14 Little Things to Make Your Content Better

*Pssst: I did a webinar about this. Watch the recording *here*.*

Great content is all about a great idea. It's also about the production quality. I can't give much advice about video or audio, but I write a **lot**. These are my favorite little tweaks to improve content quality, reader happiness, and performance.
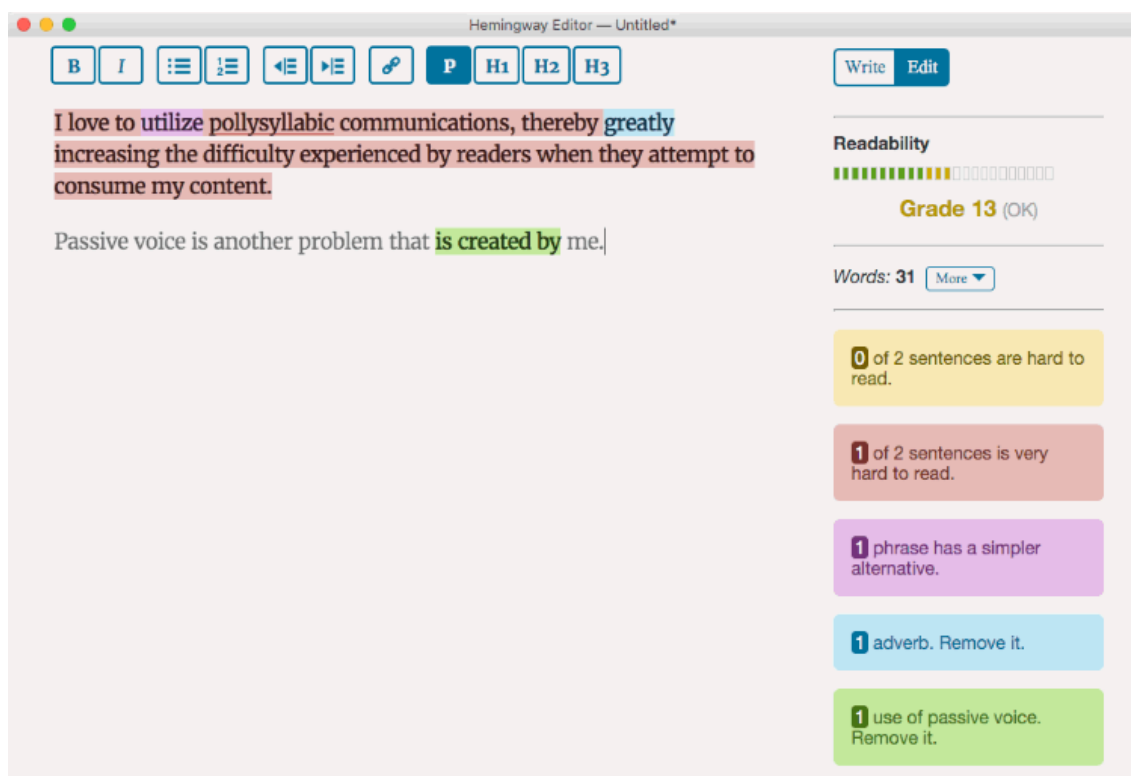
All these tips assume that you can edit your own content but not the larger page template or code that drives it. They're easy, straightforward standards that, when applied, make content greater:

1. Simplify Your Language

I love to utilize pollysyllabic communications, thereby greatly increasing the difficulty experienced by readers when they attempt to consume my content.

Passive voice is another problem that is created by me…

A tool like Hemingway points out hard-to-read sentences, passive voice and other little traps. If you can't find a good editor, it's the next best thing.

If your writing is just a little bit clearer, the audience's perception of it skyrockets.

Never, ever, ever trust a computer to do your editing. Use it as a guide and a check, but review changes before you accept them. Unless you want to get into someone's list of hilarious autocorrect mistakes.

