

Lean Content

Kick-ass Content Creation for Teams of One
by Ian Lurie





© 2016, Portent, Inc

506 2nd Ave, #1700 Seattle, WA 98104

www.portent.com

Seriously? We had to do a copyright statement? Fine. Don't steal this. It's ours. If you want to pass it along, reprint, re-use, re-broadcast, use as a movie script, add to a magazine, read it out loud at Carnegie Hall or anything else, please contact info@portent.com for permission. We're pretty cool about that stuff, and we'll probably say yes.

You may use this to line a birdcage, housebreak a dog or as a chip container. Also, funny sailor hats. Those are OK, too.

Who This Is For.....	4
Using This Book	6
What You'll Learn	7
What Is Lean Content?.....	8
What “Lean” Really Means	8
Set Up Your Toolset	15
Find Ideas.....	30
Plan	53
Produce	67
Polish.....	103
Publish and Promote.....	128
Repurpose.....	137
Building a Site That Leans.....	147
Where to from here?	148

Who This Is For

You know content's important.

You know you need to steadily produce it.

You know that quality beats quantity.

You know **saying** all this is one thing and delivering another thing entirely. It requires resources that, for most of us, are in short supply: Time, ideas, and expertise throughout the creation process.

Writing? Sure. But also, all the little things, from imagery to HTML, that separate the “OK” from the “holy crap” content.

That's what this little book is all about: Independently creating great, polished content.

It requires minimal computer and web knowledge. If you can write and publish a simple blog post in tools like Wordpress or Tumblr, you've got the required experience to jump right in.

If you can't publish a blog post yet, that's OK. If you have trouble with things like images, editing, proofreading, and formatting, by the time you're done reading this, you should be all set.

You need to enjoy getting your nerd on, just a little bit. Or aspire to getting your nerd on. We all have a little nerd in us. You're going to tap your inner propellerhead. I talk tools, formatting and a few tricks I like to use. That means you'll muck around with text files, images and such. It's fun, I promise.

This book focuses on producing content for the web. I talk about PDF and mention workflows for other formats. But I'm assuming most readers want to create blog posts and other web pages.

I'm not a video or audio guy. So, I stick to written content in this book. I'll research. The next edition may include other fun formats. First, I have to learn to set up a mic so it doesn't sound like I'm spitting into it.

You don't need to know:

- Markdown. If you don't know what this means, no sweat. You'll learn shortly.
- HTML. It's a good skill to have, but you don't need it for this book. You'll learn some straightforward ways to generate HTML without learning it.
- Photoshop. Nothing in this book requires it. Again, it's not a bad skill to have, but you don't need it.
- FTP, SSL or various other three-letter acronyms. You're AOK without them.

So you need to know how to write a sentence, use a computer, and publish online using existing platforms. That's it.

Using This Book

[Chapter One](#) talks about what “lean” means. It's a good place to start. But, if you want to get right to the tools, go to [Chapter Two](#). If you want to skip all the basics and jump directly to production, go to [Chapter Five](#). CAUTION: If you do that, you will miss tips on idea generation, setting up tools, and secrets for how I generated \$1 million in a week using only Lean Content.

Ignore that last part. I'll stop messing around now, I promise.

What You'll Learn

You're going to become a more independent, effective content producer. You'll have a good toolbox, spend more time creating, and less time dealing with logistics. Small, cute, hypo-allergenic creatures of your choice will frolic in your office.

Maybe not the last part. But the processes in this book have made independent content production a pleasure for me. I hope they work for you, too.

What Is Lean Content? 1

This book describes a process that lets a single writer brainstorm, write and publish great content.

It uses the concept of “lean,” but not in the traditional sense.

What “Lean” Really Means

Marketers often equate “lean” with “lightweight,” “minimal,” or “without waste.” It’s a system to which you aspire. I’m all about aspiration, but to me, lean is a much more immediate action.

In cycling, to handle a turn at high speed, you **lean**. As you enter the turn, you push down on the outside pedal.



That forces the tires into the pavement to increase traction. You preserve as much kinetic

energy as possible and complete the turn. Then you sprint out of the corner, leaving your competition behind.

You also lean on your own. People can coach you, and you have a team around you, but in the end, you need to be able to lean without help.

"Lean" Is a Verb, Not an Adjective (or noun)

In content marketing, lean is what you **do**, not how you do it. To lean:

- Get good, relevant ideas
- Produce in a disciplined but streamlined manner
- Polish, making every piece of content 10x
- Publish when you're ready, not when it's perfect
- Promote what you create, using a repeatable process that respects diminishing returns
- Do it all on your own

That's it. Ponder if you like, but at some point, you have to lean. Start producing. Improve along the way. Lean.

There are all sorts of reasons **not** to lean.

Pedaling a bicycle takes a lot of energy. You're tired. You're sweaty. It's hard to lean. Those corners could be a nice chance to slow down and catch your breath. But a lousy lean means you

lose momentum coming out of the turn. Then you have to spend even more energy to get back up to speed. You get more tired and slow down even more. It creates a spiraling deficit. Catch your breath on the descents, instead.

Producing content takes a lot of energy, too. You face a lack of resources, bureaucracy, and interruptions. They can cause delays, so they're a good chance to slow down.

Don't do it. Like resting in the turn in a bicycle race, it takes more energy than it saves. Instead, turn those problems into advantages:

Lack of resources? That probably means you have a small organization. Smaller organizations are lighter. They're better at cornering because they can lean fast and sprint to the next turn. Use your size to your advantage. You don't have a huge review process. You're closer to the brand itself. Be nimble as heck. Publish super-relevant, current information.

Big organization with crazy processes? Look ahead. Create a content pipeline. You've got the resources to create lots of great stuff. Set yourself up for the turns. Processes are tools that can help you polish and produce at a high level **if** you plan for them.

Interruptions? Write in small bites. Use interruptions to step away from your writing and refresh. Pass your content along for edits while you're distracted.

Also: When you're on two skinny tires, cornering is scary as hell. Sure, someone can explain it to you. But talking about cornering doesn't make you better at it. At some point, you must lean and sprint, lean and sprint. You build confidence and skill. Along the way, you may crash (trust me on this).

When you're sitting at a keyboard, content is scary as hell. Publishing is even scarier. You get zero response. You get nasty negative comments. At some point, though, you must write and publish, write and publish. You learn to create winners.

Don't Wait for a Perfect Map

Knowing the corners ahead of time is great, but impossible. Conditions will change. In cycling, people drop water bottles right in front of you, or they crash, or it starts to rain. In marketing, products break, you get a good review or industry news means you need to act **right now**.

