

Content Strategy for Everybody (Even You)

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Web content is the meat in the sandwich, not the icing on the cake. Too often, organizations build websites and then neglect the content, letting it languish, unread and unloved. Even during website redesigns, the editorial process gets short shrift in favor of building shiny new features and creating fancy new designs. Thinking about the content is always left until the last minute, always thought to be “somebody else’s problem.”

Ever wonder why so many websites feature dense, unreadable prose? Force you to navigate through pages of brochure copy and legalese? Look like they backed up a truck full of PDFs and dumped them in the content management system?

No content strategy, that’s why.

When done the wrong way, creating new content and managing the approval process takes longer and is more painful than anyone expects. But planning for useful, usable content is possible—and necessary. It’s time to do it right.

If you’re looking for ways to make your Web content better, there are several books by leading practitioners in the field to choose from. Which one is right for you? It depends on who you are and why you’re reading it.

For a Writer Who Wants to Work on the Web (or Someone Who Already Does)

Need a general overview of principles and best practices for Web writing? Maybe you’re a copywriter who typically works for print publications, but you want to expand into writing for the Web. Or you’re responsible for your company’s website and you need a high-level guide to Web content, architecture, and design principles. *Letting Go of the Words* by Ginny Redish provides a thorough overview for anyone looking to move from creating content that gets read to content that gets used. With plenty of illustrations and screenshots, Redish practices what she preaches—she

shows rather than tells what works.

This broad review of the user-centered design process covers more than just writing. Redish starts (as you might expect) with techniques to help writers focus on the needs of their audience. Though many writers start with some concept of their reader in mind, Redish expands this approach, showing how the technique of creating personas can help Web writers stay focused on key audience attributes. Because Web users are goal-oriented, she explains how to plan content around user tasks by first documenting user scenarios. Staying true to the action-oriented nature of the Web, Redish encourages writers to ensure that all the content on the website fulfills a user task.

Writers who need a brief introduction to the principles of information architecture will find it here, presented in straightforward, non-technical language. Redish shows the expected structure and information hierarchy of the homepage and landing pages, describing how readers follow the “scent” of information as they’re trying to complete their tasks. Layout and design play an important role in helping users find what they’re looking for, so Redish includes sections on basic page-design principles; formatting lists and tables; and effective ways to use pictures, illustrations, and animations. While this isn’t a comprehensive review of Web-design techniques, it offers enough background to get a writer up to speed.

Redish is at her best when talking about language, tone, and style for the Web. When she encourages “letting go of the words,” she means it, offering dozens of techniques for paring down prose so that busy Web users can easily scan it. Writers who are accustomed to creating linear documents will learn how to write actionable links that coordinate with page titles, and how to choose whether

to embed links in content or place them in a block at the end of the text. Every writer will benefit from her guidance on how to write short, simple sentences that still convey personality with an appropriate tone of voice.

Letting Go of the Words differs from Sheffield's and Halvorson's books in that the author is not trying to evangelize the growing discipline of content strategy—indeed, she doesn't seem to mention those words at all. She's more concerned with giving readers specific techniques to improve their writing than she is with the overall process for managing content development on large-scale websites.

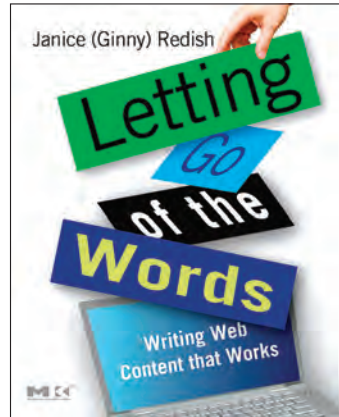
For readers who are already familiar with user-centered design techniques and with best practices for creating usable websites, this book might cover too much familiar territory. But for writers and site owners who are less familiar with tactics to develop a great user experience, this book offers a helpful introduction to writing, layout, and design for the Web.

For an Aspiring Content Strategist (or Web Project Manager)

Are you currently working as a technical writer or Web editor and want to know what additional skills you would need to apply for a job as a content strategist? Or maybe you're working as a project manager or Web producer, and need to know how to fit content strategy into your existing Web development process. Richard Sheffield's book, *The Web Content Strategist's Bible*, will give you the introduction and tools you need to understand this evolving field of practice.

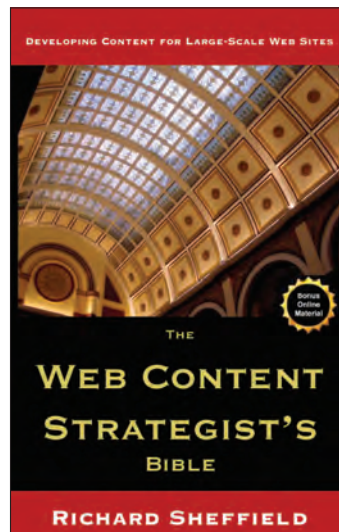
Sheffield builds credibility by describing his own career transition from technical writer to content strategist. His advice to job seekers on how to position their skills and present their past experience rings true, because he did it himself. He supplements his own story with instructions on how to search for a content-strategy job, and offers advice about how to tailor a résumé to the needs and wants of hiring managers. As the field of content strategy continues to grow, there's an increasing need for experienced practitioners; this book will be indispensable to people from related fields like technical writing who want to make a career change.

