



IDENTIFY PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Your company, organization, or client likely has problems with web content. Those problems have probably led to decreased productivity and profit. That's why you bought this book. Or maybe someone gave you this book because you've been entrusted to find and fix content problems.

That's the bad news. The good news is that all of us who do work on the web have the same or similar problems. And those problems are opportunities to do something worthwhile, like make the Internet a better place.

In this chapter, I give you some ideas and tools for determining what's wrong with your content, what role your workflow might play in what's going wrong, and how to turn your content problems into opportunities to do great work for the organizations you work with.

FIGURE OUT WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOUR CONTENT

You might want to dig into what's wrong with your content for several common reasons:

- You're about to embark on a website redesign, and you've decided to take a content-centric approach, starting with content strategy. Yay, you.
- Your website redesign is underway—launch is imminent—you've realized the content is a mess, and you don't want to launch a beautiful new site with crappy content. I'm really, really sorry.
- You're migrating to a new content management system (CMS) or using a CMS for the first time, and you have to get all your content from where it is now to the CMS. While you're at it, you want to fix the content you've wanted to fix for a long time. Smart plan.
- You're working on adding more structure to your content so it can be displayed various ways and on multiple devices and screen sizes. So you're going to clean it all up as you implement the content models. Structured content—exciting.
- You just know deep down in your heart that your content could and should better meet the needs of your organization and its audiences. And you are determined to make it so. Onward, content warrior.

Whatever the trigger, chances are you have a pretty good idea what's wrong at a high level but haven't been able to adequately document and quantify those issues. Your hunches are usually the best place to start—sort of like an experiment.

HYPOTHESIZE WHAT'S WRONG

The first step of documenting what's wrong with your content is to record your hypotheses, just as you would in an experiment. Here are some example hypotheses to get you thinking:

- The majority of the content on your site is for <audience a>, but you're really trying to increase conversions with <audience b>.
- Your content isn't written in a way that represents your desired voice and tone, or it doesn't elicit the reactions or perceptions you want your key audiences to have.

- You don't think you've provided good enough meta descriptions—your content ranks well, but you don't get the clicks you think you should.
- Your calls to action aren't very strong or don't always exist—users aren't doing what you hope they'll do after visiting a page.
- You don't think your content supports the reasons people visit your site—people come there most often to do <*this thing*>, but most of your content is about <*that thing*>.
- Your site contains a lot of outdated content, such as wrong information or links to pages that no longer exist.
- The content is not very readable—it's long, it's not organized well, important information is buried—and you think your audiences just click the Back button when they get to most of your pages.
- Visitors can't find anything on your site, so you get a ton of customer support calls and emails.

Documenting your hypotheses is super important because it helps you focus on what you want to learn about your content and what method you'll use to learn it.

CHOOSE YOUR METHODS

Once you've documented your hypotheses, you can decide how you'll prove or disprove them. Not all hypotheses can be proved or disproved using the same method, which is why I recommend combining the methods from the following three sections to get the broadest look at what's wrong.

CONTENT AUDIT

You can conduct a content audit yourself or hire a content strategist to help. In a content audit, you'll typically be looking for things you can evaluate objectively: what audience the content is for, what the intended purpose of the content is, whether links are broken or go to the wrong place, whether pages aren't accessible through the navigation, how long the content is, and how easy it is to scan and understand the key message(s). See the **Content Strategy Tool 1.1** for an example audit.



CONTENT STRATEGY TOOL 1.1

AUDIT SPREADSHEET

Download the audit template workbook so you don't have to start from scratch. It contains templates for the audit sheet (where you can collect your data) and a fancy summary sheet with formulas that pull in data from your audit sheet(s).

TIPS

- If you're auditing more than 1,000 pages of content, use a site crawler such as Content Insight to import the site structure and URLs.
- Consider whether you need to audit every page of your website or whether a representative sample will give you what you need.
- You might want to use more than one sheet in your audit, especially if you are auditing more than one property or if breaking down your data by section will be useful.

WHERE TO GET IT

Download the audit template workbook with instructions included at www.peachpit.com/register.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

Brain Traffic @petegale, (www.braintraffic.com)



TIP

Disproving your hypotheses may make you feel as though you failed. But really, the opposite is true. Instead, you've discovered an area in which you're doing better than you thought, and you can focus your efforts on the stuff that really needs help.

