: 28-39 characters

That, of course, is only Buffer's findings. In the end, Buffer determined that a good goal was a six-word headline. But your data may reveal something different. eConsultancy uses a "[65 Character Rule](#)" with headlines to ensure they fare well in any situation.

While you certainly can customize your social content, the truth is that you don't always have the time or motivation. If you rely on an automated social publishing platform of any sort, you will want to be sure that your blog post headlines conform to social powerhouse standards.

With email subject lines, there is some leeway. [MailChimp determined](#) that email subject length has very little bearing on the success of your email. Keep in mind that extremely long email subjects may get cut off in email software. Load the front of your subject with the most important keywords and emotional impact in case it gets truncated.

Search engines may not "prefer" any particular length of a headline, but they do return results that, like email, can truncate the longer headlines. The [Powermapper blog](#) suggested some guidelines based on various search engine limitations, determining that both Bing and Google will show about 70 characters headlines in their SERPs.

Ideal blog post length.

Finding the ideal blog post length is turning into the Holy Grail for content marketers. Let's take a look at just a few of the differing opinions from leading content marketers.

- [Buffer](#): 1,600 words
- Neil Patel: [2,000 or more](#).
- Neil Patel: [It doesn't have to be 2,000](#).
- Moz: [Long-form is better](#).
- Garrett Moon: [500 words is not enough](#).

The truth is, they're all correct. They analyzed their own data to come up with these discoveries and learned what works on their blog. The key here is understanding what you're able to handle, what you want your blog content to achieve, and what is actually happening in your blog's data. Do you want higher search traffic? More reading? Increased shares? What content gets that?

In general, there seems to be a pattern of search engines looking favorably on *quality* longer content. Some people will read longer content, but some simply will not. Shorter content can get lots of loyal reader traffic (see: [Seth Godin](#)). You may not be able to handle lots of 2,000+ word blog posts at first, and simply need to build up a solid and frequent schedule of blogging to get some content on your blog. *These are all valid reasons for blogging both shorter and longer content.*

Your main goal is to write high quality blog posts. Worry about word counts after you have collected your own data and understand what your audience prefers.

How Do You Write To Get More Traffic And Leads?

Content marketing would not be worth the time if it wasn't able to bring more traffic to your site, and then to generate actual leads, whether sales or email sign-ups, once that traffic got there. Not all copy does a great job at generating traffic and leads, however.

Generate more traffic with your content.

Probably the most common response, when asking anyone why they use content marketing, is to bring more traffic to their site. The [QuickSprout blog](#) has some great advice on how to drive organic traffic to your content.

- i. **Content is evergreen.** Evergreen content is always fresh and relevant, and does not contain data, copy, or information that is trendy or has a short shelf life. It sits there on your blog and continues to build inbound links, traffic patterns, and social shares long after you wrote it.
- ii. **Content is optimized for long-tail keywords.** We'll cover this in greater depth later, but the gist of it is that your content is carefully planned around what search engines are looking for and how your audience is using search engines to do that looking. No longer are you building content around simple keywords, but instead, the longer phrases that people are now using when they search. General is gone, specific is now the rule.
- iii. **Content has lots of backlinks.** Backlinks are those inbound links I mentioned for evergreen content. These happen when other content marketers link to your content from their own sites. Your content must be of high quality and it must be easily discovered for that to happen. You can help increase backlinks by using social media, sharing articles directly with influencers or other possibly interested marketers, and repurposing your content -- but be careful. Be sure your backlink efforts are above board so that you don't incur the wrath of search engines on the lookout for someone trying to game the system.

Generate more leads with your content.

When it comes to acquiring leads, the sales funnel has to be in play. That funnel is the way visitors become readers become customers. It starts with people being aware of your brand and ultimately taking action and buying in.

How do you make your copy do it? [Social Media Examiner](#) outlined a simple plan of attack.