Don't wait until you're "sure what will work" or until you've written a content strategy. Write the strategy, by all means! It's a huge asset. But write content **now**. Waiting produces zero results.

Lean, or talk about leaning and never produce anything. Up to you.

A One-Person Process

This is a process designed so that one person can independently create basic blog posts, PDFs or and Word docs. You can use it for slide decks, too. Team efforts are great, but very few organizations have the resources to routinely dedicate a team to production. Leaning requires a measure of independence.

You need a process that minimizes demands on external resources like designers, HTML coders, and developers.

This ebook provides it.

Scaling Up

Note I said this is **designed to be** a one-person production process. If you have a whole content production team, excellent! You can still use this book. You'll get more efficient, and team members will have more time to focus on their strengths, contributing more to production efforts.

Content Types

I'm a writer. Most of my work involves letters and words on a page or screen. So, most of the process in this book sticks to writing—not video, audio or other formats.

And, I usually create blog posts. A lot of the tips in this book make it easier for you to create great blog posts.

But you can use everything in this book to create any digital content. Even if you're producing video, you have to write that script, don't you...

The Four Rules

Any content creation process designed for a single person must be:

1. **Nearly Frictionless:** Creating new content should work within legal and resource constraints. Creating content should let you add basic formatting and images without requiring another person. Once you're set up, all your energy is spent creating, not messing with tools.
2. **Re-useable:** The work you create should be easily transferrable to HTML, Word, PDF and other formats.
3. **Trustworthy:** The process must minimize the odds of lost files and lost content. Your work should be easy to find. And you should be able to "roll back" to previous versions without saving backups or other silliness.
4. **Future-proof:** If you repurpose content two or ten years from now, you should be able to open and edit it using available tools.

The Process

The one-person production process is:

1. Find Ideas
2. Plan
3. Produce
4. Polish
5. Publish
6. Repurpose

Before you do anything, though, you need to set up your lean content toolset.

Set Up Your Toolset

2

In this chapter, you'll set up the stuff that lets you write, add images, edit and refine and then publish, all on your own. The setup may seem like a lot of work. But you only do it once. A half-hour now will save you time on every project.

Don't worry about learning to use these tools right now. Just get 'em installed. You'll see them in use later.

Setting Up Your Tools

I didn't start out as a tools guy. I believe in the writing and the creativity that goes into content. But the more you create digital stuff, the more you realize that tools are what make it go.

Tools are **important** when you're producing on your own. You can't lean if you're spending all your time cutting, pasting, reformatting and swearing at your word processor.

I've got a favorite toolbox. It's one that has helped me get a **lot** of work done, and publish rapidly for years.

These are the *trustworthy* tools that enable a *frictionless* process to create *re-usable*, *future-proof* content. And those are the four rules. See what I did there?

This toolset assumes most of the content you create will end up on or as a web page, or as a PDF. It works for e-books, slide decks, etc., but you may want to supplement with specialized tools like Microsoft PowerPoint.

Get a Text Editor: Install Sublime Text

Lean content starts with plain text. You'll use plain text to write. It's future proof, re-usable and trustworthy.

That requires a good text editor. I recommend Sublime Text. It's my favorite text editor. It runs on OS X, Windows, and Ubuntu. The tutorials in this book focus on it. Get it at [Sublimetext.com](https://www.sublimetext.com).

You can always use another text editor. Some people like to use Scrivener, which is great. Other people like TextMate. Choose your favorite.

You'll format all that plain text, adding headlines, numbered lists, bold and other stuff using **Markdown**, which is super-straightforward in Sublime Text.

Set Up Sublime Text Markdown Editing Tools

These tools make writing and editing Markdown more convenient. They use color-coding and indenting to make raw Markdown easy to read and write. In this example, “Dropbox” is a heading. Sublime Text bolds it:

Dropbox

The simplest option is a cloud management solution like Dropbox. These tools support all formats. You can automatically sync files to a cloud-hosted copy. You can recover previous versions. Other people on your team can comment and edit.

Dropbox and its competitors have drawbacks, though:

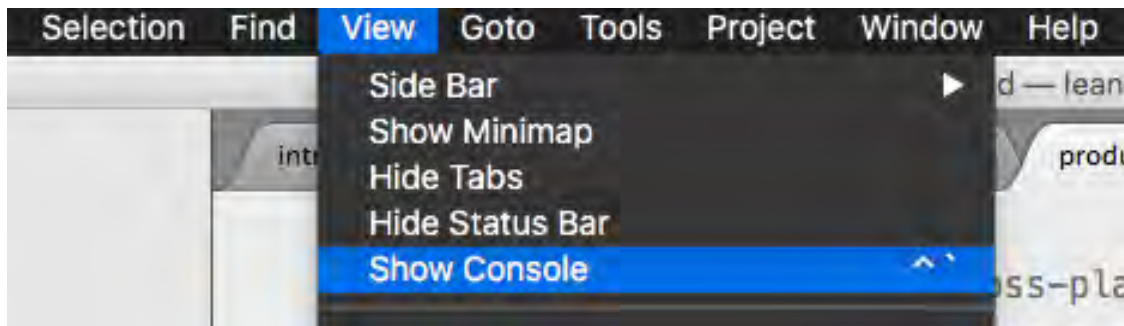
- * They're not true multi-user version management tools. Dropbox warns you if there's a version conflict. But that's it
- * They don't all keep your backups forever. That's not the worst thing, but you have to make sure you have another backup solution in place

A better solution is a true version management tool like Github.

