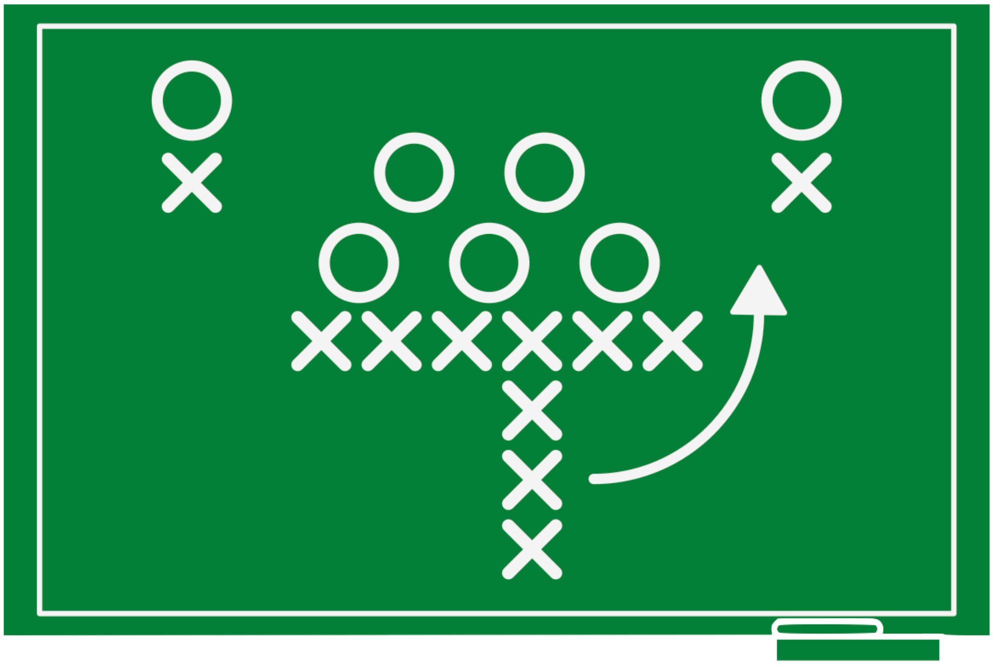
THE TECHNICAL CONTENT MANAGER'S

# PLAYBOOK



Everything you need to produce high-quality technical marketing content

**DRAFT.DEV**

# Introduction

Hey there, my name is Karl and I'm the founder of DRAFT.DEV.

After working with dozens of clients, writing hundreds of blog posts, and editing writers on almost every continent, I realized that I had a lot of experience that I could share with other content managers, editors, and marketers.

**The Technical Content Manager's Playbook** is a collection of resources you can use to consistently produce high-quality, technical content for your blog. In this playbook, you'll get access to:

- A template for creating content briefs
- An Airtable base for setting up a multi-author publishing calendar
- A technical blogging style guide

Along with each of these resources, you'll see how to use them to ensure that **every piece of content you produce is delivered on time and at the quality level you expect.** Creating great technical content is hard, but this playbook will give you a strong start.

**Who is this playbook for?** Anyone who's managing a blog with more than one writer should find this playbook useful. If you work for a company whose target market is software engineers, engineering managers, or technical executives, then you'll get even more value out of this playbook.

We created this book for content managers who:

- Are struggling to find writers that can contribute technical expertise to their blog,
- Have a hard time maintaining a consistent voice or quality, or
- Want to publish more often, but keep running into roadblocks.

If you face any of these challenges or you want to prevent them entirely, read on.

**What is DRAFT.DEV?**

We create technical marketing content designed to reach software developers. To do this, we employ engineers who write content that technical professionals want to read and share.

Learn more at https://draft.dev

**Why are you giving this away for free?** It seems counterintuitive, but when you dive into this playbook, you'll see a glimpse of the work we put into running a best-in-class technical content operation. I'd encourage you to use this playbook to try it for yourself first, but if you ever want to work with us, we're just an email away.

**I want to see better, more useful technical content on the internet.** Content marketing has a bad name in engineering circles, but with the right playbook, more brands could be helping educate the next generation of software engineers. Whether you decide to work with us or not, I hope this playbook inspires you to create something great.

