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GREAT USER EXPERIENCE — NEEDS — GREAT CONTENT
Guide Overview

This hands-on guide for all UXers explores the intersection of content strategy and UX design on a website design project.

We’ll show you how to embed content-first thinking into popular UX design techniques to reveal powerful insights about the content, that lead to a better user experience.

We’ve worked up lots of example outputs so you can see it all in action.

Content Strategy
A Guide for UX Designers

by Liam King
Introducing our client: Balmain University

Balmain University will be the fictitious client for our example project for this guide.

**Project**
BU International Student website re-design

**Scenario**
The International Office have commissioned us to run an end-to-end redesign and build of their existing International Student site. The initial discovery and user research phase has been completed and we now have an unprioritised set of user stories.

**Our objective**
We now need to define, design, prototype and validate the core user interfaces and templates required to satisfy the highest priority user stories. We are going to adopt a content first approach at each stage.

**Assumptions**
This is an agile project that is constructed around user story (needs) that have emerged from the user research.
Content considerations

We have already asked the client some revealing questions that should influence the design process. The design has to be appropriate to the client and their ability to sustain that content.

› the existing site has about 150 pages
› there will be a team of three writers on the project to rewrite the content for the new site: two from the Comms Team and one hired writer to support them
› they have the resources to typically spend one day per week adding and maintaining content to the site - there are no plans to increase this for the new site
› the University has a content style guide that the International Student site must follow
Chapter One

Define Content
User Stories

As a project team we’ve identified 80+ user needs which we have articulated as user stories.

**Step #1**

*We prioritise the user stories with the client in an Agile release planning meeting*

The user story cards are prioritised into Must, Should, Could and Won’t buckets by the end of the session.
**Step #2**

We update the user story backlog in our Google sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ref ID</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>User story</th>
<th>Priority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Inbound exchange eligibility</td>
<td>As a prospective inbound exchange student I can find out if my university has an exchange arrangement with BU to see if I'm eligible to come on exchange to BU</td>
<td>SHOULD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Find outbound exchange institutions</td>
<td>As a prospective outbound exchange student I can find out which universities BU has an exchange arrangement with so I can see where I could go on exchange</td>
<td>SHOULD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Degree courses</td>
<td>As a prospective international student I can find out if BU offer the degree courses I want to study so I know if BU is an option for me</td>
<td>SHOULD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Academic requirements</td>
<td>As a prospective international student I can find out what academic entry requirements I must meet for my preferred course so I know if I am / will be eligible to apply</td>
<td>SHOULD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Find public events</td>
<td>As a prospective international student I can find upcoming opportunities to meet with BU reps so I can get answers to my questions about BU</td>
<td>MUST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Find contact details</td>
<td>As a higher education agent I can find contact details in the BU International Office so I can ask questions on behalf of my (prospective student) clients</td>
<td>MUST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Student visas</td>
<td>As a prospective international student I can find out what student visa I need so I can arrange one and come to BU</td>
<td>MUST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Ranking</td>
<td>As a prospective international student I can see how well BU ranks so I am encouraged to apply</td>
<td>MUST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Find agent</td>
<td>As a prospective international student I can find BU accredited education agents in my country so I can contact them to help me apply to BU</td>
<td>COULD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Multilingual benefits</td>
<td>As the non-English speaking parent of a prospective student I can learn about the benefits of studying at BU so I am encouraged to send my child</td>
<td>COULD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The assigned priorities for each user story were captured in the Google sheet for everyone in the team to refer to.
What is our inner content strategist thinking?

› There’s already a growing list of likely content types emerging: events, contact details, something around exchange partners

› Do these types of content already exist on the current site or are there new additions to sustain?

› How many items are there for each content type? Does BU have a few exchange partner institutions or thousands to list? A dozen accredited agents or hundreds?

› What’s included in the current versions of the content types?

› Is there a single source of truth for contact details for BU staff? If so, where is it?

› Multilingual content was prioritised as a could, but we need to keep an eye on it because that has all kinds of translation and maintenance considerations

› Is there any likely content that the International Office (our client) does not have direct control over? If so, what? And who controls it?
UX Designers, what should your inner content strategist be thinking?
Step #3
Looking at the prioritised user stories we can see that we [the project team] need to work on the Must stories first

We will start with this user story...