2. Proofread

It's true that you can fix typos after you publish. Still, it's pretty embarrassing when you, I don't know, type something like this:
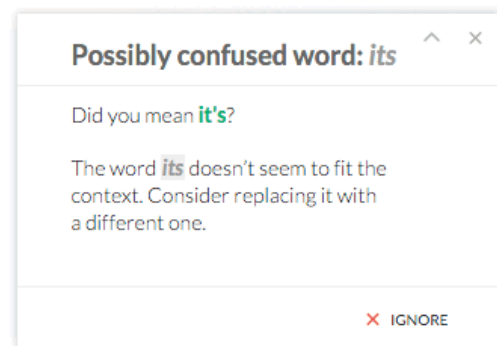
"Still, its pretty embarrasing when you…"

Ironically, that's exactly what I did while typing this.

http://www.grammarly.com caught both mistakes for me:

It's a good automated proofreader that would have saved me a lot of heartbreak when I did print advertising. A human proofreader is still better. But Grammarly is good.

Catch a few small mistakes and you put the polish on your hard work.

See above warning

3. Use Smart Quotes

Computers and web pages default to straight quotes:

He said "hi there"
The squid answered 'yo'

That's good for code, but it's terrible typography for most content. Be sure to use smart quotes:

He said "hi there"
The squid answered 'yo'

This isn't as hard and scary as it might seem. If you're using a tool like WordPress in visual mode, it should convert straight to smart quotes for you. If you use Markdown, most converters will do the same.

If you type your blog posts in plain text, type the entities to get the character:

To get…	Type…
'	‘
'	’
"	“
"	”

It seems like a little thing, right? Who cares about smart versus straight quotes? It **is** a little thing: A little thing that helps build an aura of legitimacy and quality around your content.

4. Use the Right Symbols

There are a bunch of other symbols that look better when you use their entities:

	To get…	Type…
Ellipsis	…	…
Ampersand	&	&
en dash	–	–
em dash	—	—
Copyright symbol	©	©
Trademark symbol	™	™

There are a lot more symbols to learn. They all make your content look a lot better.

Also, if you want to learn just enough typography to create great content, have a look at Butterick's Practical Typography. Amazing.

5. Use Real Paragraphs

You can create paragraphs two ways.

First, you can write paragraphs that use hard line breaks, like this:

```
If any city was going to survive The Fall, it was Aventine.
Built on bedrock high above the waters of The Gap, she has access
to an enormous aquifer from within the city. The Great Lady, as she's
called, is surrounded by smooth stone walls 70 feet high and
9 feet thick at the base. The gates are built from metal and
giant timbers and slide, rather than turning on hinges.
<br />
The city climbs up the bluff. A single main road leads in
through the Eastern Gates. Trade goods from Dirion and
other cities come in the gate. Goods that arrive via
the northern docks go out. A smaller road leads in
through the southern gate, then across the city to the docks.
Local farmers come in that gate to sell their
wares at the docks.
```

Which then looks like this:

If any city was going to survive The Fall, it was Aventine. Built on bedrock high above the waters of The Gap, she has access to an enormous aquifer from within the city. The Great Lady, as she's called, is surrounded by smooth stone walls 70 feet high and 9 feet thick at the base. The gates are built from metal and giant timbers and slide, rather than turning on hinges.
The city climbs up the bluff. A single main road leads in through the Eastern Gates. Trade goods from Dirion and other cities come in the gate. Goods that arrive via the northern docks go out. A smaller road leads in through the southern gate, then across the city to the docks. Local farmers come in that gate to sell their wares at the docks.

Oops. You can use two line breaks to create more space between the paragraphs, but the result depends on your site's line spacing settings.