Karl Hughes, Founder of **DRAFT.DEV**
karl@draft.dev

# Part 1: Content Briefs

Not even the best technical writers are mind readers. The goal of a good content brief is to transfer as much knowledge and context from the content manager's brain to the writer's.

After you've decided to pursue a technical content marketing strategy, you need to determine who will produce content for you. You might start off writing everything yourself, but once you start snagging software engineers or hiring freelancers to help you out, you need to start creating briefs.

In this section, I'll show you how to create a great content brief for your writers. Starting with the template below, I'll walk you through each element of the brief so you can make sure your writers understand the goal of each piece of content they produce.

**DOWNLOAD THE CONTENT BRIEF TEMPLATE HERE**

## What's in a Content Brief?

**A content brief is a short document that tells the writer the goal for this piece of content, who it's being written for, and the expected deliverables.** Typically, a content manager will produce briefs for each blog post before adding them to a publishing calendar and assigning a writer.

Your writers might come from a wide range of writing and engineering backgrounds, so while some just *get it* when you hand them a title for an article, most of them will need a little more guidance.

Briefs are also a helpful tool for editors and content managers. If a contributor submits a great piece of writing, but it doesn't answer the brief, it's usually not worth much to your content marketing efforts.

Your content brief should include the following details:

### The Title

While it may change, the working title gives the writer the article's topic and tone. Titles are also a gut check for writers and editors. If any paragraph fails to support the title, you should ask why it made it into the article. Savvy writers will pick up keywords from the title, but you may also instruct them of specific SEO keywords you're targeting in the pitch.

### The Pitch

Freelance journalists typically write a "pitch" to sell an editor on their idea. The brief's pitch accomplishes a similar goal, giving writers a high-level view of what readers will learn. These pitches will vary depending on the type of content you're producing, but you should start to develop a few standard formats. Pitches should answer the "what?" and "why?" questions for each article.

### Assets Delivered

Be clear about what you expect writers to deliver. Include your requirements for the article's word-count and any supporting data, images, or code samples that the writer will need to produce. If you've got several people working on each article, list the team member's name next to each asset they're responsible for.

### Audience

If your writer assumes the article is directed at entry-level developers, but you meant it to be aimed at managers, you're not going to be happy with the outcome. Give writers as much insight into your intended audience as possible, so they write to the appropriate reader.

### Exemplars

Writers often benefit from having one or more exemplars (i.e., example articles) to emulate during the writing process. At DRAFT.DEV, each of our clients has unique expectations, so we try to get sample articles up-front to guide writers to the appropriate tone, style, and technical depth.

### Outline

Finally, your briefs should include an outline of the article. You can let more experienced writers fill in details on their own, but this step is important. It forces you as the content manager to think about the topic with a little more depth before you pass it off to a writer. It also helps keep your writers focused on the right points as they research and write the article.

## A Sample Content Brief

Here's a content brief I prepared for a technical roundup in our DRAFT.DEV sample content plan. This brief outlines a hypothetical blog post detailing 10+ tips for properly securing a MySQL database:

**Title:** Properly Securing Your MySQL Database

**Pitch:** MySQL is one of the most popular relational databases used, but an improperly secured database is a recipe for disaster. Using some well-known database breaches as examples, this article will go through some of the recommended ways to harden security on a MySQL database instance. Include code samples for each item in the list as well as specific references to vulnerabilities that the item helps eliminate. By the end of this article, readers should have tangible steps they can take to improve their database's security configuration.

**Assets to Deliver:** ~1500-word article, code samples

**Audience:** Readers are assumed to know about MySQL, relational databases, and basic database administration. This article will link to companion articles that cover each topic in more detail.

**Exemplars:** The content from this page from the MySQL docs is good but not very reader-friendly. This article has a better presentation, but it doesn't include code samples or much technical depth. We'd like something that has the technical depth of the MySQL docs with a more reader-centric presentation.