#4 Find contact details:
“As a higher education agent I can find contact details in the BU International Office so I can ask questions on behalf of my (prospective student) clients”

The DNA of a user story
If you aren't overly familiar with them, a user story includes:

1. the person using the service (actor)
2. what the user needs the service for (narrative)
3. why the user needs it (goal)

The UK Government’s Service Manual has some great guidance on writing user stories: https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/agile/writing-user-stories.html
Prepare for content governance

We are keeping a list of potential risks, considerations and implications of maintaining and sustaining the content as we go through the UX design process.

**Example:**
Who is going to translate content during the project and beyond?

---

**Activity: Competitor Analysis**

Let’s look at how BU’s competitors have used content to achieve the user story we’re working on. Asking these sorts of questions will reveal insights to inform our UX design work:

- what language and labels do they use? Any patterns emerging?
- how granular is their content?
- what content elements / attributes do they include?
- what content mediums are they using and how?
- what tone of voice do they use?
- what content do they leave out?
- what content are they translating?
**Step #4**

*We review (click around) 5-6 competitor sites and annotate screenshots*

We draw the team's attention to the insights by annotating the screenshots - this one from Sydney University’s International Student site.
What is our inner content strategist thinking?

In 60 seconds we can draw out a bunch of insights (and follow up questions) from this single Sydney University example:

1. They use the term “contact us” but others are using “enquire” – which term should [BU] use?
2. They stress that only ‘Future students’ should use these contact details - is this true for BU? How else do we need to screen enquiries?
3. They are using single letters, e.g. ‘F’ for the fax number - is this convention helpful and meaningful to an international audience?
4. They have a different number for calls from overseas - Q. do BU have one too?
5. Does BU have (or need) to present a separate mailing address? If so, what?
6. They include (if a little hidden) office hours - what are the client’s office hours? What about dates the office is closed like public holidays?
7. They use Google maps – if we were to include a map does BU have a preferred map type?
And some general insights and questions:

8. The various contact channels (email, call, form) have the same weighting - but does our client want to encourage users to opt for particular channels?

9. There are no contact details for individual staff members - are we going to present actual people and their contact details? If so that might require a special content type.

10. How are we going to handle displaying international dialing codes in phone numbers? Does the BU International Office already have a convention for this? We should add this to the content style guide.

11. Presumably BU contact details already exist and we want to use those (and not create a duplicate) - but that will mean syndicating content from another system? Do we know which system?

We upload our annotated screenshots and analysis bullet points to the project team's shared space (Basecamp).

We present our insights to the project team for a wider discussion.
Activity: Mapping User Flows

We now start to map out the user flows for our priority user stories to reveal the templates and key interfaces we need to design.

We consider where users arrive from, plus the step / actions they will take after their visit. This gives us more context to design the parts of the experience we have control over.

#4 Find contact details

**Inward Path**

- Google
- Referral site
- Main BU.edu site
- Print publication

- Landing Page (international.bu.edu)
- BU Education Agent support staff contact

**Forward Path**

- Phone staff
- Send email

We map out a high-level flow for each of the prioritised user stories to begin to understand how a user could achieve their goal.
What is our inner content strategist thinking?

Which pages will be the top landing pages on the site? Which are the top landing pages on the current site, and what content do they include?

› Will a regular article page template be sufficient or do we need a dedicated landing page template?

› Will the contact details for the staff that support the Education Agents be embedded in article pages on the topic or in a dedicated contact us page, or both? Is there a duplication risk?

› Do we need a content type in the CMS for contact details so we can have a single source of truth that can be published in multiple places on the site?

› How many BU staff members will actually be taking enquiries from Education Agents - one, two, a dozen?

› Do the contact details (name, email, phone number) we need to satisfy the user story already exist? Where can we see them?

› What other info may the Education Agent need to make a successful enquiry? Office hours (especially for calling)?

› Will we need some screening questions to make sure they aren’t wasting BU staff time? Do any policies and protocols already exist about this?

We will feed these juicy insights directly into our content modelling work later in the guide.
**Note potential templates and content types**
Build a simple, running list of templates and CMS content types as they emerge during these early UX design activities. A table or bulleted list in a project Wiki, a shared Google doc, or Basecamp writeboard are all perfectly good options at this stage.
Chapter Two
Design
(Content Models)
As a project team we now need to start designing the interactions, interfaces and content to achieve our prioritised user stories.

**Concept Sketching**

The core project team attend a “Design Studio” session to work on concepts for delivering the prioritised user stories for the sprint. We follow Adaptive Path’s 6-Up, 1-Up brainstorm sketching technique to rapidly develop and refine ideas as a group.