Or, you can create them the right way, using paragraph elements:

```
<p>If any city was going to survive The Fall, it was Aventine.
Built on bedrock high above the waters of The Gap, she has access
to an enormous aquifer from within the city. The Great Lady, as she's
called, is surrounded by smooth stone walls 70 feet high and
```

```
9 feet thick at the base. The gates are built from metal and
giant timbers and slide, rather than turning on hinges.</p>

<p>The city climbs up the bluff. A single main road leads in
through the Eastern Gates. Trade goods from Dirion and
other cities come in the gate. Goods that arrive via
the northern docks go out. A smaller road leads in
through the southern gate, then across the city to the docks.
Local farmers come in that gate to sell their
wares at the docks.</p>
```

Which will look like this:

If any city was going to survive The Fall, it was Aventine. Built on bedrock high above the waters of The Gap, she has access to an enormous aquifer from within the city. The Great Lady, as she's called, is surrounded by smooth stone walls 70 feet high and 9 feet thick at the base. The gates are built from metal and giant timbers and slide, rather than turning on hinges.

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Your site's stylesheets will automatically create the spacing the designers intended.

Text in a paragraph element can managed and formatted across devices, screen sizes and context. If a designer changes the paragraph typography, spacing or anything else, your content will follow suit. If you use hard breaks, the designer will have to edit by hand, swearing at you the entire time.

Browsers can more easily flow paragraph elements. And, paragraph elements are just **tidier**.

WordPress and most other respectable content management systems will do this for you. Just use a regular line break instead of shift-return.

6. Use Real Lists

You can create lists two ways, too.

You can create them by typing in numbers or bullets and using hard line breaks, like this:

1. This is the first item
2. This is another item
3. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipisicing elit. Saepe similique, facere quibusdam ipsa, veritatis necessitatibus rem natus doloribus officia modi, a tempore eum dolor ipsam voluptatibus, dolore ratione nam exercitationem!

That looks awful. There's no hanging indent, so the text for number 3 wraps. Plus, the list items aren't spaced.

Here's the other option:

1. This is the first item
2. This is the second item
3. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipisicing elit. Tempora in numquam nam amet commodi, quas necessitatibus, ab quisquam doloribus dolorem voluptatum repellat. Corporis officiis fuga sunt, sint repellendus odit quas.

So much better. To do that, use this code:

```
<ol>
        <li>This is the first item</li>
        <li>This is the second item</li>
        <li>Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur
        adipisicing elit. Tempora in numquam nam amet
        commodi, quas necessitatibus, ab quisquam
        doloribus dolorem voluptatum repellat.
        Corporis officiis fuga sunt, sint repellendus
        odit quas.</li>
</ol>
```

If you want to use bullets instead of numbers, replace 'ol' with 'ul'

Trivia: The 'u' stands for "unordered" and the 'o' for "ordered." So 'ul' is "unordered list." 'ol' is "ordered list." You are now a nerd.

WordPress and most other content management tools will create numbered and bulleted lists for you. In visual mode, look for these buttons:
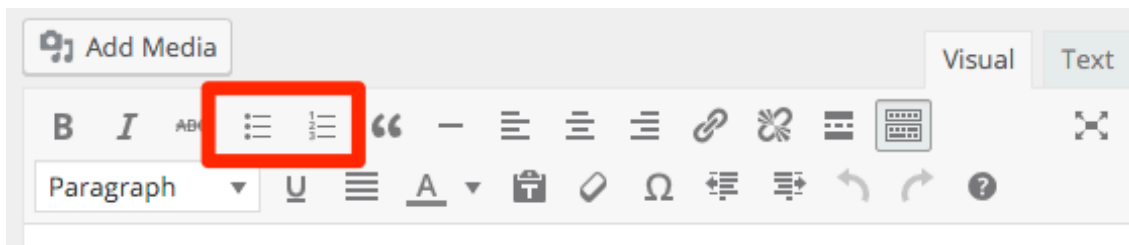
list-items-wordpress-visual

To create lists in visual mode, use these buttons

In text mode, look for these:

list-items-wordpress-text

To create lists in text mode, use these buttons

7. 5–7 Lines/Paragraph

Keep your paragraphs to 5–7 lines or less. On a screen—particularly on a small screen—people have a really hard time reading longer paragraphs. Compare this:

text-no-paragraphs

That's a long paragraph. Ick.