**Outline:**

Introduction
- What is MySQL? (briefly)
- Why security matters for your database

Security Tips
1. Remove unused and default users
2. Restrict access to your private network
3. Create a new user for each application and developer with access

4. Check server file privileges
5. Upgrade to the latest version
6-10. Note: To be added by the author

Conclusion

Re-emphasize the importance of database security
Give readers a final summary of what they learned
Mention our call to action

**DOWNLOAD THE CONTENT BRIEF TEMPLATE HERE**

This brief’s expectations are clear, even to a new writer, but we still left some leeway for the author to add their own ideas.

You might think that adding this level of detail to every brief you create is a lot of work, and you’d be right. It means that as the content manager, you need to do some research, understand the topic, and think through possible questions a writer might have. Most content managers don’t make this investment, and that’s why they often struggle to get great results from their writers.

## Part 2: Publishing Calendar

If you want to publish new content consistently, you have to plan for it. A publishing calendar will help hold you and your writers accountable for delivering content consistently.

Once you’re publishing more than once or twice per week and have a few contributors, you will need some way to keep track of all the content you are planning, writing, editing, and promoting. While you could start with a spreadsheet or Trello board, we’ve found the flexibility and power of Airtable to be ideal for creating a scalable, multi-author publishing calendar.

**What is Airtable?**

Airtable is a free content management platform that gives you the power of a database with the ease of use of a spreadsheet. In addition to integrations with third-party tools like Zapier, Airtable has apps, automations, and blocks that make the platform even more powerful.

In this section, I'll show you the key elements of a publishing calendar and give you access to a template of the publishing calendar we use at DRAFT.DEV to manage hundreds of pieces of content and dozens of writers simultaneously.