ANALYTICS REVIEW

With an analytics review, you can look at things like pageviews, user paths through content, common search terms, devices and browsers used, and traffic sources.

USER TESTING

Getting insights from actual users is a great way to add some subjectivity to your assessment. You can look at things like how content makes a user feel, how easy your content is to understand, and how findable key content is. See the **Content Strategy Tool 1.2** for an overview of a content testing method.

Table 1.1 includes a few examples from the previous hypotheses list.

CONTENT STRATEGY TOOL 1.2

A SUPER SIMPLE USER TEST

The fine folks at GOV.UK have been rocking content strategy and content development for several years now. This super simple user test gives some great insights about your content.

**STEPS**

1. Choose a few key pages from your site, and print copies for each participant and one for you.
2. Ask participants to read the content. Have them highlight in green the content that makes them feel *<confident, smart, ready to act>*, and highlight in red the content that makes them feel *<less confident, confused, hesitant>*.
3. Once all participants have highlighted their pages, start with a clean copy and highlight everything your participants highlighted in the corresponding colors.
4. Take a deep breath and look at the intensity of the green and red highlights to see where your content is doing pretty well and where it really needs work.

TIPS

- Ask participants to highlight for only one set of adjectives (such as more confident, less confident). Pick the set that is most important to your organization.
- When analyzing the results, pay more attention to the darkest highlights, which represent patterns.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

Pete Gale, @petegale, GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

TABLE 1.1 **CONTENT ASSESSMENT HYPOTHESES AND METHODS**

HYPOTHESIS	AUDIT	USER TESTING	ANALYTICS
The majority of the content on your site is for <i><audience a></i> , but you're really trying to increase conversions with <i><audience b></i> .	X		X
Your content isn't written in a way that represents your desired voice and tone, or it doesn't elicit the reactions or perceptions you want your key audiences to have.	X	X	
Visitors can't find anything on your site, so you get a ton of customer support calls and emails.		X	X

**HINT**

You might be able to reuse some of what you come up with here when you develop your scorecard for measuring content performance later. And the assessment, or at least some of it, can be used as a baseline. More in Chapter 12.

**TIP**

Save yourself a spreadsheet headache by setting up data validation for the values in your audit. Slicing and dicing the data is much easier when the values are consistent throughout the audit sheets.

SET UP YOUR EXPERIMENTS

Now that you know what methods to use, you can get specific about what to measure and how to do the measuring. For each method, document what you'll look for to prove or disprove your hypotheses and how you'll document or gather the findings.

AUDIT

You should start with the audit, but before jumping into it, get really specific about the criteria you'll use to assess your content. I put together an audit charter with a matrix that details the criteria and the evaluation scale. This matrix is especially helpful when you have multiple people working on the audit. It also helps you explain your findings to your stakeholders or clients.

Table 1.2 provides an example of an audit criteria matrix.

TABLE 1.2 **AUDIT CRITERIA**

ATTRIBUTE	CELL VALUES	RESEARCH QUESTION	WHAT YOU'LL LOOK FOR
Audience	C-Level Manager Media Unclear	Who does the content appear to be written for?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Call to action (CTA) that suggests a role Level of complexity Nature of the content
Voice and tone	Yes Somewhat No	Does the content portray the desired voice and tone?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content that clearly embodies our defined voice and tone attributes of x, x, and x.
Clarity	Yes Somewhat No	Is the message conveyed clearly and effectively?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Descriptive title and headings Logical information hierarchy Plain language Persuasive CTAs
Readability	Yes Somewhat No	Does the content employ writing, style, and formatting best practices?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simple, short sentences Little to no jargon Headings and lists Active voice

ANALYTICS

You can learn so much from your analytics that you may be tempted to just start mining the data and hope you find some good insights. A better approach is to decide what specific questions you want answers to first. Depending on what you want to know, you might be able to use your audit sheet to collect the data. For example, if you want to know which pages were viewed most, you can add a column for that in your spreadsheet.

Once you know the questions, record how you'll document what you learn. **Table 1.3** provides an example of research questions and documentation details.



TIP

I'm not an analytics expert, but the folks at Google are. Chances are you use Google Analytics on your site, and it has a ton of resources for using its tools online.