To this:

A quick catch-up, in case you didn't know: This whole internet thing looks to be more than a fad. It's also stuffed with content that ranges from amazing, world-changing stuff to the worst mental sewage imaginable.

The only tools that let us really sift through it all? Search engines. Yes, I *know* there are other gadgets and apps. But search engines absolutely dominate, and that won't change any time soon. In spite of our complaining, they do a pretty darned good job.

So, let's assume that search engines will continue to be the internet's utility: We treat it like electricity. If you don't believe me, imagine what would happen if the world had no Google for, say, 48 hours. Total. Hysteria. We turned 'Google' into a verb, for Heaven's sake.

But there's a problem. To function at scale, search engines had to over-simplify. They live in a world driven by links and words. Nothing else. That leads to some weird assumptions:

text-with-paragraphs

Paragraphs = so much better

Which would you rather read?

8. Use Headings

Try to avoid having more than 3–4 paragraphs in a row without a heading.

I know, this is arbitrary. Why not 5 paragraphs? Or 10? Because 3–4 seems more comfortable to me. Try different numbers for yourself. But break up your content with headings. Use headings to group and organize your content. It makes it far easier to read.

For example, have a look at this:

Ever write something really great, see it hit the top of the rankings, and then watch it drop when copycats write knockoffs that rival the script of Sharknado? You've been victimized by search engines' assumption that new is generally better.

Google's just started trying to deal with this by showing in-depth articles. Which, as I'll point out in a minute, is really another form of dispersed citation.

Until now, though, it's been all about the freshest stuff. Which leads to all sorts of silliness, since some of the best information around was written before the 1990s, when we all forgot how to spell.

The simple fact that we know we're being observed changes our behavior with respect to words and links. It's impossible for search engines to get a truly 'natural' picture of those two critical factors.

Any time you have a system with limited, largely artificial inputs and a vast audience of people shoving to get in, you're going to get folks trying to game it.

So, what do we do? We run out and start cranking out guest posts so poorly written they'd make your 2nd-grade grammar teacher cry. That, we think, will get us lots of links.

text-no-headings

No headings makes text really hard to follow

A little hard to follow. How about if we do this, instead:

New is better

Ever write something really great, see it hit the top of the rankings, and then watch it drop when copycats write knockoffs that rival the script of Sharknado? You've been victimized by search engines' assumption that new is generally better.

Google's just started trying to deal with this by showing in-depth articles. Which, as I'll point out in a minute, is really another form of dispersed citation.

Until now, though, it's been all about the freshest stuff. Which leads to all sorts of silliness, since some of the best information around was written before the 1990s, when we all forgot how to spell.

Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle will not apply

The simple fact that we know we're being observed changes our behavior with respect to words and links. It's impossible for search engines to get a truly 'natural' picture of those two critical factors.

Any time you have a system with limited, largely artificial inputs and a vast audience of people shoving to get in, you're going to get folks trying to game it.
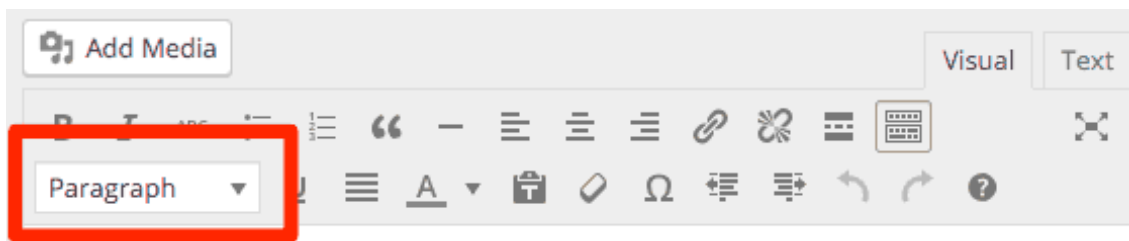
text-headings

Headlings make text easier to follow and scan

Much better.