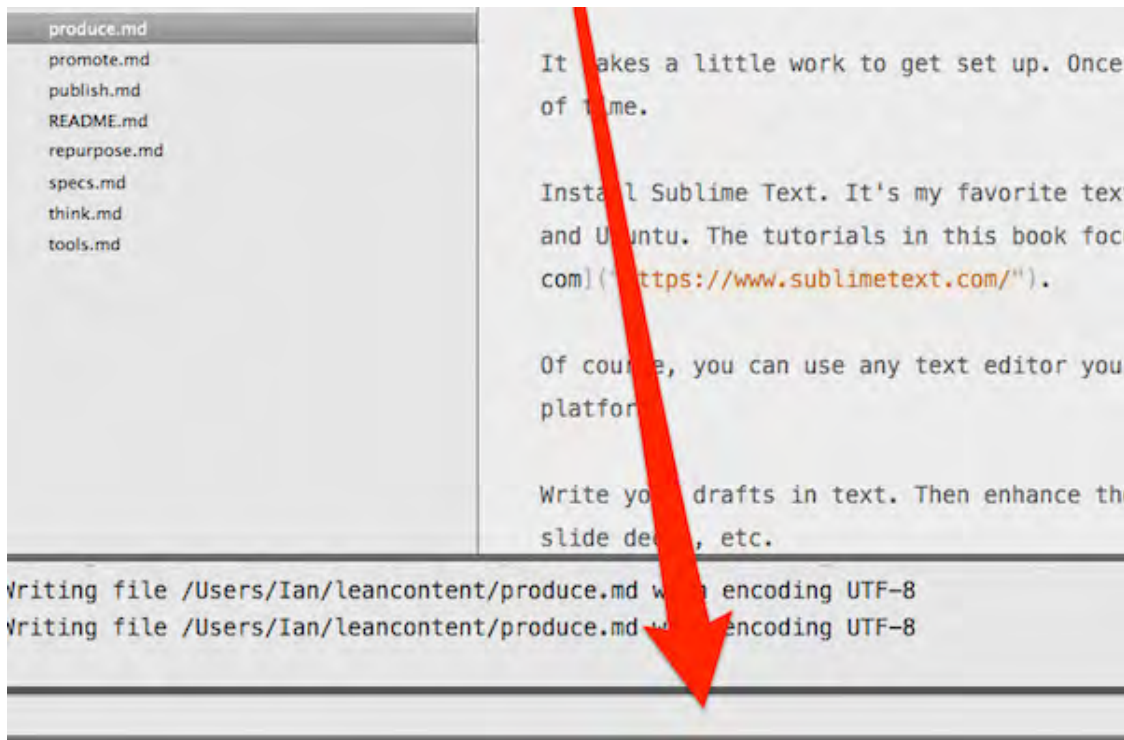
Markdown file highlighted by Sublime Text's Markdown package

In Sublime Text, install Package Control

1. Go to <https://packagecontrol.io/installation#st2>
2. Copy the horrible-looking text under “Sublime Text 2” or “Sublime Text 3,” as relevant.
3. In Sublime Text, click view > show console:



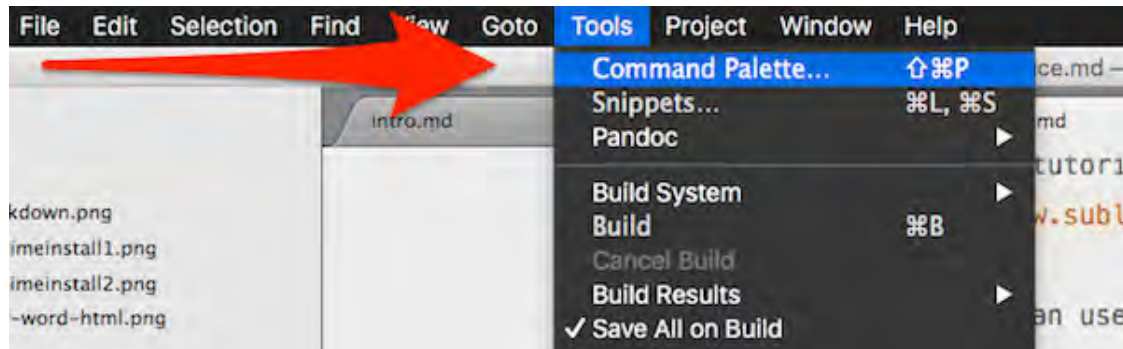
4. Paste the horrible-looking text here:



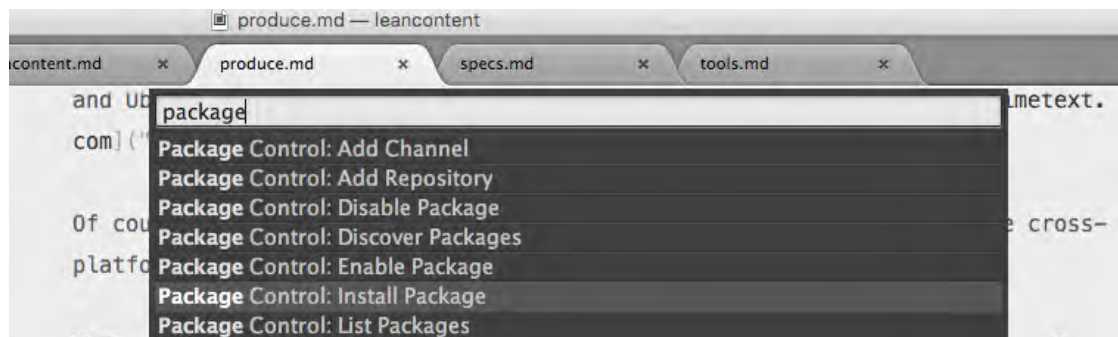
Sublime Text will putter along, installing Package Control.

Use Package Control to install Markdown editing

1. Start the command palette:



2. Type “package” and select “Install Package:”



3. In the list that appears, install MarkdownEditing and SmartMarkdown. Choose others if you want. Once you start adding packages to Sublime Text, it's hard to stop.

Advanced: Use Package Control to install Pandoc plugin

Pandoc is a powerful command-line tool that converts Markdown to just about any format imaginable, from Microsoft Word to HTML to Acrobat.

It's got a steep learning curve, but Sublime Text has a package (of course!) that does the job nicely.

1. Install Pandoc. This isn't part of Sublime Text. It's a separate program. You can find Pandoc Windows and MacOS installers at the bottom of [this page](#). Install it there.
2. Open Package Control in Sublime Text using the instructions in [Use Package Control to install Markdown editing](#).
3. Select "Pandoc."
4. Sublime Text will install Pandoc.

To convert a document, start the command palette and choose Pandoc. Pick the format you want.

This package is still a bit rough around the edges. I've tested it, and it generates HTML, PHP Markdown and Rich Text Format and every other text-based format. It has trouble with PDF and Docx. Watch for updates.

Using Pandoc, Sublime Text will convert the file to the desired format and open it.

Get a Markdown viewer

Markdown is cool, but you want to see how it'll look to readers. The easiest way to do that is with a Markdown viewer.

On the Mac, I like Marked. Download it at marked2app.com. Open your .md file and view it live, as you edit. Here's how this chapter looks, previewed in Marked:

I'm not saying you should ignore content strategy. If resources allow, create one. But understand: Content is talking, and you don't give your audience the silent treatment. Start producing content right now. Don't wait.

In this chapter, I'll talk about the steps, and a bunch of tools:

- Starting with plain text
- Using Markdown for enhanced formatting
- Managing versions with Git or Dropbox
- Enhancing to final format

Starting with plain text

Where are you publishing? Probably on the web. Tools like Microsoft Word and Powerpoint have their place, but have you ever converted a Word document to a blog post? It's not pretty.



Chapter Preview in Marked

Nice!