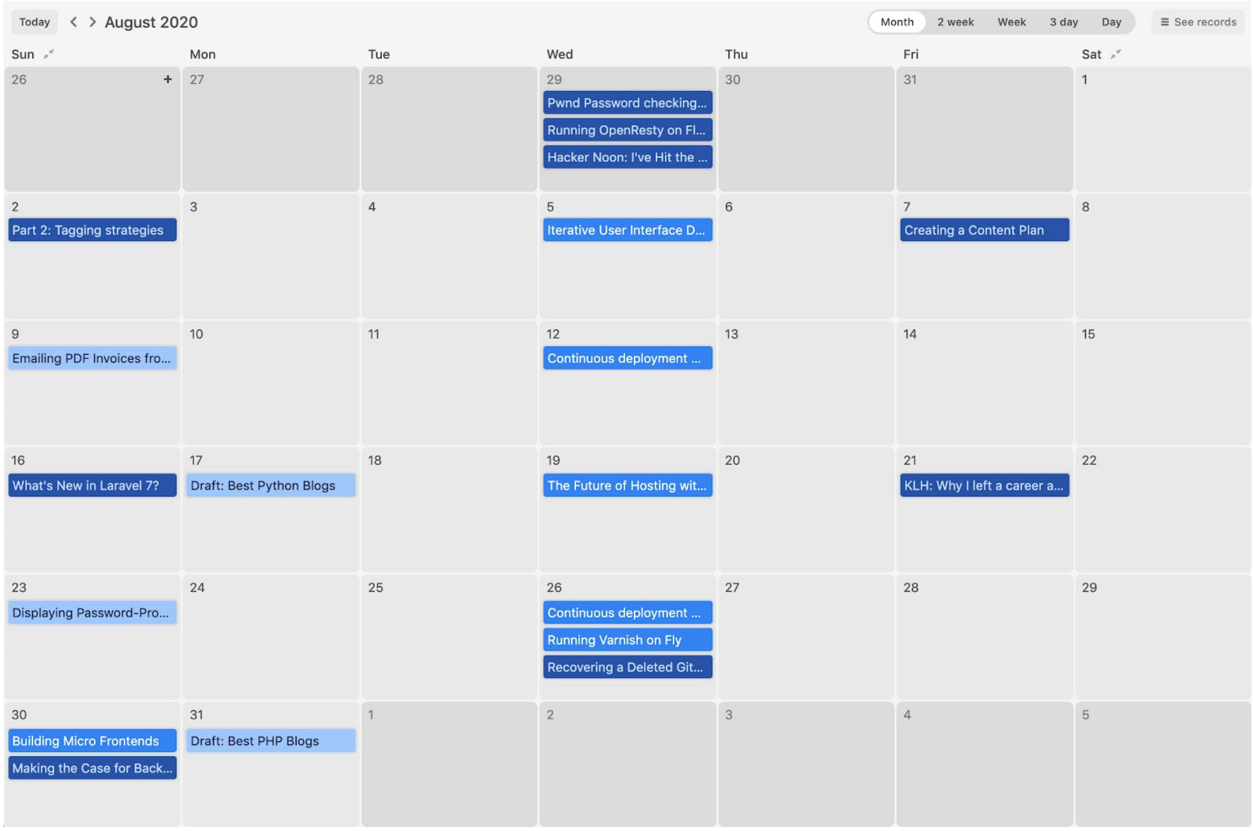
**GET THE AIRTABLE PUBLISHING CALENDAR TEMPLATE HERE**

## What is a Publishing Calendar?

A "publishing calendar" or "content tracker" is the backbone of a robust content management process. It lays out all the articles your team is working on along with their current status. You can take this even further by adding writer payments and applications to your publishing calendar in Airtable.

### Publishing Schedule

If you're old-school and keep track of your content on a wall calendar at your office, you'll probably just pencil in the names of each article on the date you plan to release them. I wouldn't recommend this approach, but the primary goal of a publishing calendar is just that. Use the "Calendar View" in the "Assignments" table to see when articles will be published.



| Sun | Mon | Tue | Wed | Thu | Fri | Sat |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 26 | 27 | 28 | 29<br>Pwnd Password checking...<br>Running OpenResty on Fl...<br>Hacker Noon: I've Hit the ... | 30 | 31 | 1 |
| 2<br>Part 2: Tagging strategies | 3 | 4 | 5<br>Iterative User Interface D... | 6 | 7<br>Creating a Content Plan | 8 |
| 9<br>Emailing PDF Invoices fro... | 10 | 11 | 12<br>Continuous deployment ... | 13 | 14 | 15 |
| 16<br>What's New in Laravel 7? | 17<br>Draft: Best Python Blogs | 18 | 19<br>The Future of Hosting wit... | 20 | 21<br>KLH: Why I left a career a... | 22 |
| 23<br>Displaying Password-Pro... | 24 | 25 | 26<br>Continuous deployment ...<br>Running Varnish on Fly<br>Recovering a Deleted Git... | 27 | 28 | 29 |
| 30<br>Building Micro Frontends<br>Making the Case for Back... | 31<br>Draft: Best PHP Blogs | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

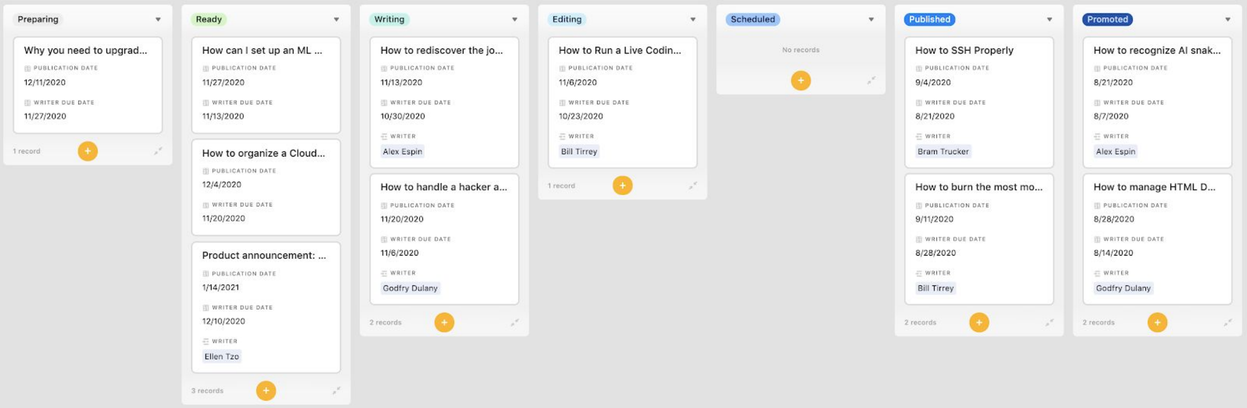
By color-coding each assignment, you can see which ones are on track and which ones might need extra attention to make sure they hit their due date. You can also drag assignments around to move their due dates or rearrange them based on extenuating circumstances.

