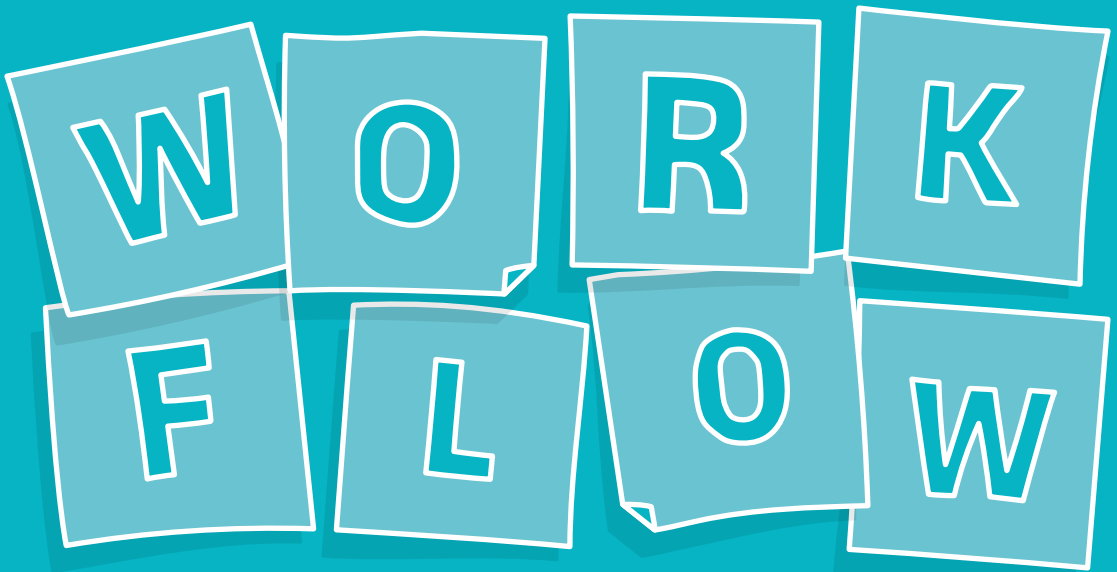


A Guide to Content Production Planning



by Liam King

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What is content production planning?

Content production planning helps you to establish a fluid workflow around the creation and management of your project content.

Everyday we work with agencies and their clients, or in house teams, who are trying to produce content for their new websites.

We know just how hard it can be to get good quality content produced and published on time.

Of course, every project is different, but we've been around long enough to see the same basic challenges crop up again and again.

We've put our heads together and rolled all the best stuff into this guide to share with you.

So before you take another step forward in your project, have a read. It's going to save you from a few headaches.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is for nice agency folks and in-house teams who work on web projects and want to produce quality content.

You'll get the most value from this guide if you typically build sites with hundreds of pages, rather than thousands.

Table of Contents

Chapter One

Put content at the heart of your web project

Find out what bad things happen when content production isn't treated with the respect it deserves. Then, learn what to do about it.

Chapter Two

The content production process

Get familiar with the typical stages in the content assembly line. What happens when? How long does it take? Who is responsible?

Chapter Three

How to design a content production process

Learn how to collaborate with your team to develop content processes that produce good quality content, on time.

Chapter Four

Define your content 'hats'

What roles and skills does a great website project content team need? We'll tell you.

Chapter Five

Implement your content production process

Lessons learned and proven techniques for helping you achieve a smooth content production experience.

“As you plan your production process, be sure to build in a way to establish goals for each piece of content. You can use a template for this or even a simple questionnaire. If you set goals before the research and writing start, the rest of the process will be much faster. Clearly articulated goals help your writer know what questions to ask and what to write. They give your approvers and subject experts a framework for evaluating the content. They even give your copy editor a better idea of what changes should be made.”

MICHAEL METTS

Designer, Writer, and Speaker




Chapter One

Put content at the heart of your web project



Bad things happen when content is treated as an afterthought...

- › Projects run late (as you wait for the content to catch up);
- › Which means budgets blow-out as the project churns;
- › Which means poor quality content gets rushed through;
- › Which means poor design decisions are made without knowledge of the content; 
- › Which means the overall user experience suffers;
- › Which means the site's business objectives fail;
- › Which makes the project a failure.