### Step #1

**6-Up Brainstorm**

Each of us in the room has to sketch out six rough ideas (one per cell) to achieve a particular user story. Our example user story is:

**#4 Find contact details:**

“As a higher education agent I can find contact details in the BU International Office so I can ask questions on behalf of my (prospective student) clients”
Find out how to design a content model for a better UX team
We have 60 secs per idea which might be the rough outline of a user interface, or a process diagram. There are no points for good drawing or over thinking the idea.

In 6 minutes the group of five have collectively produced 30 ideas like this sheet.

On this example sheet several distinct ideas start to emerge:

1. Idea: embed a reusable panel with a quick question form for education agents
2. Idea: use a simple picker pattern for the education agents to self identify themselves (and be shown the relevant contact details they need)
3. Idea: use simple and clear headings to chunk up the different types of contact detail for the distinct user types
4. Idea: use tags to filter which contact details are shown
5. Idea: embed a reusable panel with the full contact details education agents need
6. Idea: filter down the contact details based on the region of the education agent

**Step #2**
*Present, critique, and vote on 6-up sheets*

We now pin our sheets to the wall and each have three minutes to present our six ideas back to the group.

Everyone asks follow up questions and critiques the ideas, and offers suggestions to develop the ideas further.

We then vote (with dot stickers) on the strongest ideas on each sheet.

The dot voting makes it easy to see what the groups feels are the strongest ideas to develop further.
1. The voting reveals that the reusable panel / module of contact details for education agents is the strongest idea.

2. The group are also interested in allowing education agents to get contact details based on region because the International Office has staff dedicated to liaising with agents in each region.

**Step #3**

*1-up activity*

We now each develop and refine our strongest ideas from the 6-up activity on a single piece of paper (a 1-up sheet). We have ten minutes to think through and sketch our next iteration, like this one:

The 1-Up sketch has more thought and detail (and content insights).
1. The reusable panel / module can be slotted into different places on a page template to give the site managers more flexibility

2. The Pick a Region interaction idea has been incorporated in the panel

3. The contact details of a specific BU staff member (Education Agent Liaison Officer) for the region are shown, including their postal address

4. The Ask a question form has been incorporated

**Step #4**

*Present and critique 1-up sheets*

We pin our 1-Up sheets to the wall and each person has two minutes to present their refined concept back to the group.

Everyone asks follow up questions and critiques the ideas, and offers suggestions to develop the concept even further.

We repeat these steps for the other prioritised user stories for the sprint until the team runs out of time.
What is our inner content strategist thinking?

Although the concept sketches are still pretty raw we can start to draw some significant content insights (which are typically questions that need answers):

› How many pages on the site should include this contact details panel for education agents?
› Which bits of content are page furniture, e.g. the blurb text and form labels on the panel? How will clients be able to edit this beyond launch?
› What are the world regions in this context? Does BU have a standardised breakdown of regions? Where can we find it?
› How many Education Agent Liaison Officers are there? Is there more than one EALO per region? If so, do we show more than one EALO in the panel?
› Is there already a source of truth for staff contact details (to populate those elements of the panel)? Where is it? What platform? What state? Who to talk to?
› Is it ok to have staff pictures on the site? Will there be resistance?
› What will happen to the content from Ask a question form submissions? Is there already a workflow for submitted questions from education agents? Who do we speak to about it?
Start defining your content model

From the rough sketch we can start to define the content elements required to support the user story. These content elements and the way they relate to each other is our content model.

Our early content models will certainly be iterated and refined as we learn more during the unfolding design process, but articulating the model that underpins our content early gives us more time for insight.
SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION AGENTS

WE HAVE A DEDICATED NETWORK AROUND THE WORLD TO WORK WITH ED. AGENT PARTNERS

WHICH REGION ARE YOU FROM?

EUROPE

OUR EDUCATION AGENT LIAISON OFFICER FOR EUROPE IS STEVE ROGERS

EMAIL: STEVE_RO@BU.EDU
PHONE: 01234 56789
POST: RM 101, BUILDING Y
STREET: ___________
CITY: ___________
COUNTRY: ___________

ASK STEVE A QUESTION...