## Article Progress

The “Kanban View” in the “Assignments” table helps you see exactly where each article is in the publishing process. A typical piece of content might go through the following stages:

- **Preparing** - Ideas and loose pitches that still need to be defined go here. You probably want to have a complete brief (see *Part 1* above) before moving an assignment out of this column.
- **Ready** - At this stage, the assignment is defined, it has a due date, and you’re deciding who will write it.
- **Writing** - Once the writer is confirmed and starts working on the assignment, move the assignment to this column.
- **Editing** - After a writer submits their first draft, the article enters editing. Typically, this involves some sub-steps (technical review, copy editing, revisions, etc.), but by the end, you should have a complete piece of content that’s ready to publish.
- **Scheduled** - It’s usually better to schedule posts so they go live on a regular schedule than to publish them immediately after editing. You can move each assignment into the Scheduled stage until it goes live.
- **Published** - You should be spending almost as much time promoting your content as you do writing it. This column holds articles that have been published but not yet promoted.
- **Promoted** - At this point, the article is completely finished...until you decide to do a refresh.

Here’s what the whole “Kanban View” looks like:



Preparing

Why you need to upgrad...
PUBLICATION DATE
12/11/2020
WRITER DUE DATE
11/27/2020

1 record

Ready

How can I set up an ML ...
PUBLICATION DATE
11/27/2020
WRITER DUE DATE
11/13/2020

How to organize a Cloud...
PUBLICATION DATE
12/4/2020
WRITER DUE DATE
11/20/2020

Product announcement: ...
PUBLICATION DATE
1/14/2021
WRITER DUE DATE
12/10/2020
WRITER
Ellen Tzo

3 records

Writing

How to rediscover the jo...
PUBLICATION DATE
11/13/2020
WRITER DUE DATE
10/30/2020
WRITER
Alex Espin

How to handle a hacker a...
PUBLICATION DATE
11/20/2020
WRITER DUE DATE
11/6/2020
WRITER
Godfry Dulany

2 records

Editing

How to Run a Live Codin...
PUBLICATION DATE
11/6/2020
WRITER DUE DATE
10/23/2020
WRITER
Bill Tirrey

1 record

Scheduled

No records

Published

How to SSH Properly
PUBLICATION DATE
9/4/2020
WRITER DUE DATE
8/21/2020
WRITER
Bram Trucker

How to burn the most mo...
PUBLICATION DATE
9/11/2020
WRITER DUE DATE
8/28/2020
WRITER
Bill Tirrey

2 records

Promoted

How to recognize AI snak...
PUBLICATION DATE
8/21/2020
WRITER DUE DATE
8/7/2020
WRITER
Alex Espin

How to manage HTML D...
PUBLICATION DATE
8/28/2020
WRITER DUE DATE
8/14/2020
WRITER
Godfry Dulany

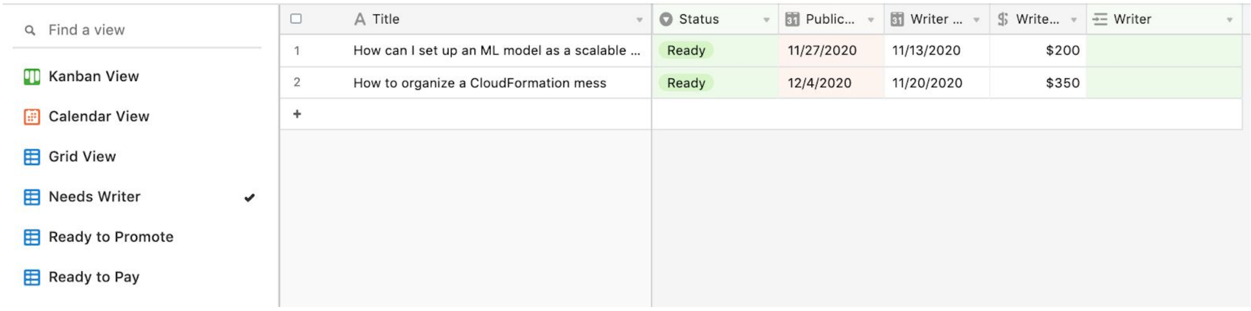
2 records

Because Airtable keeps track of when articles move from one stage to another, you can look back and see where things got stuck in your process and how they changed over time.