The Inconvenient Truth

Producing good content for a new website is a big challenge. If you and your team don't treat it with due respect, the entire project is at risk.

Rules of engagement

Working together, you can overcome content chaos with some simple rules:

We will:

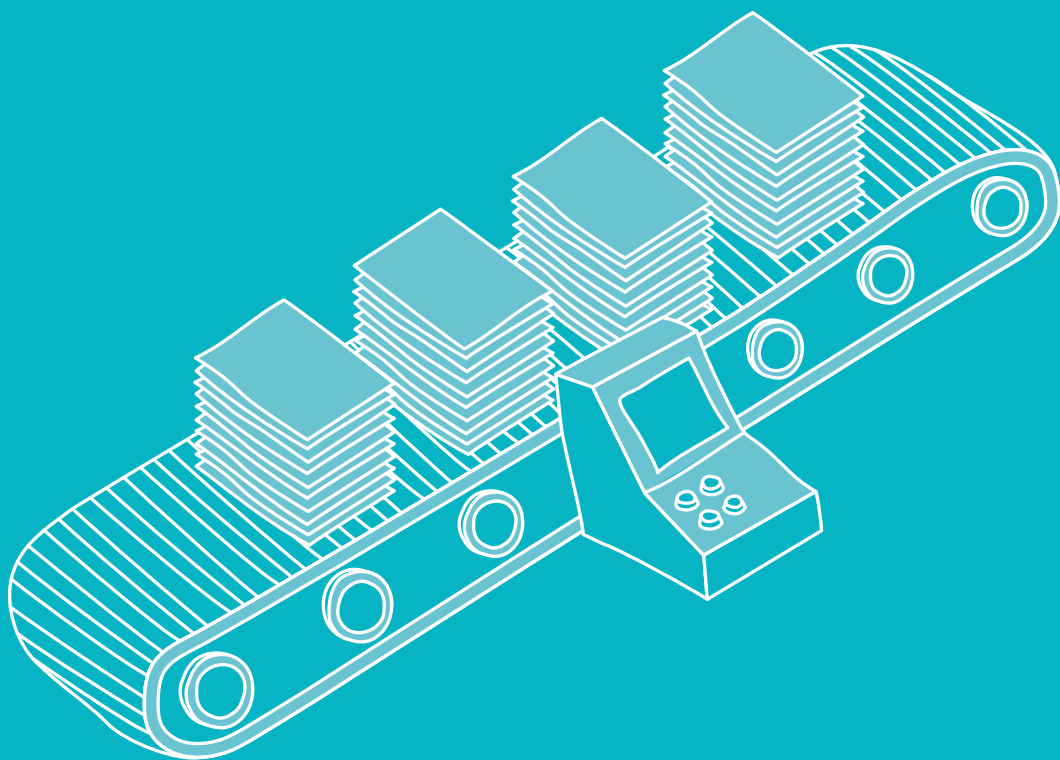
- ✓ Prioritise the content needed at launch, and publish more in follow-up phases
- ✓ Identify key people early and assign Subject Experts to content ASAP
- ✓ Archive as much of the existing site content as possible before beginning
- ✓ Minimise review points and be clear on the exact remit of each reviewer
- ✓ Stagger content production to reduce bottlenecks (like a factory assembly line)

We will not:

- ✗ Underestimate the time it takes to produce content (it always takes longer than you expect!)
- ✗ Migrate all of the current site's content (this is the time for a Spring clean!)
- ✗ Dismiss hiring professional web Copywriters because of cost
- ✗ Start writing until we have a digital style guide
- ✗ Allow reviewers to make direct edits to the content