TYPE YOUR Q. HERE:

YOUR NAME

YOUR EMAIL

ASK
To begin with we use a shared project Notebook in Evernote to paste a scan of the sketch with a simple table of the initial content model for our simple-looking Education Agent contact panel:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ref ID</th>
<th>Content elements</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Content type / template</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Panel title</td>
<td>Text</td>
<td>EALO panel template</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Panel blurb / intro</td>
<td>Text</td>
<td>EALO panel template</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Region question title</td>
<td>Text</td>
<td>EALO panel template</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Regions</td>
<td>Taxonomy term</td>
<td>Regions controlled vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Education Agent Liaison Officer (EALO) text</td>
<td>Text</td>
<td>EALO panel template</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>EALO first name</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>EALO profile content type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>EALO surname</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>EALO profile content type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>EALO thumb picture</td>
<td>Image</td>
<td>EALO profile content type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>EALO email address</td>
<td>Email</td>
<td>EALO profile content type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>EALO phone number</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>EALO profile content type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>EALO postal address</td>
<td>Address</td>
<td>EALO profile content type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Ask question text</td>
<td>Text</td>
<td>EALO panel template</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>EALO first name (again)</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>EALO profile content type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Question form field labels</td>
<td>Text</td>
<td>EALO panel template</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Question form submit button label</td>
<td>Text</td>
<td>EALO panel template</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meta 1</td>
<td>EALO region responsible</td>
<td>Taxonomy term</td>
<td>EALO profile content type</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To populate the content for this simple-looking panel we need to consider a dedicated EALO profile content type to give us all the contact details we need for people like Steve Rogers.

It makes sense to have a EALO panel template that can be controlled in the CMS as a module to drop into selected pages. But it is important that all of the content elements in the template, like its title and instruction text, are editable by the client after launch. Such content elements (known as “page furniture”) often get hard coded into the template's HTML and are not editable from within the CMS. This is too restrictive.

The modeling exercise also reveals the likely need for a Regions controlled vocabulary. The list of regions (Europe, North America, South Asia...) will be needed to populate the region picker and identify which Education Agent Liaison Officer to show for each region.

**Templates and content types – what’s the difference?**

The two terms are now used interchangeably and the most important thing is the project team means the same thing when they say template or content type.

On the BU project when we say content type we mean a collection of elements (attributes) in the CMS, e.g. event profile, article, or staff profile.
When we say template we mean the actual HTML interface the user interacts with, e.g. upcoming event index, homepage, article. A template may be an entire page or modules such as our example Education Agent contact panel.

Confusingly, some things can be both CMS content types and templates - an event profile template on the site will be populated from an event profile content type in the CMS.

**What hidden content do you need?**

A content model is as much about the content that isn’t seen by the user - the string that holds it all together. But that content still needs to exist and needs thought and effort to produce and sustain.

We have already uncovered one likely controlled vocabulary for world regions for this single user story. We may need many more: countries, university departments, campuses, degree courses to support the rest of the user stories.

**Content model formats**

There is no one rule for how to present your content model. Ideally it should be in a collaborative space and format like Evernote, a Wiki, Google sheet, or a dedicated tool like GatherContent.

The most important thing is that the entire project team has quick access and can understand what it is communicating.
Chapter Three
Prototyping with Proto-Content
Now we have our user interface sketches and initial content model we're ready to refine and digitise our designs for some early usability testing.

However you prefer to wire-frame / mock-up / prototype designs please use proto-content rather than Lorem Ipsum.

## What’s wrong with Lorem Ipsum?

Stuffing Lorem Ipsum into wireframes and prototypes is not a **content-first approach**. It is the opposite because it is inert, meaningless and lacks context, revealing very little about the relationship between the design and the content.

We don't need perfect content to design and validate our imperfect prototypes, but we do need something better than gibberish. Fortunately, there are several options for UX and visual designers to make smarter design decisions early:

- Design with current content
- Design with competitor content
- Write your own throw-away content
- Use draft content (don’t wait for sign off)
- Commission sample content

We cover each type of proto-content in our [Content Strategy: A Project Guide](#).
Step #1
We use the wireframing and prototyping tool UXPin to develop and digitise our sketched interface of the Education Agent panel into a lo-fi HTML prototype we can play and test with.

Working with proto-content

Rather than pasting in Lorem Ipsum or using generic labels like “email@bu.edu” in our prototype, we write our own proto-content. We want to design around the content - to be content-first.

We mainly do this by pasting in actual content from the existing site - names and contact details for example. And we attempt to write new content for elements that don’t already exist.