## Writer Matching

Sometimes, having all the articles in a single view is overwhelming. Airtable lets you create new views to serve a specific purpose. For example, you can use the “Needs Writer” view to see all the articles that currently need a writer.

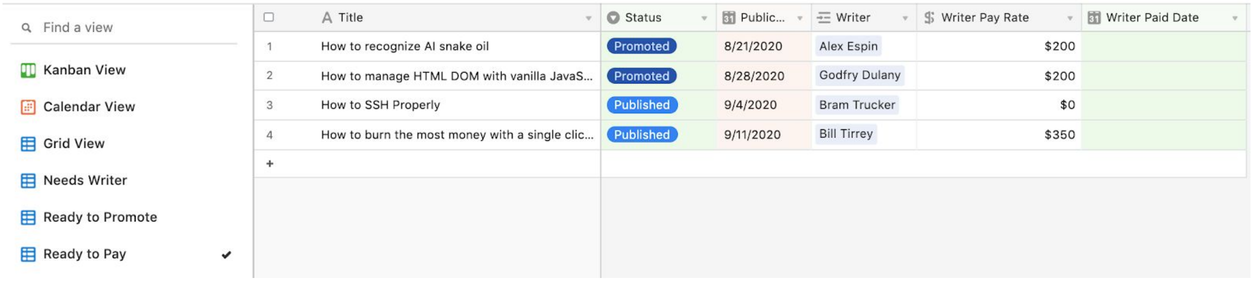
From this view, you can reach out to any writers who might be a good fit for the available pieces. When you find a writer, type their name into the “Writer” field to match them to the article and move the article to the “Writing” column.



| □ | Title | Status | Public... | Writer ... | Write... | Writer |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | How can I set up an ML model as a scalable ... | Ready | 11/27/2020 | 11/13/2020 | $200 | |
| 2 | How to organize a CloudFormation mess | Ready | 12/4/2020 | 11/20/2020 | $350 | |
| + | | | | | | |

## Writer Payments

If you’re working with freelance writers, you’ll find the “Ready to Pay” view useful. Every time you run payroll, you can use this view to see which writers have written articles and how much they should be paid.