Chapter Two

The content production process



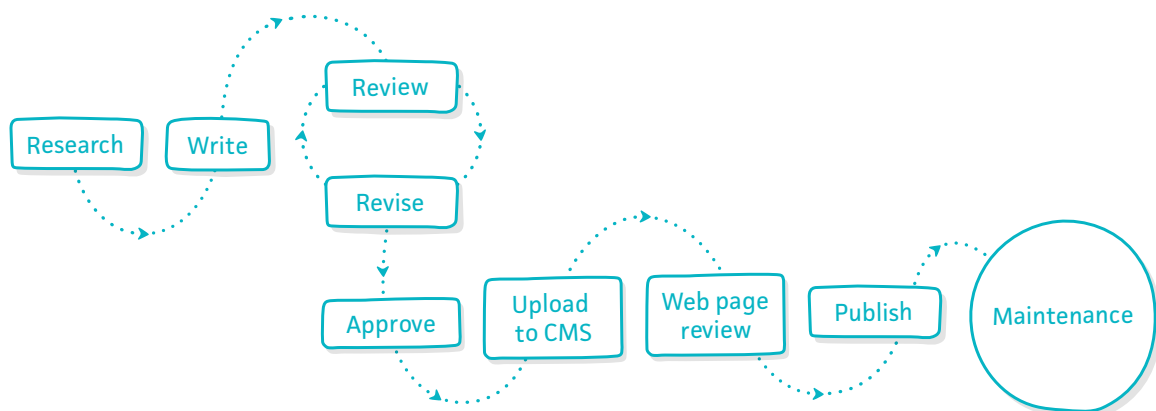
“Build in a little extra time to produce those first few pages so you get messaging, voice and tone spot on. It’s easier to fine tune these things at the start of the process rather than at the end.”

SALLY BAGSHAW

Content Strategist



A content workflow



After you have agreed on the website's goals, and established what content is required (IA), it's time to start producing the content.

Bear in mind, this process may vary from project to project or client to client.

Some sites will need a legal review. Others may require the CEO's sign-off on every page. Don't forget translation for multi-lingual websites too - be prepared to adapt the stages in your process.

It can often feel like a factory assembly line, as each piece moves its way through the many stages towards eventual publication.

We've gone through a likely content production process to give you a better idea of what stages to expect.

How long does it take to produce a single web page?

Well that depends! A reasonably detailed info page on a university or council site could easily take 10+ hours of total effort to produce and publish. A short product blurb page should take less, but an important, much-discussed, landing page could blow out to more.

Things do speed up with practice and there are efficiencies of scale on larger sites. Never underestimate the effort needed to produce quality content. [!\[\]\(2bdfe261b986065ee0ac76460d6528c9_img.jpg\)](#)

“Include templates for each content type in your style guide so writers produce content consistently and to ensure no elements are missed.”

SALLY BAGSHAW

Content Strategist



Don't start content production without a good content style guide



CLICK TO TWEET

1. Research

Writer (usually!)

Amount of effort: 2 hours

Get briefed by the Senior Editor or Content Strategist on the page's communication goals. Then review existing content, third party sources and consult the Subject Experts to pull together the info, facts, quotes, and materials to write the page.

2. Write

Writer

Amount of effort: 2 - 4 hours

The Writer now has what they need to produce the actual content. But remember: it takes time to develop the structure and apply the body copy, headings, descriptions, snippets, captions, call to action labels, and links.

The content team may also need to produce images and other media at this stage.

Do you have a style guide yet?

A good content style guide will cover the tone of voice for your digital content, house style rules, and writing for the web best practice. Don't start content production without one.

3. Review

Subject Expert / Senior Editor

Amount of effort: 1 - 2 hours

Content reviews are an important and often difficult stage in the process. Depending on the project you may want to break this stage up into multiple steps.

Typically Subject Experts will be asked to check the content is factually accurate, on message, and complete. The Senior Editor (role) then checks the content is well written, consistent with other content, and applies the style guide and house rules.

4. Revise

Writer

Amount of effort: 0 - 2 hours

The Writer interprets the Reviewer's feedback, updates the copy, and reissues a new version.

The Writer may need to speak with the Reviewer for clarification to avoid the risk of the content getting stuck in a loop.

Be clear about what to review

Content stalls at the review stages when stakeholders are unclear on their role and the remit of other reviewers.

5. Approve

Subject Expert

Amount of effort: 0 - 1 hours

The reissued content is reviewed for approval / sign-off. It's then ready to be uploaded to the CMS.

6. Upload to CMS

CMS Editor

Amount of effort: 1 - 2 hours

Populate the CMS page with the approved content, adding links, images, files, feature content, and meta data (taxonomy labels and descriptions).