The 1-Up sketch has more thought and detail (and content insights).
It won’t be the final content for the new site, but that doesn’t matter at this point. Using proto-content reveals immediate insights:

1. The panel’s heading quickly widows to a second line at the standard wing width

2. Will education agents be able to easily self-identify which region they are from? Is Mexico in the region of North America or South America for example? Perhaps we should ask them

**Step #2**

*We continue to design the expanded version of the panel which reveals the Education Agent Liaison Officer contact details and ask a question form for the selected region.*

The panel expands downwards once a region is selected to reveal the contact details and ask a question form for that region’s Education Agent Liaison Officer.
which country they are from and map that to its region?

3. South East Asia is the longest region name (that BU like to use) which easily fits into a dropdown of this width

The proto-content reveals even more insights:

1. The sentence feels a bit squashed but probably works

2. Is this mugshot too small? Perhaps we don’t show mugshots on the side-wing version of the panel and only when it is embedded in the body area of the page (with much more width to play with)?

3. This typical character-count email address is too long for the available width - we will need to rework the layout or the email addresses are going to break the template. What is the longest email address we know about?

4. This layout can’t handle phone numbers either? Do we even need to say the word ‘phone’? Let’s look at our competitor examples again to see what they do.

5. This layout is struggling to display a typical address? Is there even sufficient user need to include a post address in the panel? Could that level of detail be shown in the general staff directory area of the site?

6. Should we limit the character count of questions? Where does the content in the forms actually go and get stored?
Chapter Four
Validating the Content
We're ready to put our lo-fi prototype of the panel in front of some end users to get quick feedback we can iterate with.

Because we have used proto-content, rather than Lorem Ipsum, we can get juicy insights about the content at this early stage.

**A content focus to usability testing**

**Step #1**

We test the panel with four participants, in face-to-face sessions. We ask them to perform these two user tasks (that would largely achieve the user story).

**User task #1**

Find the most appropriate (BU) contact details to help you with a question you have on behalf of a prospective student client.

**User task #2:**

Ask your question using the contact method you most prefer.

During the session we pay close attention to how the content is performing, trying to walk away with answers to these questions:

- What content do they find useful (and don’t find useful)?
- What content is missing (for them to perform their task)?
- Do they understand the content or misinterpret it?
- Do the labels and words we’ve used make sense?
  What language do they use?
Working with usability testing observations

For general guidance on running effective usability testing sessions check out the [GOV.UK usability testing guidance](#).

## Testing observations

**Step #2**

*Throughout the sessions we capture lots of observations and direct quotes from the participants:*

- “Why don’t you just ask me what country I’m in? I will definitely know the answer to that.”
- “What’s the advantage of using the Ask a question form rather than just emailing the contact?”
- “I can’t think of a situation when I would need their personal postal address - an email or phone number is all I need”
- “The universities I work with don’t use fax machines any more so I would always presume that this is a phone number.”
- “Education agent is just one title for people who do what we do, so you might want to be careful with that.”
- “I know this is an email address - I don’t need to be told that.”
- “I like seeing a picture of the person I’m going to deal with - not just a faceless person.”
## Hypothesise, iterate, (re)validate

### Step #3
We add all our observation notes to a Google sheet that the whole project team can access.

### Step #4
We now agree as a project team a hypothesis to improve each usability issue with the Education Agent Contact panel.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observation / comment</th>
<th>Hypothesis (to iterate and improve)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why don’t you just ask me what country I’m in? I will definitely know the answer to that.</td>
<td>Changing the picker from regions to countries will increase an agent’s confidence that they are getting the appropriate contact details.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can’t think of a situation when I would need their personal postal address - an email or phone number is all I need</td>
<td>Removing the postal address for individual contacts will save space and make the genuinely useful contact details easier to see and use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Their email address was too long to see in the ask your question input field without moving the cursor back and forth - this could lead to input mistakes</td>
<td>Increasing the width of the email input field by changing the layout of the form fields will mean users can see their entire email address without moving the cursor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education agent is just one title for people who do what we do, so you might want to be careful with that</td>
<td>Clarifying what we mean by an “Education Agent” will help such people to self identify.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like seeing a picture of the person I’m going to deal with - not just a faceless person.”</td>
<td>VALIDATED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know this is an email address - I don’t need to be told that.”</td>
<td>Removing the “Email” label will not confuse users and save space for the actual email address.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Observation / comment | Hypothesis (to iterate and improve)
---|---
The universities I work with don’t use fax machines any more so I would always presume that this is a phone number.” | Removing the “Phone” label will not confuse users and save space for the actual phone number.
Clicked on the email address to ask his question which opened his email browser, but there was no pre-populated subject line. | Adding a pre-populated subject line as the email client opens will save the education agent time.
What’s the advantage of using the Ask a question form rather than just emailing the contact?” | Adding a short description that explains the benefits of using the form will encourage them to use the form rather than the email.