9. Use Real Headings

Use **headings** to create headings. That means using this drop-down to select 'heading' in WordPress and most other CMSes:

heading-button

Create proper headings with this button

And it means using this code if you're writing in raw text/html:

<h1>Heading text here</h1> for a level 1 heading. Replace the '1' with a '2' for a level 2 heading, and so on.

Don't create headings by bolding your text by hand and making it bigger. That leaves a huge formatting headache, and messes up line and paragraph spacing your designer carefully set up.

10. Resize Your Images

Use Photoshop, Preview (on the Mac) or Paint (on the PC) to resize your images. Check with your designer before you do this, though. Some sites use special image formatting. If so, you may not want to resize the images at all.
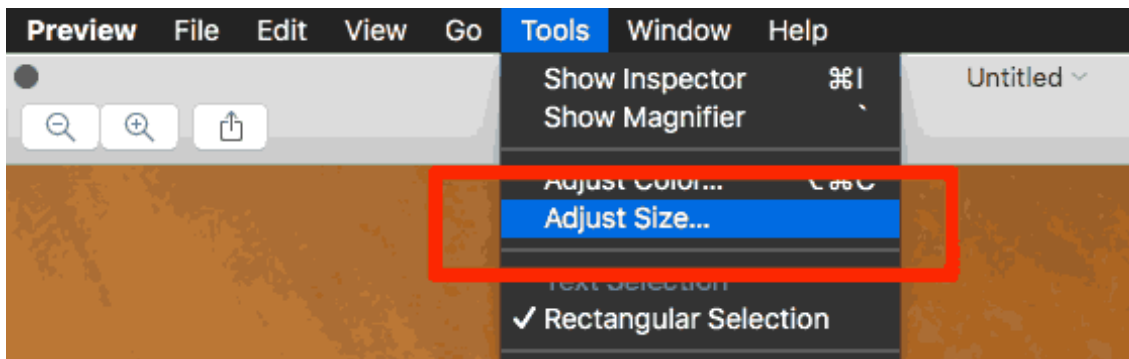
resize-preview

Adjust image size in Preview - it's easy!

Yes, you can squish the image smaller by using the height and width attributes. But that forces the reader's web browser to download the larger file, slowing down page load time. Slow load times frustrate your readers before they read. Not good.

11. Compress Your Images

Compress your images, too. We've written a whole guide to image compression here. Check it out.

12. Write Your Description Tag

A lot of content management systems use the first few sentences of your page as the default description meta tag. That's great, but it leads to some awful results. This article either has no description tag, or a bad one. That leaves it up to Google, and means a non-descriptive tag:

No description tag. Which search listing would you click?

That's a shame, because readers are less likely to click through and read what you wrote. You took some chances chasing those feral goats.

Write your description tag. Make it 150–160 characters.

Don't Succumb to Link Madness

Don't start linking to every single relevant key phrase in your post. Google knows what you're trying to do. And it's hard to read.

Instead of trying to guess "right" number of links (there's no such thing), follow the next two rules:

13. If You Cite, Link

If you cite someone else's work, link to it. *Don't just name them. Link to it.* On the web, links are citations. Simply saying "Jane wrote this" is not.

Oh, and use a followed link. Nofollowing citations is like leaving a penny for a tip. It's not just stingy. It's a little tacky.

14. If It's Useful, Link

If you mention something that includes a useful resource, link to that, too. Once. And it really needs to be useful. "Useful" means that the reader will click that link and say "Hey, thanks, that's useful." If they'll click the link and say "Where the hell is my back button," forget it.

Reduce Distance From Perfect

All these tips reduce distance from perfect. By doing that, they:

- Improve the reader's return on time invested
- Increase the chance they'll read more
- Increase the chance they'll share
- Increase the chance they'll subscribe

If you're creating content purely for SEO (sigh) then these improvements are a win. They're also sneaky: These little tweaks mean you deliver better content on every channel. That's a future-proof, cross-channel win that helps you grow.

Got any other tips? Post them below.

I did a Slideshare about this. It was popular. So I'm going into a little more detail in this post. If you want the slideshare, get it here.