Only at this stage can you see how well the content works in its website template. A good Digital Producer or Site Editor will adjust and format the content to work best.

7. Web page review / sign-off

Subject Expert / Senior Editor

Amount of effort: 1 hour

Time for quality assurance: Is the formatting suitable? Is the page consistent with other pages? Do the links work? Did any typos creep in during the upload?

The page may also need to be signed-off by the Subject Expert or Project Owner who will want to be satisfied the content achieves its brief.

The content is then ready to be published.

8. Publish

CMS Editor

Amount of effort: n/a

Web pages in a project are usually published when the entire site is deployed (launched).

Publishing is just day one

Ensure there is a plan for maintaining the site's content after the project finishes. In the hurry to publish content for a new site, this critical planning is often overlooked and the site soon deteriorates.

“One of the most important things you can do for your content producers is to help them understand your strategy, from what business goals you’re trying to achieve to what your users want and expect from you to why you decided to create the content you’re asking them to produce. Then, give them tools to help them create the kind of content you’re looking for. For example, a simple editorial checklist of desired content characteristics helps to keep your strategy top-of-mind.”

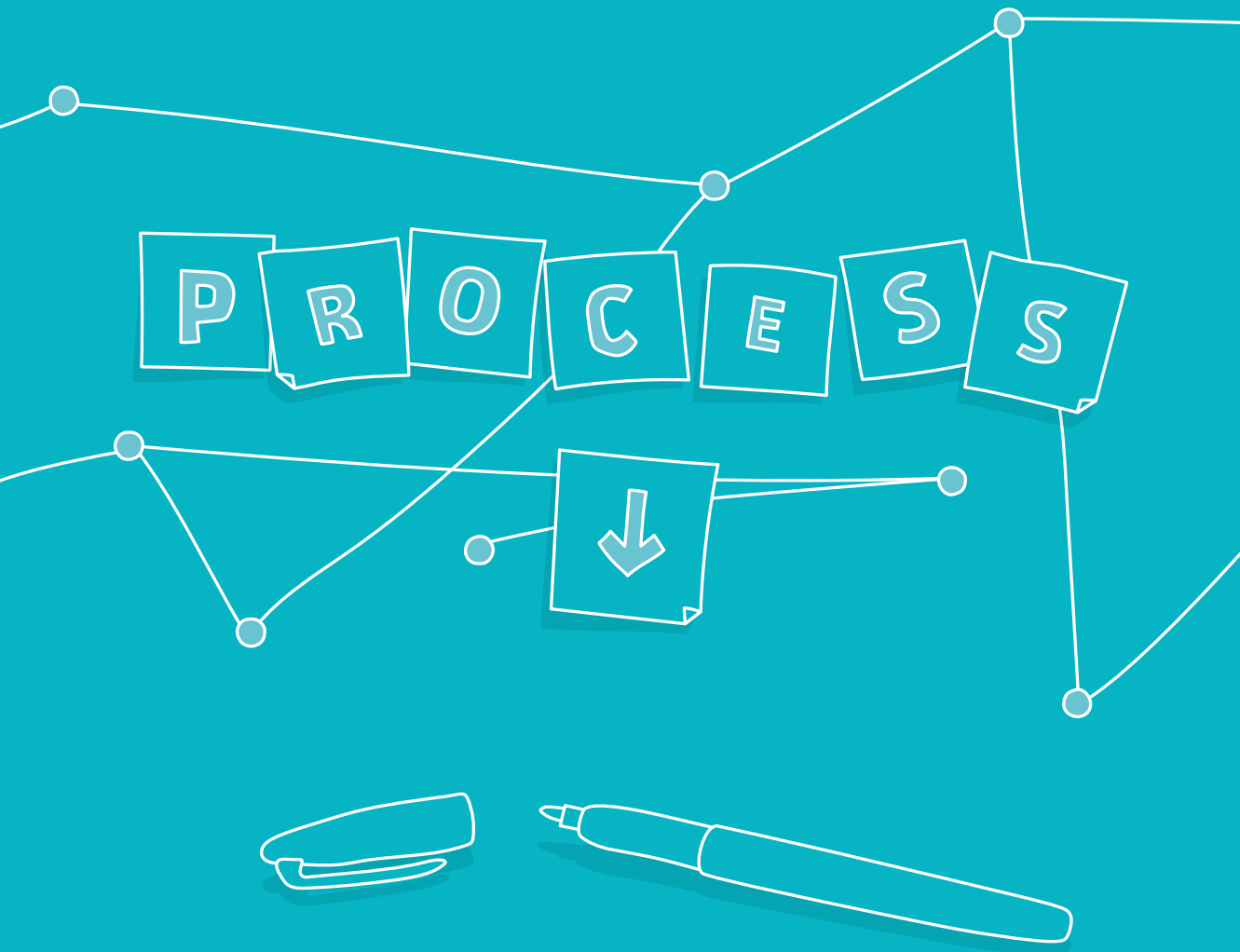
MEGHAN CASEY

Author and Content Strategist



Chapter Three

How to design a content production process



Getting your hands dirty

Every website project is different. You need a process that's up to the job or you will struggle to produce good quality content on time.

So take the time, as early as possible, to design a process around your website project.

Producing the content will still be a big challenge, but you'll be better prepared with your plan.

We've found workshops to be the best way to kick-off this planning process.

Running the workshop

1. Prepare the workshop

- Book a meeting room for a few hours
- Invite the Project Manager, Project Owner and the Senior Editor
- Invite one or two reps from each of these groups: Writers and Producers, Subject Experts, and the Digital Producers
- Bring plenty of post-its, pens, and some big sheets of paper

2. Map your own process

- Pick a key content type you expect to have on the new site, such as events, product pages, how-to guides
- In groups, map out a suitable production process to get one piece of content published on the new site

3. Assign responsibility

- Annotate each stage on your sheet with the person or role responsible for it, such as Copywriter or Senior Editor
- Mark any stages that don't have a clear owner
- Ask: "Do the labelled people know they are responsible?"

Tips