**Step #5**
*We agree the priority of each hypothesis for implementation in the next iteration using the MoSCoW (Must, Should, Could, Won’t) method.*

The panel expands downwards once a region is selected to reveal the contact details and ask a question form for that region’s Education Agent Liaison Officer.
Iteration #2

We now apply our hypotheses to the prototype panel.

1. Tightened the title to work in the restricted width
2. Clarifies who this is for
3. Changed from selecting a region to country
4. Still refer to the region that India is part of
5. Kept the thumbnail image because of positive feedback
6. Just the email address (without a redundant label)
7. Just the phone number (without a redundant label)
8. Added text benefit for using the form
9. Form layout changed to give all fields plenty of room
10. Updated the button to sound more personal and inviting
Re-test

**Step #6**

We’re now ready to run another round of usability testing and validate our hypotheses.

Some will have worked, some will fail and new issues and insights will emerge. That’s good.

We’ll now continue to follow this cycle of testing, hypothesising, and iterating until we’re confident we’ve got things right.
The End

And this is where we leave the story. Obviously our work is not finished and the site still needs to be built and launched, but that is a story / guide for another day.

Hopefully you will agree that good things happen when we iterate and improve the content and design together from the earliest stages.

We don't claim that you will tease out all the content and design challenges working this way, but waiting to code and implement all the templates and CMS content types before uniting them with real content is simply asking for trouble.

Some simple additions to your existing UX techniques and a slight shift in perspective to a content strategist's view of the world can make all the difference.

We would love to hear how you get on!
“Brand following and loyalty is heavily influenced by change. A well-established brand with a defined market and healthy number of loyal followers maintains success and following by ensuring brand perception is consistent across all channels. Any dramatic change through one channel that is not supported through the others can cause damage.

A key role of a UX designer is to identify, design and test journeys and interactions to ensure anyone using system has the best experience in response to their need. Recently, perception of UX seems to have developed into one of a focus on websites and applications, with a heavy leaning towards interface design.

However UX is far more holistic. Scenarios and situations are considered and used to help design outcomes and processes – such as where people are using a system, how and why they decided to, and what they are likely to do after using it.
Content plays a massive part as an influencer to consistency. A UX designer must be aware of the ways in which content is consumed by people, and how content delivered through all channels must be planned and maintained.

A UX designer is not a content strategist. A content strategist is not a UX designer. But a defined strategy for the creation, publication and maintenance of content must include insight and input from the people striving to ensure people using a site, application or service experience the desired emotional response as defined by brand positioning.

I see content as being the energy running through a product or service. In order to experience that energy, we must design systems and approaches to interaction that are conduits to it. And if we have ways of helping us access the energy, we equally need to ensure the level of energy is as high as it can be to ensure an engaging memorable experience.

Every product, site and service has its own intricacies, and we need to allow the energy to flow throughout and design systems that facilitate the tapping of it.

A well-designed and executed content strategy needs a well-designed and executed experience, regardless of type or means of interaction.”
“First of all I’d ask you have a think about this? Without content what the hell are you actually designing? Designing without proper content is a bit like swapping flour with washing powder and expecting your cake to turn out tasting great. After all they look similar right?

Given that the thing you are designing is inextricably connected to the content it intends to deliver, how are you realistically able to abstract design from the content?

If you flip any product on it’s head, what is the one thing you want users to take away from it? The content. The product is merely a vehicle for communicating that content. Designing without an understanding of that content demonstrates you don’t understand the true value of that product. The product in fact is not the website, app or service. The content is the product. Your User Experience lives or dies based on how successful you can be at facilitating the delivery of that content, in a way that’s simple, delightful and as frictionless as possible.

Design’s sole purpose across any industry is to address a specific need through problem solving and creation. That’s it. Anything else is extraneous. For the majority of communication projects, the con-
tent is the need we’re trying to fulfil.

Design has to work hard to help the narrative of your content play out. Design provides context, inferred intent, trust and helps brings content to life. It’s a tricky balance to find where design helps that narrative without getting in the way. To nail that level of nuance you absolutely have to be designing with real content rather than faking it.