If you're on a PC, try [MarkdownPad](https://marked2app.com) for similar features.

Other options

Sublime Text is pretty “raw.” There are specialized Markdown editors out there. They have things like built-in previews and easier link creation. MarkdownPad (mentioned above) is one. Markable is another. There’s also Markdown Here and iA Writer.

I prefer to use Sublime Text + Marked because Sublime Text is great piece of software. It’s fast, stable and configurable. It gives me a lot of flexibility for editing in HTML, true plain text and other formats. Since I’m a bit of a nerd, and it supports Python and javascript, and it’s blistering fast, Sublime Text is my favorite. And I’ve never seen it crash.

Install Version Management and Backup Tools

Text files are the best lean content format around.

But computers crash, get dropped, or get large glasses of Sprite spilled on them in airport restaurants. You need to keep a copy of your content someplace **other** than your computer, just in case.

You’ll make edits and decide the content three versions ago is better. Then you must roll back, which is impossible without version management. You need to keep a history of your content, too.

If you have a team, you must find a way to let people share, comment and update content without overwriting each others' work.

Version management can take care of all of these problems. It keeps your system trustworthy.

Dropbox

The simplest option is a cloud storage solution like Dropbox. These tools support all formats. You can automatically sync files to a cloud-hosted copy. You can recover previous versions. Other people on your team can comment and edit.

Dropbox and its competitors have drawbacks, though:

- They're not true multi-user version management tools. Dropbox warns you if there's a version conflict, but that's it.
- They don't all keep your backups forever. That's not the worst thing, but you must make sure you have another backup solution in place.
- Team members may be able to overwrite each other's work, or just muck up the works.

But, it's a great, simple solution that balances the need for a backup with the complexity of a genuine version management solution.

If it's not enough, and you want to geek out, use Github.

Github

Github is a full version management tool. Programmers created it for development projects, but it's great for content, too.

It provides incremental versioning. Many producers can work on the same file at the same time. And it lets you save versions of entire folders, rather than individual documents.

I recommend you start with Dropbox or something similar, and then move to Github when you feel constrained.

When you're ready:

1. Set up an account on [Github.com](https://github.com).
2. Download and install [Github Desktop](https://github.com/desktop).
3. Set up your first repository. For our purposes, the “repository” is your book. Unless you want to share it with the world, **make sure it's private**.
4. Sync it with your computer. That creates a folder on your computer. The contents of that folder will always sync to Github.
5. Start writing. Save images and text in that folder.
6. Check in changes, at a minimum, at the end of each writing session.

Every time you sync, Github receives the latest copy of your files, as well as new files. If you delete something, Github updates the

latest version of the repository, but keeps the deleted files in previous versions.

You can then view each version on Github or in Github Desktop. Compare changes, roll back, replace deleted files, etc.

It's pretty simple once you get the hang of it.

I'll write a whole separate ebook about Github someday.

Install image editing and annotation tools

You can easily edit and resize images yourself with super-simple tools:

- On the PC, try [Paint.net](#).
- If you want to get more advanced, try [Gimp](#) or (if you want to spend the money) Photoshop.
- On the Mac, use Preview as the default. Then try Photoshop or Gimp.

For screen captures

Screen captures require a different toolset, because they tend to be more annotation-dense. You'll often add callouts, highlighting, and text labels, or must capture a "panoramic" view of a screen that's larger than your monitor.

I recommend going one step beyond your computer's built-in screen capture keystrokes. Get Skitch or, if you're on Windows, get the free version of Evernote (Evernote integrated Skitch features into Evernote in January of 2016). If you're OK with the fact that you must have an Evernote account to use Skitch, this is a great solution.

If you're averse to using Skitch and want something even more powerful, try Snagit. It costs \$50, and it's well worth it. It captures videos. It also captures full-length web pages or anything else you scroll through. And, it captures images at full Retina resolution. If you do slide presentations, you'll see that Retina screen captures are crisp, even projected on a huge screen.

Install image compression tools

If you're publishing on the web, large image files slow load times.

For image compression, install [ImageOptim](#) on the Mac, and [Caesium](#) on the PC. Both are drag-and-drop tools that let you quickly generate compressed JPG or PNG images.

You can compress photos and graphics using most image editors and annotation tools, too. I like these because they let me compress many images at once, and they usually squeeze a little more out of the images.

If you want to get more advanced, use Gimp or Photoshop.

You can get even nerdier with command line compression. But the learning curve gets steeper as you go.

Install editing tools

Get [Hemingway](#) and [Grammarly](#). You'll thank me later.

Consider a Style Guide

A style guide's a tool, too. Most content creators equate "style guide" with "brand guidelines." When you're doing Lean Content, a style guide is anything that provides a consistent set of rules for content creation. Consistent rules mean you can create and know your work won't get punted back to you with a big red "X" on it.

They make lean content easier by providing consistent guidelines when you work alone. You don't have to go to an editor for simpler stylistic stuff. You can deliver work that's ready for approval. You build trust with the rest of the team as you create content that fits the brand.

Most important, style guides reduce time spent asking questions and waiting for answers. They streamline the whole Lean Content process.

Creating a Basic Style Guide

If your organization doesn't have a style guide, start one.

I don't care if you're a team of one or one hundred.

Style guides aren't mystical. A basic FAQ document will save you tons of time and help you stay consistent. Keep track of the questions you ask as you create content. Write down the answers. That list becomes the first voice and tone guide.

Questions to start with:

- What voice and tone should I use?
- What words can't I use?
- What words should I use for certain concepts?
- Do I use title case for headlines?
- Should I put a period at the end of bulleted text or not?
- Should I use Oxford commas (I'm a fan)?
- When do I need to use a copyright symbol? A trademark symbol?
- When should I use images?
- Where do we keep stock images and other media?
- Should I include "click here" with links?

Don't forget the broader questions that may affect content approval, though. Knowing the answer to these will speed approval when you submit your content for review:

- Can I say “guarantee?”
- Can I write step-by-step procedures, or should I direct readers to customer support?
- Can I publish on Medium?
- Can I mention competing products and brands?
- Can I be funny?
- Can I use puns?
- Can I be racy?

Every time something gets sent back, ask the stakeholders:

“I'd like to make fewer demands on your time, and get content published faster. Is there a guideline you can give me so I can make sure I handle this correctly next time?”

If you have answers at your fingertips, you can work with fewer interruptions. That takes a ton of friction out of the process and lets you lean.

Up Next

You're ready to go. Time to get your ideas together.

Find Ideas

3

In this chapter, learn to find ideas, even when you think you can't.

Nothing is Boring

Before you start writing and get to play with all the fun toys, you need an idea.