- i. **Make them aware.** At the broad top of the funnel, your goal is to make visitors aware. This is when you get their attention and establish expertise and relevance to whatever brought the visitor to your site (e.g. search terms). Again, we'll talk about keyword research later, but that plays a critical role here. You can also raise awareness through guest posting, networking, leaving comments in forums or on other blogs, and so on.
- ii. **Draw them in.** It does no good if your visitors get no further than awareness. They have to go further into the funnel. That's where in-depth how-to or super-helpful blog content really shines. Or, you may have conversations with them on social media or respond personally to them in the blog comments. Getting your visitors to sign up for your email, email courses, or to access downloads is a further way to get them into the funnel.
- iii. **Meet them at the bottom.** The bottom of the funnel is where the leads convert. That's where you show the value of the product or service, you use anecdotes or testimonials from real customers, embed a call-to-action, or direct them to landing pages.

Your entire site is centered around this funnel, but so is each individual blog post. You should always keep an eye towards creating content that fits into the funnel as well as contains the full funnel itself.

Creating Great Headlines

We've already talked about headline length, but what does it take to actually write a great headline, beyond mere character count? The [eConsultancy blog](#) points out that what worked in traditional media doesn't always fare well on the web.

Brian Clark, from Copyblogger, understands the importance of headlines, devoting much of his well-trafficked site to the topic of [creating headlines](#) and making them work. [According to Clark](#), headlines are the first and, potentially, last thing people will see of your content because they are skimming across social feeds, email inboxes, and RSS readers. Your headline is often the only thing that determines if people will continue reading. You have to get this right.

We've talked about headline length, but what else makes a great headline?

- **Words and adjectives that are interesting.** Words can be interesting because of sound, because they haven't been overused, or because you've put words together in an unusual pattern.
- **Words that tap into our emotions.** Whether those emotions are insecurities (use negative wording), hope (positive wording), curiosity, and anything in between, emotion is the key element. Words like No, Stop, and Without [receive more social shares](#).
- **Words that are actually numbers.** Numbers suggest lists, and people like list posts. However, don't write the number out as a word -- use the actual number. People can read and process it faster.
- **Words that fit the content.** Whatever you do, don't create headlines that have little to do with the actual content. Headlines must truthfully tell the reader what to expect, and not just serve as clickbait.

- **Words that are clear.** Your headline needs to pique curiosity, but it also needs to be specific enough that the reader has an idea of what to expect. Curiosity doesn't arise out of vagueness, but out of specifics.

Neil Patel has gone as far as suggesting a [headline formula](#), and it looks like this:

Number/trigger word + Adjective + Keyword + Promise

Now, there's no guarantee that will work every time, but it might be useful to help you start thinking of headlines in a way that points you in the right direction.

Tools For Creating Headlines:

[Headline Analyzer](#): Enter your headline and see how it performs according to key variables.

How To Do Content Research

Researching for your content marketing is how you get quality content. While some of your content will be based solely on what you already know in your head or on anecdotes and experience, you should include a healthy amount of content that is based on research. Remember, you're here to be helpful. Help your readers learn something new by doing the hard research for them.

- **Ask good questions.** Know how to ask questions, not just of others, but of yourself. What key piece of information is missing? What isn't clear? Ask the questions you want answered, do the research, and you'll end up answering most of your reader's questions, too.
- **Be an excellent curator.** By collecting, curating, reading, and sharing other's content, you'll stumble onto material that you can link to or reference in your own content.
- **Look for patterns.** One reason it is helpful to plan your content in advance is that you know what you'll be writing about. With that in mind, you'll start to see patterns that fit with upcoming content in what you're reading, experiencing, seeing, or the conversations you're having. As blogger [David Meerman Scott](#) points out, just about everything around you can be used in content.
- **Be careful of easy sources.** Wikipedia is not the answer to all research. It is more of a dictionary than anything, best there to help you understand a topic enough that you can ask questions that lead you to more authoritative sources. Use other sources such as Google Scholar, Google Books, research or science journals, or government sites.
- **Keep an eye to science.** Readers love posts that are tied to science and psychology. Add "science" or "psychology" to your search terms and see what data comes up.
- **Mine your own data.** You have a lot of data that can be used for content as well. You might want to share which products customers love, and why. Or, which blog posts or emails do better, and how you did A/B testing to determine why this was.