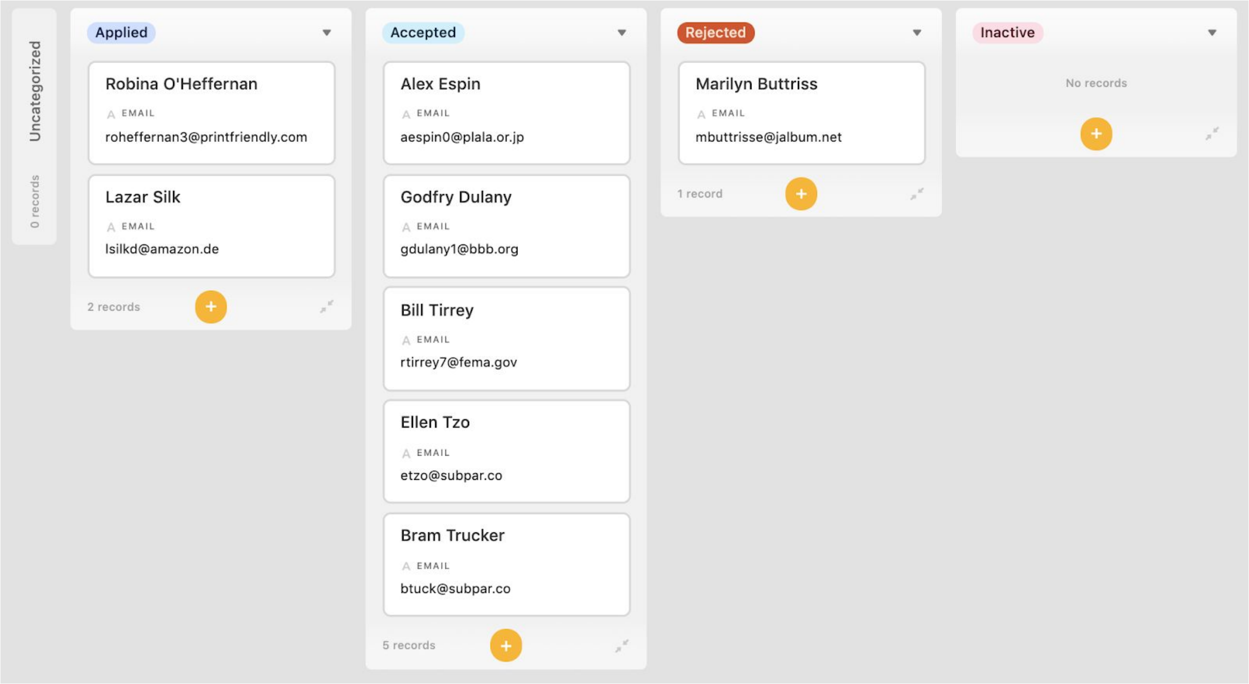
| □ | Title | Status | Public... | Writer | Writer Pay Rate | Writer Paid Date |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | How to recognize AI snake oil | Promoted | 8/21/2020 | Alex Espin | $200 | |
| 2 | How to manage HTML DOM with vanilla JavaS... | Promoted | 8/28/2020 | Godfry Dulany | $200 | |
| 3 | How to SSH Properly | Published | 9/4/2020 | Bram Trucker | $0 | |
| 4 | How to burn the most money with a single clic... | Published | 9/11/2020 | Bill Tirrey | $350 | |
| + | | | | | | |

After each writer has been paid, add the pay date to the last column so you have a paper trail of the payment. While you might not need this view, it gives you a sense of what’s possible with custom views in Airtable so you can create your own.

## Available Writers

The publishing calendar has a second table called "Writers" that stores profile information about each writer you work with.

The "Kanban View" shows you all your writers broken down by their status (e.g.: "Applied," "Accepted," "Rejected," "Inactive"). This allows you to review new writer applications, take inactive writers out of your pool, and see which articles each writer is assigned to.



Uncategorized
0 records

Applied

Robina O'Heffernan
EMAIL
roheffernan3@printfriendly.com

Lazar Silk
EMAIL
lsilkd@amazon.de

2 records

Accepted

Alex Espin
EMAIL
aespin0@plala.or.jp

Godfry Dulany
EMAIL
gdulany1@bbb.org

Bill Tirrey
EMAIL
rtirrey7@fema.gov

Ellen Tzo
EMAIL
etzo@subpar.co

Bram Trucker
EMAIL
btuck@subpar.co

5 records

Rejected

Marilyn Buttriss
EMAIL
mbuttrisse@jalbum.net

1 record

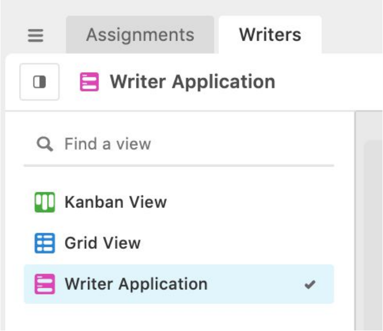
Inactive

No records

You can review writer applications using a hiring rubric and move those who meet your criteria to the "Accepted" status column.

## New Writer Applications

Finally, you can use Airtable as an intake form for new writer applications. You can see this in the "Writer Application" view in the "Writers" table.



**GET THE AIRTABLE PUBLISHING CALENDAR TEMPLATE HERE**

In addition to the Airtable template here, you can use automations in Zapier to streamline your process and remind writers of important deadlines and tasks. These tools will allow you to maintain your quality standards while writing more content and managing more writers. If you're struggling to keep up with all the content you have planned, you need a robust publishing calendar.

# Part 3: Style Guide

"I'll know good content when I see it" is a lousy way to edit. Experienced editors develop a style guide, editing checklist, and content briefs to help them set clear expectations for their writers.