TABLE 1.3 ANALYTICS RESEARCH PLAN

RESEARCH QUESTION	DOCUMENTATION
What do users do after visiting <key page from which you expect the user to respond to this CTA>?	Percentage for each path of the total paths a user takes from this page during xx time period
What are people searching for when they arrive on your site?	Top xx search terms monthly
What pages are visited most frequently, and how do people get to them?	Top xx pages and percentages for each path users take to get to them

USER TESTING

Again, before sitting down with users, specify what you want to learn and how you'll get the answers from test participants. Examples of questions for which you might want answers are

- How does the content make the user feel? For example, is he confident, at ease, overwhelmed?

- What words would the user use to describe your organization after reading your content? You want to see if these words match your brand or voice and tone attributes.
- How well does the user comprehend your content?
- Is the user likely to take the action you want them to take after reading your content?
- Can the user find key information on your website?



TIP
You don't have to do user tests with a jillion people. In fact, the law of diminishing returns suggests that you really need only five people.

Using your list of questions (that correlate to your hypotheses), write a user test to walk through with your five participants. I recommend trying it with a colleague or your mom first to determine how long it takes and to practice explaining the tasks.

DON'T FORGET PEOPLE AND PROCESS

You probably think your content is a mess. You're reading or referencing this book because you want to fix it. What else do you need to know besides what specifically is wrong with your content? You need to acknowledge that your problems with content stem from problems involving people and the processes they use to do their work.

Keep in mind two important principles about people and processes. First, everyone—or almost everyone—has good intentions and is trying to do good work. The people involved in making content decisions and doing content work are doing the best they can with the skills they have and the guidance they get. Second, even the most pointless and cumbersome processes and tools were created to solve the problem at hand. The problem is they didn't evolve or they were never re-examined.

Why do I mention this? Well, mostly because I have to remind myself of those two things every time I start a new project. It's easy to mutter under my breath, "What in the world were they thinking?" or "Do they have any idea what they're doing?" But that doesn't help me or my client. Instead, I say, "Help me understand why they're doing things this way?" or "Do you feel there are gaps in the skillsets necessary to create content better?"

OK, with that out of the way, here are some of the questions you should answer at this stage of the project:

- Who is involved in efforts to create content—including subject matter experts, legal/compliance reviewers, writers, editors, publishers, and so on?
- How much time do people spend contributing to content creation or publishing that content?
- How long does it take to publish new content from ideation/request to publishing?
- How much content do you publish daily/weekly/monthly/quarterly/annually?
- How do you decide what content to publish?
- What are the pain points and roadblocks related to your content that people complain about?

You likely don't want to spend a ton of time documenting processes and roles at this point in your quest, especially if you don't have funding or the go-ahead for a content strategy project yet. Do some walkabouts, talk to people in the break-room, buy folks coffee, and make some assumptions based on your experiences. You can validate and vet all of what you learned later. For now, you just want to describe how people and processes affect your content.



HINT
 For now, just try to get a handle on pain points and opportunities. I'll dig into people and process much more in Chapters 9 and 13.

TURN PROBLEMS INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Problems are depressing. Opportunities, you can work with. And opportunities are much easier to sell to your boss, your boss's boss, your coworkers, your clients, and even yourself. Fixing problems sounds hard. And seizing opportunities sounds like fun. Right?

This next bit of work is going to be the foundation of everything that comes next. So take some time to connect the dots between what you learned about your content and your people and processes. Then, play around with positioning so you can make a case for a content strategy project (more in Chapter 2).

Table 1.4 is an example of how you might summarize the problems and opportunities you've discovered so far. In this format, you can set up the larger problem and related implications you uncovered during the audit, analytics review, and user testing.

TABLE 1.4 OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE CONTENT

PROBLEM	IMPLICATIONS	OPPORTUNITY
You are creating half as much content for your primary audience as you are for less important audiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Misuse of writing resources ■ Perception that you don't care about the primary audience ■ Primary audience unable to find content that is relevant to them 	Do user research to better understand users' needs along the customer journey so you can spend your writing time and budget on fixing or creating the content most likely to lead to conversions.

**TIP**

When writing opportunity statements, make sure they include the desired end result. In the example in Table 1.4, the end result is more conversions. That's what your boss's boss and your boss's boss's boss are going to care about most. If it makes sense, also include some context for how the end result will make things run more smoothly or save the company money. For example, spending resources more wisely also directly contributes to the bottom line.

READY? LET'S GO

You know a lot about what's wrong. You've turned those problems into opportunities. Now you need to convince the people in charge that your organization needs content strategy. On to Chapter 2.