Calculate the actual man-hours of work (Effort) required to complete the stage rather than the span of time (the Duration) it takes for the stage to be completed, although both are important when planning resourcing.

4. Identify risks in the process

Review and mark each stage with potential risks

Ask these questions:

- Are there lots of people with a say in the content?
- Is an unfair workload falling on one person?
- Do we have the required skills? Where might things get political and contentious?

5. Estimate hours of effort

- Attempt to estimate how much effort (as fractions of hours) each stage could realistically take to perform – write the agreed number against each stage
- Total up all the stages at the end of the process
- Multiply the total with the anticipated pages on the new site to get an estimate of total effort for all your content

6. Present the process

- Each group walks the whole team through their process (on a sheet of paper) and opens up for discussion
- Video the presentations so that any absent stakeholders can keep up with the discussion

“In order to successfully model content, we must create content environments that stand up to the pressures of production. In some organizations, this is as simple as building organized templates for different content types. Other organizations might not be able to predict their production needs with any certainty, and instead must create systems that can accommodate volatility and change.

But we can only learn these things by spending time in and around the production of content. When we conduct user research, we must remember that the writers, editors, and designers that enact our models are actually some of the most important users we have — and that all of the principles of user experience apply to them, too. Content strategists that don’t spend a significant portion of their time accounting for how things will operate during production and maintenance are likely to underestimate or misunderstand the challenges of enacting their strategies.”

DEVIN ASARO

Senior Content Strategist



Chapter Four

Define your content ‘hats’



To produce quality
content for your site you
need a skilled content
team



CLICK TO TWEET

Roles and accountability

To produce quality content for a new site, your team needs to build a project content team with the skills to play each of the core roles or 'hats'.

For smaller web projects it is common for individuals to wear several hats: the Senior Editor will often have to juggle writing duties for example.

Watch out for bottlenecks if one person has too many responsibilities.

1. Copywriter

Skills

- › Writing for the web experience
- › Ability to apply style guide
- › Domain knowledge (ideally)

Responsibilities

- › Research and consult Subject Expert
- › Draft and revise quality content
- › Source relevant media and populate content templates

Copywriters may be existing staff, from your agency, or a third party.