There's always something to write about. No product is boring. There's no way "everything's been said."

Companies make razor blades, hand soap and spoons interesting. They make milk, cranberries and almonds fascinating. You can manage something.

I'll make you a deal. If you're stumped, send me your product. If I can't come up with an interesting content idea, I'll buy you a

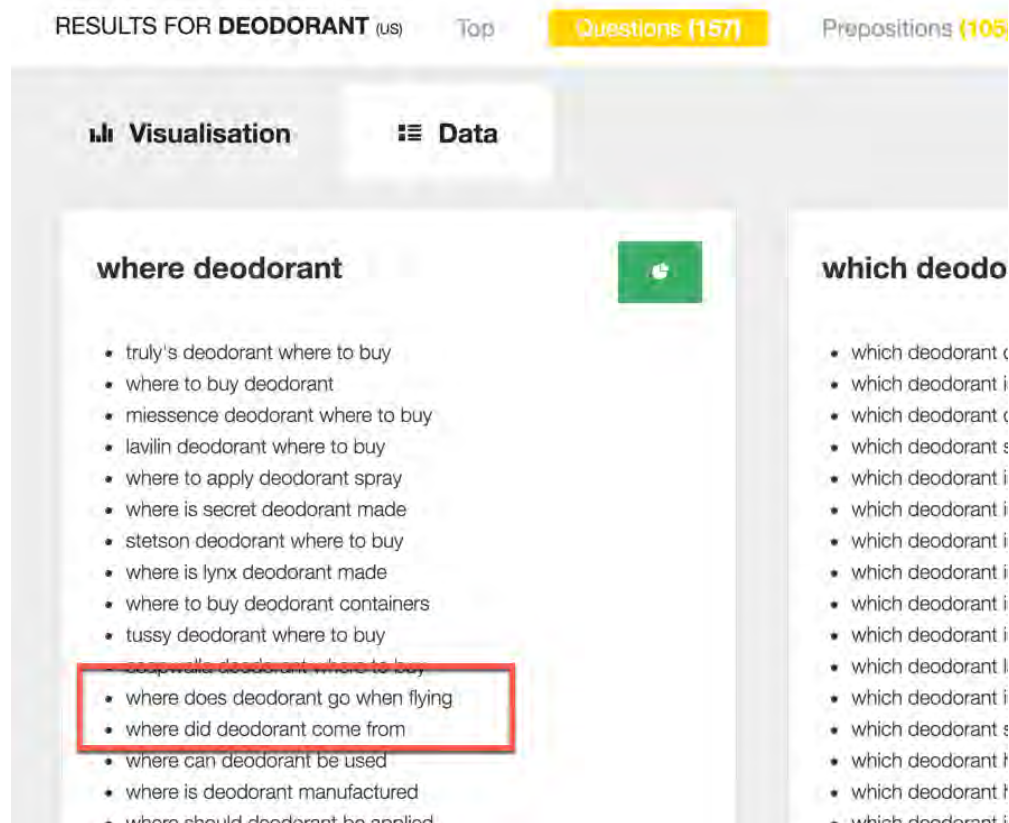
pound of chocolate or the beef jerky of your choice. Or a fruit basket or something.

I have three go-to resources for content ideas:

Questions

I always start with questions. If the audience is asking a question, and you have an answer, you can help.

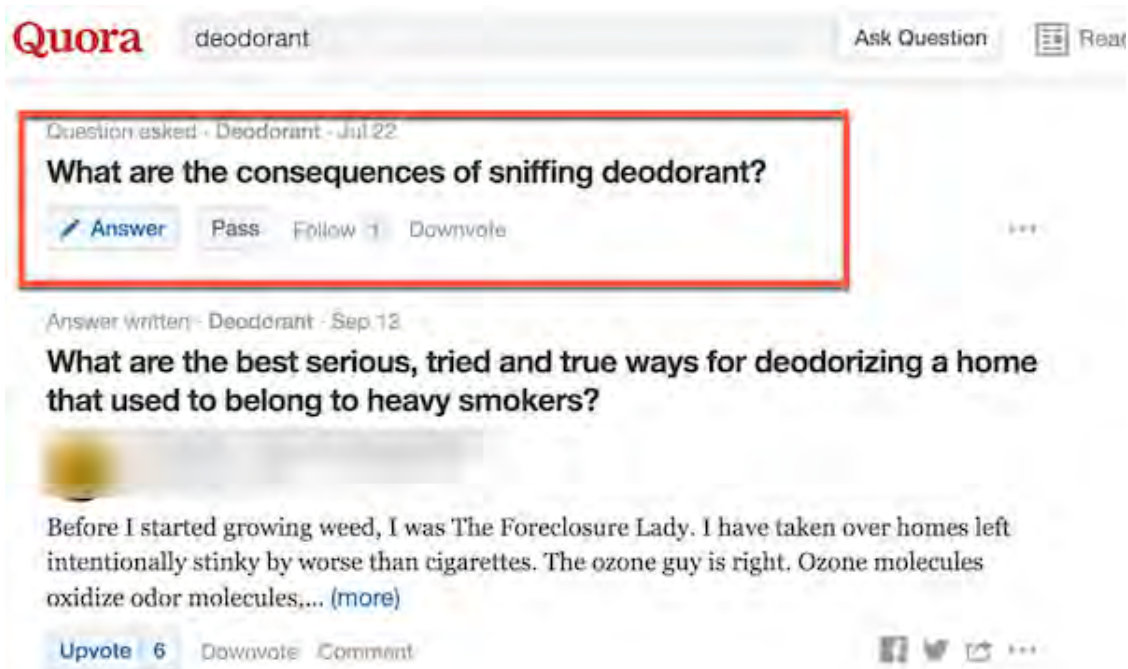
Right now, my favorite questions research tool is [Answerthepublic.com](https://www.answerthepublic.com). Enter a word and the site spits out dozens of ideas. Say I need to write an article about deodorant:



Answer The Public

I'll also look at question and answer sites like [Quora.com](https://www.quora.com).

I don't have a deodorant obsession. But if people have questions about deodorant, you can find relevant questions about anything:



Quora.com: People have questions about everything

Sniffing deodorant. I must admit, I'm intrigued. But I'll stick to Answer the Public and "where did deodorant come from" for now.

A few other question finders:

1. Google Suggest. Visit Google and start typing a question. Don't click "Google Search." Pick the interesting results and write about them.
2. [Keywordtool.io](https://keywordtool.io). Type a phrase and then select the "Questions" tab.
3. Go to Wikipedia. Search for a relevant topic, then see what's linked from that page. Those links are good hints at related topics.
4. Other Q&A sites, like [Stackoverflow](https://stackoverflow.com)

Don't Forget Your Customers

I talk a lot about "big" ideas you can find on AnswerThePublic and other sites. But don't forget your customers!!!!