You wouldn’t think about starting a project without understanding business needs. Hopefully you wouldn’t begin without understanding user needs. You’d maybe have a little tantrum if you hadn’t been sent the logo and house font for the project... and yet probably the most important user facing aspect of any design project - the actual content, often gets sidelined as something that will just slot into your design. This has to stop.

Design without content is pure fiction. People don’t come to a website or use your product to gasp at how pretty it is. They come for the content. The interface is purely there as a means to help that happen.

Content first is absolutely the only way to work to produce meaningful, valuable design work. But Content first as a principle doesn’t mean all of the content. Get just enough upfront to provide context and structure, and then design systems to help deliver it in the most meaningful way possible.

From microcopy to sectional or navigation labels, everything that lives inside your product that isn’t purely for visual effect is content. And deserves as much consideration as any long copy. Sweat the details with this stuff and your users will thank you.”
“Content strategy is the origin of the experience. When you think about it, UX starts with information architecture. Once you’ve conducted some initial usability testing, you map out the structure and flow of content for your site or app. Then, you’ll play with the interaction design and visual design to ensure the look, feel, and behavior of the content matches the experience you wish to create. Users want content, they don’t care about design, so you must always start with the content and build around it.”
“As a UX designer reading this guide, I’m sure there’s lots that’s familiar to you. You’re probably already validating your work with users, doing competitor analysis, mapping user journeys and flows, and using sketching workshops to brainstorm ideas with your colleagues. And you know that content - the substance of all those words and images, and audio and video, and animations and stuff that end up on the pages and screens you design - has a huge impact on the experience of the people who use them.

But if you’ve come to the vast, broad church of user experience design from a visual design or front-end development background, it can sometimes be hard to know where to get started influencing the form that content takes. If you’re focused on making wireframes and designs, or building interactive prototypes, what you create can all too easily end up being basically a bunch of grey boxes saying “some content goes here”. Like designing a range of best-selling t-shirts by drawing a t-shirt with a box on the front, writing “funny cartoon goes here” inside it and “hilarious caption” underneath. It’s coming up with a cartoon that’s actually funny, and a caption that’s genuinely hilarious, that’s the real trick.

That’s where content design comes in. Content design is the process of deliberately and consciously designing not just the boxes, but
also the nature of the stuff that goes in them. It means working
with real words and pictures, to both stress-test your designs, and
so you can test different approaches to tone, style and substance
with users. Working out details of how content is structured: how a
page or template breaks down into granular chunks, spotting where
the same chunk can be re-used in multiple places, and how chunks
and content types relate to other chunks and content types - the
glue that makes it all hold together. And it means planning for how
content will be created and maintained in a way that’s achievable
with the time and people you have available.

This is more than just content-first design. It’s content-first thinking.
Putting content at the heart of your design process, and designing
the form and structure of content with just as much care as how it’s
presented. You probably give all this stuff some thought already. But
as you build content strategy and design into your practice, you’ll
start to do that more consciously and deliberately. You may not be
a content strategist, but that doesn’t mean you can’t steal all our
best ideas and start putting them to use. In doing so, you’ll be able
to influence the content that eventually gets put into the ‘boxes’ so
it’s better aligned with the experience you’re trying to create, help
authors understand what works and what doesn’t for users, and
deliver great experiences with content that moves seamlessly across
multiple channels, platforms and devices.”
A craftsperson selects their materials. A carpenter carefully chooses their wood, a tailor selects their cloth, and a jeweller chooses their metal. These raw materials have qualities that determine the shape of the outcome; strength, malleability and availability, for example. If we think of content as a raw material, then the properties of a company’s brand, the malleability of their information and the strength of their message all determine the shape of things to come. Whether you’re a craftsperson, an artist or a designer it’s important to explore the constraints of the materials before starting to work with them; What’s going to be fit for purpose? What’s going to provoke the strongest response? What’s adaptable? What’s most desirable? It’s both about being inquisitive and exploring the limits of what’s possible.

It is strange then, that it has been unusual for UX designers to start with the content in all these years of digital design. Content Strategy was a niche specialism, an added cost, or ultimately the client’s responsibility. After all, the UX designer had ‘design’ to think about, and there was a risk that inserting content might upset the beautifully crafted markup. Or worse still, break the layout. Thankfully, this is no longer the case.
Responsive design exposed the somewhat arbitrary split between the design of content and container. Content can no longer be painted on or poured in. Instead, a piece of content is active and alive. It has a life-cycle that may have begun long before the design process has even started. In the past designers got away with a container–first approach. Responsive design has spurred a content–first mindset.