“Your content production process is totally at the mercy of your writing staff. Unfortunately, most businesses don’t have a staff. “Writers” are often a loosely assembled team of marketers, interns, and project managers brought together by a mandate to “create fresh content for the website.” Therefore, many teams try to shoehorn in editorial techniques that won’t work for the individuals involved. The backbone of any solid editorial process is accountability and ownership. If you are the one tasked with assembling a process, it’s your responsibility to ensure the process is effectively carried out. That means working with each individual on your team to determine their strengths. Again - and I know I sound pessimistic, but oftentimes you’re assembling the Bad News Bears of content teams. These are the folks that are good at many things, but often writing is not one of them. The only reason you have access to them is because they have time. Knowing how your writing staff works is essential because then you can put them in positions to succeed. For example, you may have a project manager who hates to write, but LOVES analytics. Boom, that person is now tasked with establishing the KPIs for successful content for your team.”

MATTHEW GROCKI

Principal and Owner of Grass Fed Content



2. Senior Editor

Skills

- › Significant digital communication experience
- › Intimate with the project objectives
- › Domain knowledge (ideal)
- › Relationship with Subject Experts

Responsibilities

- › Review all content
- › Own and enforce the style guide
- › Own the content production process with the Project Managers

Ideally the Senior Editor should be appointed from the team with the authority of “an insider”. This means their intimate understanding of the site’s content is not lost at the end of the project.

3. Subject Expert

Skills

- › The authoritative subject voice
- › Access to accurate information
- › Values communicating the subject
- › Willing partner in the project

Responsibilities

- › Available for research consultation
- › Provide content to the Copywriter
- › Review content for accuracy
- › Ongoing ownership of content after launch (ideal)