Get questions about your own products and services. You can often take those questions, expand them, and make them into lightly-branded content.

Find questions:

- On Amazon, if you sell there
- In your existing Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)
- By asking your sales team
- By looking at competitors' FAQ

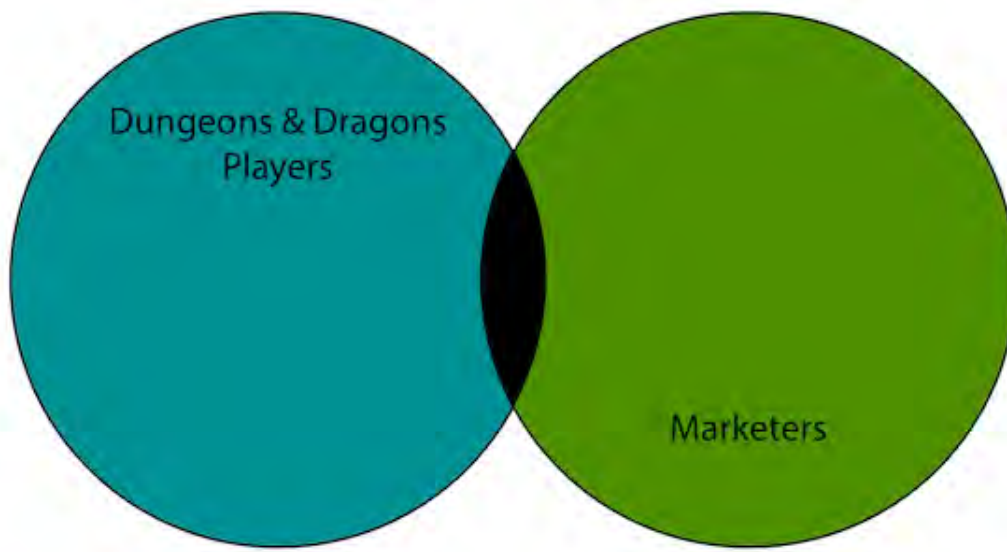
Again: Think big. But keep an eye on your closest audience. Their questions can lead you to some great ideas. At the very least, you'll want to update product descriptions, right?

Random Affinities & Random Ideas

Random affinities are ideas that are connected only by the people who like them both. It's my favorite way to find unexpected niches.

For example, there are lots of marketers. If I try to write something for all of them, I'll get drowned out by all the other people trying to grab the attention of every marketer on the planet. That won't work.

But there's a smaller small group of marketers who play Dungeons & Dragons. It's a group, for real, with at least 120,000 people.

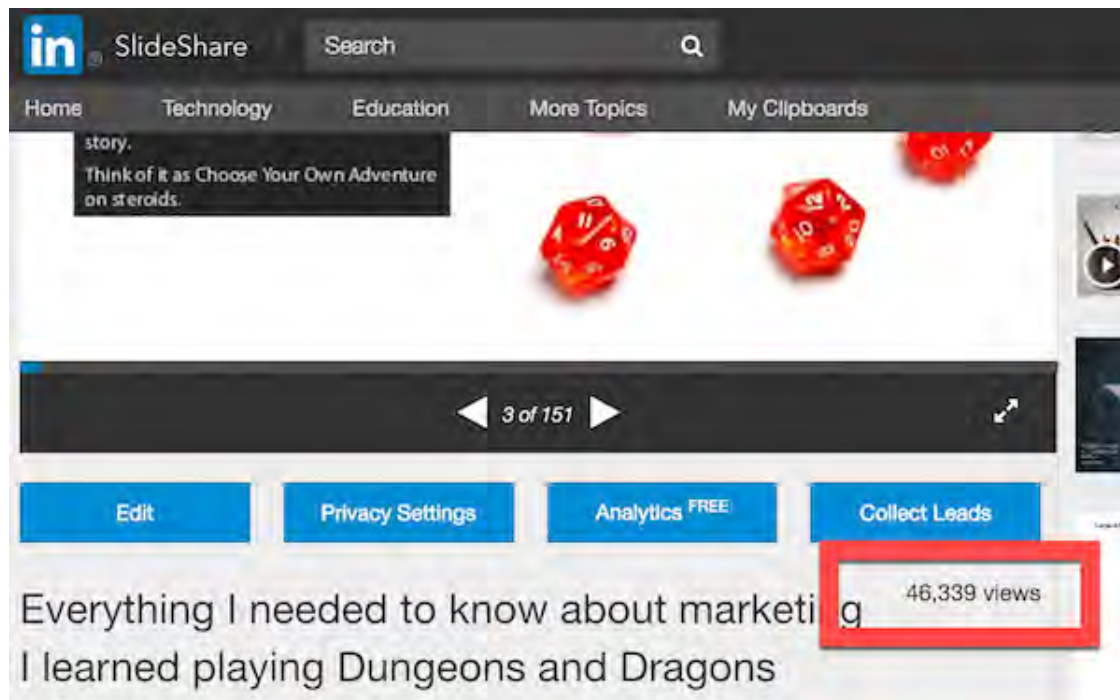


Dungeons & Dragons players who are marketers

A Random Affinity

If I can tie marketing to D&D (that's Dungeons & Dragons, for the uninitiated), I can probably get visibility with that audience. Not a lot of folks out there tying D&D to marketing skills.

When I created this presentation, I hit that very narrow niche. While it wasn't that many people, they were very motivated, and very likely to pay attention:



Dungeons & Dragons + Marketing. Who knew?

That Slideshare post got over 51,000 views. And two leads. And a new client.