That's not to say that only people who are seeking to become content strategists would



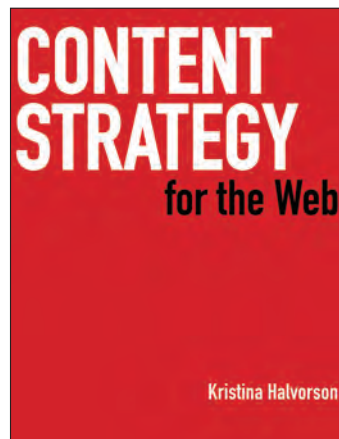
Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works

Janice (Ginny) Redish
 Morgan Kaufman Publishers, 2007
 \$49.95



The Web Content Strategist's Bible: The Complete Guide to a New And Lucrative Career for Writers of All Kinds

Richard Sheffield
 Cluefox Publishing (Createspace),
 2009
 \$25.99



Content Strategy for the Web

Kristina Halvorson
 New Riders Press, 2009
 \$24.99

Ever wonder why so many websites feature dense, unreadable prose? Force you to navigate through pages of brochure copy and legalese? Look like they backed up a truck full of PDFs and dumped them in the content management system?

benefit from Sheffield's book. Project managers would do well to read it carefully and incorporate its advice into their next project plan or scope of work. Anyone involved in Web development can probably tell a horror story about a project that went off the rails because the editorial process was mismanaged. Too often, content strategy and development is treated like a black box in project plans, without the same level of planning given to design or development tasks.

Sheffield knows that content requires the same detailed attention throughout the project life cycle as every other activity. He walks readers through the process, explaining the activities and deliverables needed to create useful, usable content. He maps tasks to the project life cycle, summarizing what content strategists do during discovery, analysis, design, build, and maintenance phases. And he includes several examples of content-strategy deliverables, so readers see a snapshot of the types of documents they would create and use throughout the project.

The Web Content Strategist's Bible and *Content Strategy for the Web* both cover the content strategy process and deliverables, but Sheffield is more focused on how, while Halvorson spends more time on why. If you're not actively working in Web development or wanting to work as a content strategist, then you may find Sheffield's book more detailed than you really need. But if

you're working as a Web editor or content strategist, particularly if you're trying to break into the field, a well-thumbed and annotated copy of this book should live on your desk within easy reach.

For Your Boss (or Your Whole Executive Team)

Want to persuade your boss or the executive team at your company that your Web content needs attention? Pick up a book that will do for Web content what Steve Krug's *Don't Make Me Think* did for Web usability. *Content Strategy for the Web* is a quick, breezy read, and it will give readers a better sense of why organizations need to expend more effort on content planning, creation, and governance.

Halvorson gives organizations some tough love, detailing the failures of management and oversight that result in rotten content. Do you have any idea whether the content on your website provides business value? Do you edit ruthlessly, focusing on delivering quality content instead of just quantity? Once your content goes live, does anyone take responsibility for its care, maintenance, and eventual peaceful retirement? Sadly for most organizations (and unfortunately for most Web users), the answer to all of these questions is no.

There's a solution to this problem, and Halvorson breaks it down into simple steps: plan, create, and govern. Before any organization can develop a content strategy, it first needs to evaluate the content it already has. Halvorson shines a bright light into the dusty corners and forgotten filing cabinets of the website, encouraging content caretakers to document it all in a content inventory and then analyze its usefulness. Too many organizations shy away from auditing their content, believing it a Sisyphean task best left ignored. Halvorson makes it clear that the content audit is a necessary part of the process, one that can reap huge rewards.

This book will help you develop better content, covering the nuts and bolts of editorial workflow—content creation, Web writing, and managing the approval process. Halvorson's focus on the people side of content strategy extends into the maintenance and governance phases. She reminds everyone that the content isn't going to take care of itself and makes a call to arms to empower content strategists within the organi-

zation, ensuring that someone has ownership of the content and maintains it over time. For every aspiring content strategist reading Sheffield's book, there should be a hiring manager reading Halvorson's.

Her overview of the content-strategy process covers similar territory to Sheffield's, describing roughly equivalent activities and deliverables. Although Halvorson's book will be useful for practicing content strategists, her discussion of the process will also be relevant to a broader audience of marketing, product, technical, and legal staff who might be called on to act as reviewers and approvers of the content. She provides a clear and concise overview of what it takes to do content strategy properly, offering a glimpse of each approach and activity.

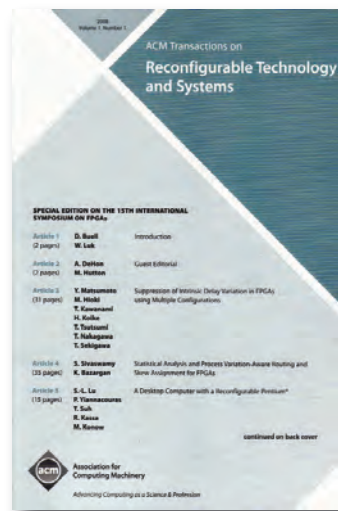
If you're trying to persuade your organization to take content seriously and you need some tips to help bolster your arguments, take a peek at Halvorson's points and work some of them into the conversation at your next meeting. Even better, the next time your boss takes a plane trip, tuck a copy of this book into his or her carry-on with a note saying, "All I ask is you just flip through this." When the boss comes back, see if you don't find a renewed sense of the complexity and importance of content strategy for the Web.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR For more than 15 years Karen McGrane has helped create more usable digital products through the power of user experience design and content strategy. Today, as senior partner at Bond Art + Science, she works with clients to create personalized portals that dynamically

update based on user behavior, develops data visualizations that make complex quantitative information easy to understand, and consults with publishers on ways to make their sites more appealing to readers and successful for advertisers. Prior to starting Bond, McGrane helped build the user experience practice at Razorfish, hired as the very first information architect and leaving as the VP and national ILead for UX. She is also on the faculty of the new MFA in interaction design program at SVU in New York, where she teaches interaction design history, focusing on the key movements and trends that have shaped the field; and design management, which aims to give students the skills they need to run successful projects, teams, and businesses. She received an M.S. in technical communication from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute with a focus on human-computer interaction.

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