4. CMS Editor

Skills

- › Confident with the CMS
- › Experienced at populating page templates

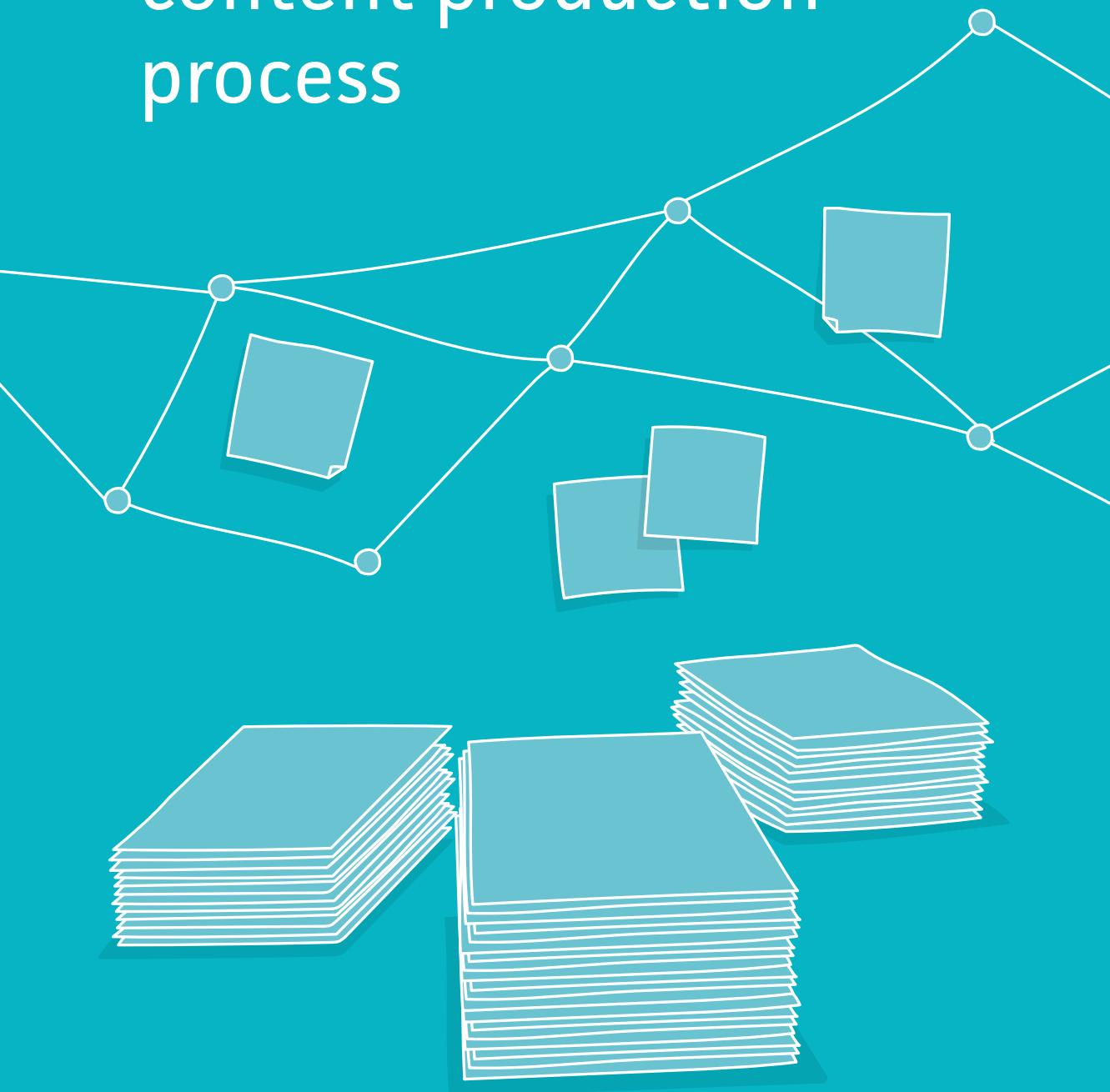
Responsibilities

- › Build page structures from sitemap
- › Import content into CMS
- › Add links, images and files
- › Apply meta data such as taxonomy labels, and search content
- › Format content to work online

The CMS Editor is the person with the ongoing responsibility for maintaining and updating the site's content, having cut their teeth on the CMS during the project.

Chapter Five

Implement your content production process




Get the job done

Once you've designed a content production process for your website project, you still need to deliver the goods. And that's easier said than done!

This proven advice on engaging content owners and prioritising content will help keep everyone on track.

Engage the Subject Experts

Subject Experts will make or break a content production process.  Depending on the process they may be responsible for consultation during research or reviewing content for accuracy and messaging. They may even be asked to write some content.

Support the project content team to identify and engage with the subject experts:

1. List the site's subjects

- Capture each subject as a post it note and stick to the wall
- For a school website the subjects could be 'enrollments', 'facilities', or 'curriculum'. Don't worry about individual pages or assets at this point, you're just interested in the buckets of content

2. Assign experts to subjects

- Try to assign the name of a person who is authoritative, knowledgeable, and responsible for each subject


3. Review nominated experts

- Do all subjects have a nominated expert?
- Is the same name coming up again and again (a potential bottleneck)?
- Are the nominated experts aware of the project and their potential role?

4. Recruit the nominated experts

- Contact each nominated expert to begin setting expectations on their responsibilities, required effort, and project timelines
- Prioritise identifying experts for any unowned subjects

Prioritise the content

It's incredibly important to emphasise quality over quantity to improve the return on your content investment. 

You can help the project team prioritise the content they want in their new site:

1. Prepare a planning session

- Book a room for 2 hours
- Invite the project's content team (that get a say in what to prioritise)
- Print off and stick up your sitemap / list of potential content pages and assets

2. Get prioritising

- Does this content directly support the communication goals for the target audience?
- Is this content unique to this site? (there is little value in generic content)
- Does it need lots of effort to produce? Will it be difficult to maintain?

3. Rinse and repeat

- As the launch gets closer and new content ideas emerge, it is important to continuously prioritise
- Bring the group back together and (re)prioritise the remaining backlog of content
- Record any changes and update the team

Tips

- › The MoSCoW method works well to prioritise content: “We Must / Should / Could / Won’t produce this piece of content for the site launch.”
- › You can use any method or scoring system that is simple to apply and makes the priority clear.

“It’s tempting to complete easier sections of content first so things get ‘ticked off the list’. But be realistic—more complex sections of content will take longer to produce. Make sure the sections you focus on are important to the success of the site.”