When you ask someone to write a post for your blog, what do you typically tell them? If you're like many content managers, you work with the writer to come up with an idea and then let them have at it.

The problem with this approach is that the writer is bound to have questions:

- What format should I write in?
- Should I use second or third person?
- How should I structure the introduction and conclusion?
- Where do I upload images?
- How do I format code samples?

If you're lucky, the writer will ask you these questions, but more often than not, you'll be working with them on several rounds of revisions. This is as frustrating for your writers as it is for you as a content manager.

One tool designed to help you minimize these misaligned expectations is a style guide. In this section, we'll review the key elements of a technical style guide, and we'll show you a few examples. Starting with one of these is a great way to start standardizing your blog's content.

**DOWNLOAD THE SAMPLE STYLE GUIDE HERE**

## What’s in a Style Guide?

A style guide includes expectations for your contributors. The sample above is broken down into four categories:

1. **Voice** - Expectations surrounding style, tone, and point of view.
2. **Content** - Covers content standards and structure.
3. **Conventions** - Formatting preferences and examples.
4. **Communication** - Communication expectations for our writers.

Of course, this is not the only example of a technical writing style guide. If you’re looking to compare your options, check out Google’s developer documentation style guide, DigitalOcean’s technical writing guidelines, and some of the other guides listed here. If you’re creating a style guide for the first time, I’d recommend reading over several before you get started.

## How do you use a Style Guide?

Once you have a style guide, you should send it to your new contributors to ensure they are familiar with it before they start writing. You can also remind them of it every time you assign them an article, and you should reference it when your writers have questions.

You can also use it throughout your editing process. New writers often jump into writing before they’ve thoroughly reviewed the style guide, so you’ll probably have to remind them to reread it if their first draft needs more work.

## Things to Consider When Creating a Style Guide

While you can blindly copy one of the above style guides, your team might not need the same level of specificity. Here are some of the factors you should consider as you choose and refine your style guide:

### Length vs. Thoroughness

You can include as many details in a style guide as you want, but the longer it gets, the less likely your writers will be to use it. This delicate balance will be a constant challenge. I prefer terse descriptions and lots of examples, but I don’t have quantitative data beyond my personal experience to back up this choice.

### Writers’ Experience

Experienced writers may want more detail in a style guide, whereas new writers will be overwhelmed if you give them too much information at once. If you’re working with engineers who are relatively inexperienced writers, consider focusing on high-level best-practices rather than the minutiae.

### Format

Publish your style guide in a place that writers can find it. If you work with lots of external contributors (like we do), you can publish your style guide publicly so that it’s always a Google search away. If your contributors are all internal team members, you can probably make do with a shared document.

### Organization

Like any form of documentation, organization is one of the most significant factors in its success. Try to summarize your rules and break them into logical sections so writers can skim your style guide to find relevant information faster.

### Coding Standards

If you write a lot of tutorials, you should specify your coding standards in your style guide. We don’t include this in our general-purpose style guide because it varies from client to client, but it’s worth noting.

### Updates

Like most documents, your style guide should evolve. As you encounter issues, your content strategy changes, and your contributor pool grows, you’ll need to update and reorganize your style guide. Consider making a quarterly reminder to update yours until it’s finely tuned for your blog.

**DOWNLOAD THE SAMPLE STYLE GUIDE HERE**

I hope this section helps you create a style guide. It’s unfortunately rare to find technical blogs that use one, but a style guide is one of the best ways to ensure you maintain consistency and quality among your contributors as you grow.

# Are You Ready to Take Your Blog to the Next Level?

As you might expect, reading about these best practices is easy, but applying them consistently every day is the difficult part.

**Imagine putting your blog on autopilot.**

Companies work with us at DRAFT.DEV because we specialize in this detailed execution work that is so time-consuming.

After we agree to a content plan, you'll receive original, high-quality technical posts every week for your blog without lifting a finger. You won't have to worry about flaky freelancers missing deadlines, re-writing low-quality work from inexperienced writers, or wondering if each piece is technically correct or not.

To learn more, head to our website to schedule a call.

Karl Hughes, Founder of **DRAFT.DEV**
Connect with me on Linkedin or Twitter
karl@draft.dev