These days, the team at Clearleft, like many other teams, are thinking about the relationship between content and design from the outset of the project right through to beyond the delivery; from playing with the raw material to fashioning something that has ongoing resilience and sustainability. This means that content strategy weaves throughout the entire process; it’s in the up-front research, it’s in the sketching sessions, and it’s there in the minute branded details like the micro-copy and the way an interaction unfolds, and it affects our clients’ strategies for content production far into the future.”
An interview with

Trisha Doyle

What can teams do to bring content and UX together and how does this work at GOV.UK?

At GOV.UK, no one has UX in their job title. Instead, everyone is responsible for user experience. How we make this a reality is by designing products and services around meeting user needs. Once these are defined, they’re the focus for the whole team - from content designers to developers.

We have content designers rather than traditional editorial teams; it’s a different skillset. Content designers create the content based on user need, using insight from data like search and analytics, as well as user research. The focus is always on the user, finding out what they need and helping them to do it.
How much does content impact on and affect an overall user experience?
It is the user experience. It sends so many signals to the user about your organisation, from the tone, language and structure. It tells your users how authoritative or trustworthy you are as well as helping them understand how to do what they need to. Language can be a huge barrier to this, which is why we advocate for plain English so strongly.

Content is the user experience, particularly for a website like GOV.UK.

What questions should designers be asking in relation to content when focused on UX?
Who are your users? What do they need to do? You can find the answers through user research and data from analytics, search and other user touch points with an organisation, like call centres. Once user needs are defined and prioritised, the next question a designer should be asking is where is the content to design with? If you can’t put together a piece of real content for design, then you haven’t done enough user research or design thinking. Start small and iterate.

What steps can be taken to ensure ongoing content governance doesn’t dilute the user experience?
Governance should be part of the overall strategy, which should articulate the vision of what you’re trying to do and the needs you’re trying to meet. Stay focused on the user need. It should be open to iteration but make sure it’s always evidence-based.
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.
OLLIE WELLS
Digital Creative
Ollie is a digital creative leader specialising in user experience and interaction design. He has worked in the digital industry since 2000 and has developed a wide range of skills honed to designing and developing experiences for people who interact with a brand at any time, through any means.

He describes himself as a thinker, planner and implementer with people, project and product management skills. He leads the delivery of digital products and services that are efficient, intuitive and delight users through simplicity, refinement and attention to detail.

ALEX MORRIS
UX and Product Designer
Alex originally trained as a journalist which started off his relationship with creating engaging content for people. Working on the web and in product design for nearly 20 years now, content has always been at the heart of his design process. Alex has designed everything from bicycles to backpacks and has worked on large scale design projects for the likes of Adobe, ESPN, Microsoft, Intel, CERN and many more. In his spare time Alex also dabbles with his own projects and has recently launched an email client called Dart which MacUser described as “having potential to be the future of email”
JERRY CAO
UX Content Strategist
Jerry Cao is a UX Content Strategist at the wireframing & prototyping app UXPin where he creates in-app content, design articles, and free design e-books. In his spare time, he enjoys playing electric guitar, watching foreign horror films, and expanding his knowledge of random facts.

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Sophie is an expert on content and user experience strategy. She loves working with blended creative / technical teams (especially agile ones) to deliver outstanding digital products and services. She has lead strategic design and development projects for, among others, world-leading UX consultancy cxpartners, the National Trust, the Office for National Statistics, Public Health England, Bristol City Council, and the University of Surrey.
JAMES BOX
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James leads the renowned user experience team for digital-pioneers Clearleft. In 2010, he co-authored the book Undercover User Experience Design (with Cennydd Bowles). He’s on a mission to re-introduce radial menus to the web (and thankfully, failing).

ELLEN DE VRIES
Content Strategist
Ellen de Vries is a Content Strategist at Clearleft. In 2006 she set up a content agency which specialised in brand language, tone of voice and deep-tissue content governance for major universities, unions and British heritage brands. Since joining Clearleft she’s been working with a global publishing brand and a well-loved retail chain. She’s on a mission to rid the world of unnecessary complexity, and succeeding.

TRISHA DOYLE
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Trisha Doyle is Head of Content Design at GDS. She and her team focus on meeting user needs through content across GDS. Before joining GDS, Trisha worked at AOL Huffington Post Media Group and Money Advice Service.
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