SALLY BAGSHAW

Content Strategist



“Content process documents are simultaneously paradigmatic and iterative. That is, there are likely aspects of the planning process that you find don’t work in practice, or which your in-house team flouts in order to get a piece of relevant, topical content pushed through production quickly enough. Digital content production is, by nature, fast-paced and constantly evolving. Track these areas and update your process documents accordingly; after you fought to have intelligent content at the heart of your website project, it’s your responsibility to nurture its growth by advocating for living, collaborative documents that govern its planning, production and maintenance.

Be a responsible guardian of your process documents. One of the most insidious foes of a seamless content production process is petty corruption, which often takes the form of requests with the word “just:” “just a small change,” “just another landing page,” “couldn’t we just add this,” etc. Any one of these requests is small enough that your content team will likely feel miserly to refuse it, but cumulatively, they show breakdowns in your content production. In these cases, having a backlog or a shared spreadsheet, especially through QA and UAT, is not bureaucratic -- it’s necessary to keep your project on schedule and in scope. For example, I recently helped a company push a homepage redesign project live. Long after the window for UAT had closed, I received a list of requests from a business owner who was not able to complete the testing on time. But because the content team had an established, documented process, we were able to prioritize his change requests and mitigate scope creep.”

ANDREW MCKERNAN

Content Strategist

Thanks for reading

Thanks for taking the time out of your busy schedule to check out our guide.

Hopefully you have learned a few things which will help you through the content production process.

If you have any questions, or feedback, for us please email hello@gathercontent.com. We would love to hear from you.

On a final note, good luck with your next project

About the author



Liam King

Liam is Founder of Lagom Strategy, a UK consultancy specialising in UX and sustainable content strategy.

With over a decade of content production and strategy experience in the UK and Australia, Liam has built up a wealth of practical knowledge on how to put content back at the heart of web projects.

Liam was previously Senior UX Architect / Content Strategist with Sydney agency, Digital Eskimo, where he introduced and led the agency's successful content strategy services. Before heading to Australia in 2009, Liam was a Web Producer at the UK Parliament and the Senior Web Editor at the UK Foreign Office.

Liam also has a Masters degree in Web Journalism.



MICHAEL METTS

Designer, Writer, and Speaker

Michael Metts is a designer, writer, and speaker living and working just outside Chicago, Illinois. He specializes in creating a consistent, meaningful narrative for each user experience he works on. His background in writing, editing, and journalism heavily informs his practice.

He's currently Lead UX Writer at Wolfram and in the past, he's spoken at Confab Central, Midwest UX, MinneWebCon, and more.



SALLY BAGSHAW

Content Strategist

Sally is a Brisbane-based content strategist who likes big, messy web redevelopment projects and improving customer service content. A word nerd at heart, she isn't afraid of spreadsheets or metadata but hates the word migration. Read more of her [content strategy musings](#) or follow Sally on Twitter @snappysentences.



MEGHAN CASEY

Author and Content Strategist

Meghan Casey, author of The Content Strategy Toolkit: Methods, Guidelines, and Templates for Getting Content Right and Lead Content Strategist, Brain Traffic



ANDREW MCKERNAN

Content Strategist

Andrew McKernan is the content strategist at NCSA Athletic Recruiting. He's come brand-side from the agency world and has an MFA in fiction to boot, so you might stumble on his writing anywhere. Watch your step. He wants to be your friend: find him on Twitter @andrewmckernan and on LinkedIn.



DEVIN ASARO

Senior Content Strategist

Devin is a Senior Content Strategist at Centerline Digital, where he is currently developing a content strategy for a leading academic research organization. He also hosts In the Making, a podcast exploring the origin stories of people who work in web design. Follow him on Twitter for more thoughts on content strategy, information architecture, and (occasionally) hockey.



MATTHEW GROCKI

Principal and Owner of Grass Fed Content

Matthew is the principal and owner of Grass Fed Content, where he has been challenging organizations to rethink the impact of content on their business. His work focuses on correcting content production inefficiencies and facilitating organizational change.

Matthew has been a content strategy consultant for over 5 years creating content and editorial strategies for NASDAQ OMX, MFS Investments, Dell, Cisco, and Covidien. Prior to consulting, he sat in a windowless office for 12 years and was miserable.

Matthew is an active member in the content strategy community and international speaker. He is frequently featured by many of today's top content strategy blogs and is currently a featured columnist for eContent magazine.



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