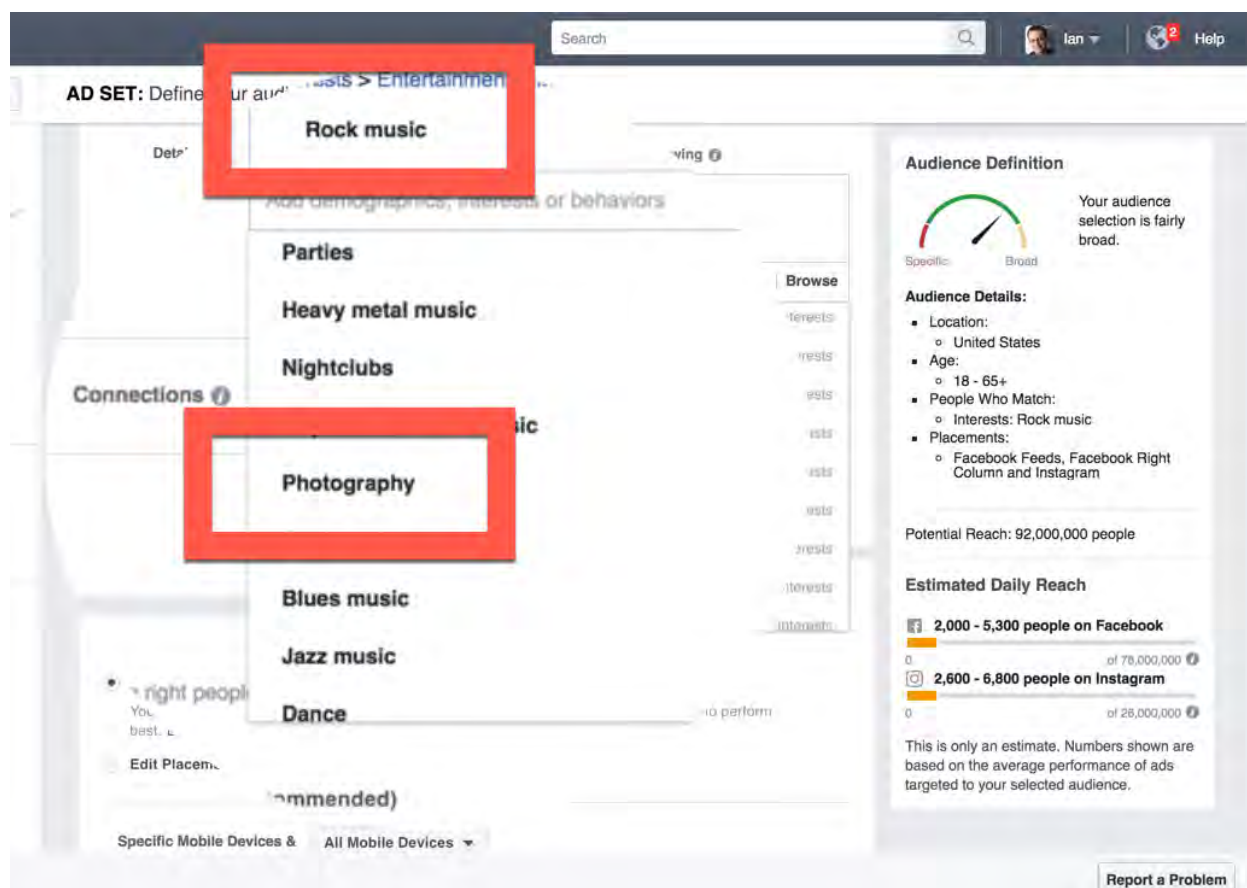
I didn't do any research for this. I came up with this idea on my own. Your brain is a great source of random affinities. Humans are about as random as it gets. Which is the first source of random affinities.

But you probably want to verify you've got an actual audience. You can do that using social media.

Social Media

When you click “Like,” Facebook records it. So do Twitter, LinkedIn and most other sites. They provide this data to advertisers for targeting purposes.

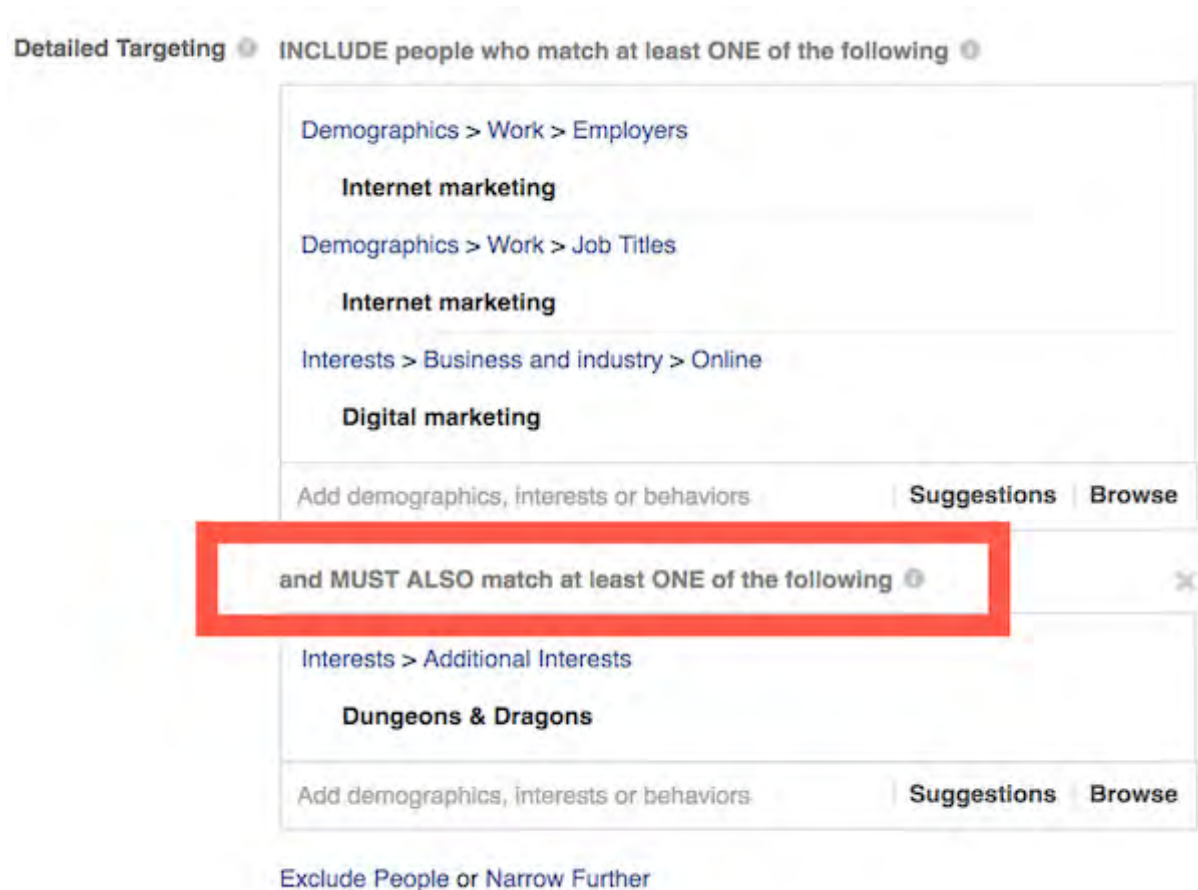
If you create an ad, you can get a peek at random affinities as defined by likes:



People who like rock music also like photography

Not earth-shattering, but I’m not sure I would’ve thought of it. The deeper you dig, the more you’ll find.