All the great research in the world does your reader no good if you can't distill it down to something clear and easy to understand. If you don't understand the research yourself or can't find another way to explain it, consider a different approach. Don't use research as an excuse to link and dump data into a post in the hopes of appearing intelligent. Readers can see through that.

Tools For Researching:

[Google Drive Research Tool](#): Research where you are writing.

[Feedly](#): Load up this RSS reader according to topic, and always have fresh research and ideas available.

[Do a Site:Search](#): Research in a specific site.

[Percent Change Calculator](#): Get help with troublesome calculations.

[Search In A Giphy](#): Find the perfect animated GIF

Creating Powerful Images For Your Content

Content without images is like a sailboat without wind. It doesn't go far. Articles with images get [94% more views](#) that those that have none. Of course, not all images are created equal. [HubSpot](#) has come up with some simple tips to make sure your images pull the most weight possible:

- i. **Use real people.** People like to look at other people. Research has shown we'll look at pictures of people more than any text. Whenever possible, use images that have people in them. Be sure you have permission to use the images or that the people in the photos (if you took them yourself) have given you permission to use their image. Traditional stock photos of people aren't as effective, as we've been trained to ignore stock photos.
- ii. **Put text with photos.** People will be more likely to remember your text information if an image is accompanying it.
- iii. **Make sure images load quickly.** Image loading time affects SEO, but it also affects whether people will stick around or not. About half of web users want a 2-second load time or they leave, according to [Akamai](#), so if your images are too slow, they've actually done the opposite of what you wanted them to do.
- iv. **Make pictures from data.** Create graphics that are visual versions of your data, and readers will love you for it.
- v. **Use great images.** Shoddy images, pixelation, poor composition, and anything clearly amateur or low-end will destroy your credibility. You must use high quality imagery and design.
- vi. **Use images for leads.** Images are more than just a photo at the top of a blog post. Use them to increase leads for your call-to-action. Images help persuade.

- vii. **Image location matters.** [Buffer](#) suggests that an image to the right or left of the leading paragraph will get people to read the article.
- viii. **Use images based on content length.** HubSpot suggests using one image for every 350 words. While this is a rule of thumb, the idea is to not use too many or too few. Find what works for you, but do use more than one image per blog post. According to [Orbit Media](#), 44.5% of bloggers typically do.

Tools For Creating Images:

[Canva](#): Powerful cloud-based tool that makes creating images and graphics for blogs, social media, and more absolutely simple.

[Skitch](#): Create screenshots, and add annotation marks or arrows, easily.

[ThingLink](#): Create graphics that have interactive hotspots to link to other content.

[Infogr.am](#): Create infographics easily.

[Meme Generator](#): If you need to create a meme quickly, this site will help you do it.

[Haiku Deck](#): Create beautiful presentations and slide decks easily.

[Visual.ly](#): A full-service company that provides you with top-shelf image branding for a variety of content types and needs.

Hiring Outside Content Creators

Hiring content creators outside of your team (or besides yourself, if you are a solo marketer) is always an option. Whether you turn to guest bloggers or paid writers, you must be sure that the content is high quality and that you keep an eye on the sites they link to. You don't want to damage your brand in the eyes of search engines because a content creator was gaming the system with bad links or anchor text.

How do you find content creators?

- i. **Find blogs you like.** Look at the writers of blogs you read. Contact the contributors whose style would fit your brand and ask if they'd be interested in writing for you.
- ii. **Let readers know you're looking for content.** This is probably going to be the least successful method, as guest blogging has become overrun with spammers. However, creating a "write for us" page is still an option.
- iii. **Look to social media.** Do you have followers on social media that you engage with? See if they have a blog, and check out their work. Consider asking them if they would be interested in writing for your blog.
- iv. **Use apps and services.** There are several services that help match writers with brands, and I've included them here. Keep in mind these are writers who will need to be paid, so you'll want to have a budget in place.

Tools For Finding Content Creators:

[Contently](#): A service that matches up great content creators with brands to help them tell their stories, including a custom project management and workflow dashboard.

[Skyword](#): Businesses can connect with a variety of content services, including some stock imagery.