I tested my Dungeons & Dragons + Marketing random affinity on Facebook, too. I created an ad, then built an audience of people who like Dungeons & Dragons **and** marketing:



Facebook Audience Building

It showed an audience of about 120,000:

Audience Details:

- Location:
 - United States
- Age:
 - 18-35
- People Who Match:
 - Interests: Dungeons & Dragons
- And Must Also Match:
 - Interests: Digital marketing
 - Employers: Internet marketing
 - Job title: Internet marketing
- Facebook Feeds, Facebook Right Column and Audience Network

Potential Reach: 120,000 people

The Result

If you want to read a great book about this kind of psychographic mining, check out [Killer Facebook Ads](#) by Marty Weintraub.

That's a nice bit of proof that I'm on the right track.

Don't let Facebook veto an idea. You may be onto an idea that no-one's considered. That's where your brain comes in.

Your Brain

Lots of sites provide good answers about the history of deodorant. Some sites do it well. So, while it's a good question, it's been answered, and I can't improve on those answers. I keep researching to find a few related questions, though.

Very few sites deal with:

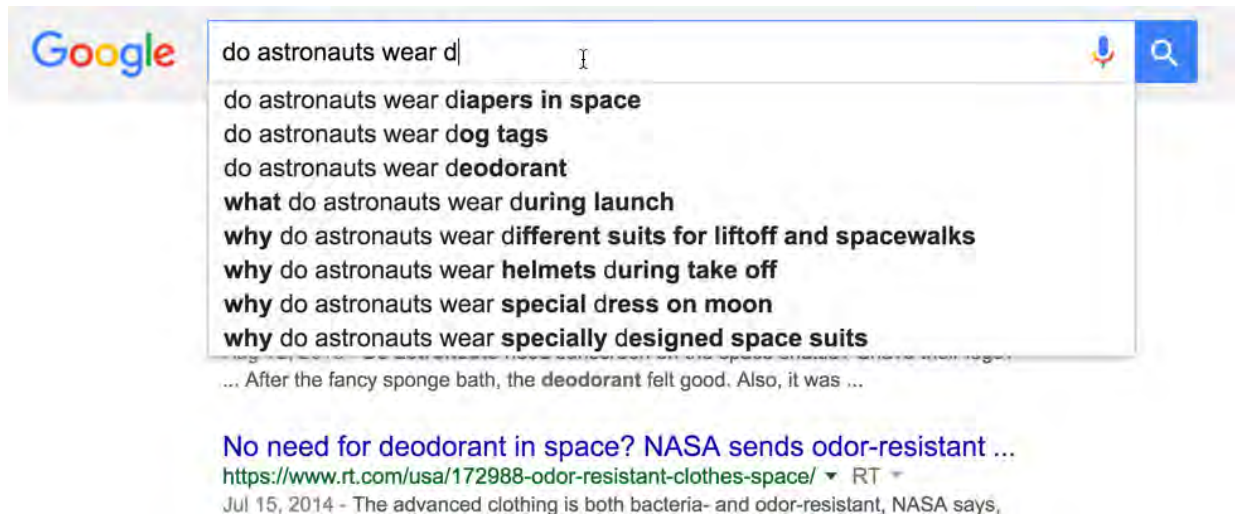
- Famous deodorant disasters
- Deodorant consumption by population
- Why is deodorant white?
- Do astronauts need deodorant?

BINGO. Astronauts and deodorant! I went into a complete nerd swoon when I thought of this.

It turns out no one's written about deodorant and whether the Apollo Astronauts needed it. There are lots of space travel fans. And most of them probably use deodorant. That could be a great random affinity.

Facebook won't tell me much here. Not many people express an interest in deodorant. It's still a good topic.

I'm going to use Google Suggest to see if anyone ever asks about space travel and deodorant. Turns out they do:



Someone wants to know about it

That was a good gut-check. I can work with this idea.

Even if you can't confirm an idea like this, you might still want to try it. There may be a lot of folks out there who will want to hear about this once we bring it up.

There are lots of other tools to help you find random affinities. Amazon is another favorite of mine.

Amazon & Collaborative Filtering

Many sites that show "People who like this product also like..." use **collaborative filtering**. Collaborative filtering uses purchase, browsing, listening and other habits to predict what you want to buy/see/hear next.

Amazon happens to be the world's largest collaborative filter-er. You can use their book sales data to find random affinities. People read books about things they like or need to learn, and Amazon sells enough books to sink a continent.

I did a quick search on deodorant and couldn't find a thing about "deodorant space travel" or "deodorant astronauts," but I'm determined. I keep digging and find a brand of deodorant socks that's apparently worn by astronauts.

I'm not kidding. I found a brand of deodorant socks astronauts wear. I don't even have stinky feet, but I'm buying some. Because astronauts.

I'm not going to write about the brand or socks alone, but a light dawns: If I don't have enough information about deodorant worn by astronauts, I can branch out and write about deodorant *clothing* worn by astronauts.

I'm going with it.

Time-sensitive Content

Companies write all kinds of "Best ____ of 2016" type stuff. Go to Google and search for "Best of 2016," or whatever year you want. Get ready to write an update in 2017.

Or, if you know something in your industry just changed, search for anything written about the previous iteration, and write an

updated version. For example, when Google does one of their many algorithm updates, I almost always write a piece about “[TACTIC] after [CHANGE].”

It’s valuable to my audience. They need to know what to do. And it’s timely.

Get Creative

Two of my favorite non-digital, fun, weird, uber-creative ways to get ideas:

1. Story Cubes: [Rory’s Story Cubes](#) are utterly random and great fun. Roll the cubes, then develop a story that integrates your topic with the cubes. It’s a great brainstorming warm-up, if nothing else. There’s a digital version, too.
2. Go to an art museum. Seriously. Look at the t-shirts people wear. Do they have kids? Take pictures? What kind of cameras? More iOS or Android? It sounds a little creepy, but I’m just talking about people watching. A little observation goes a long way. That probably won’t work for deodorant, obviously. Hopefully.
3. Go to the grocery store. They’re famous (infamous?) for combining products in odd ways. Look at how they group what they sell. What do they connect? Are the soft drinks

near the energy bars? Maybe that means people who aren't necessarily improving their diet still like energy bars.

But again, your most powerful tool is your your brain.

Developing Your Idea

After all my research, I'm going to go with astronauts and deodorant. I can take that idea few directions:

- Do astronauts wear deodorant in space?
- What do astronauts use as deodorant in space?
- How do astronauts deal with body odor in space?
- Or, any particular space program (Apollo, Soviet, Mercury, etc.) and its connection to the entire species of smell-producing human beings

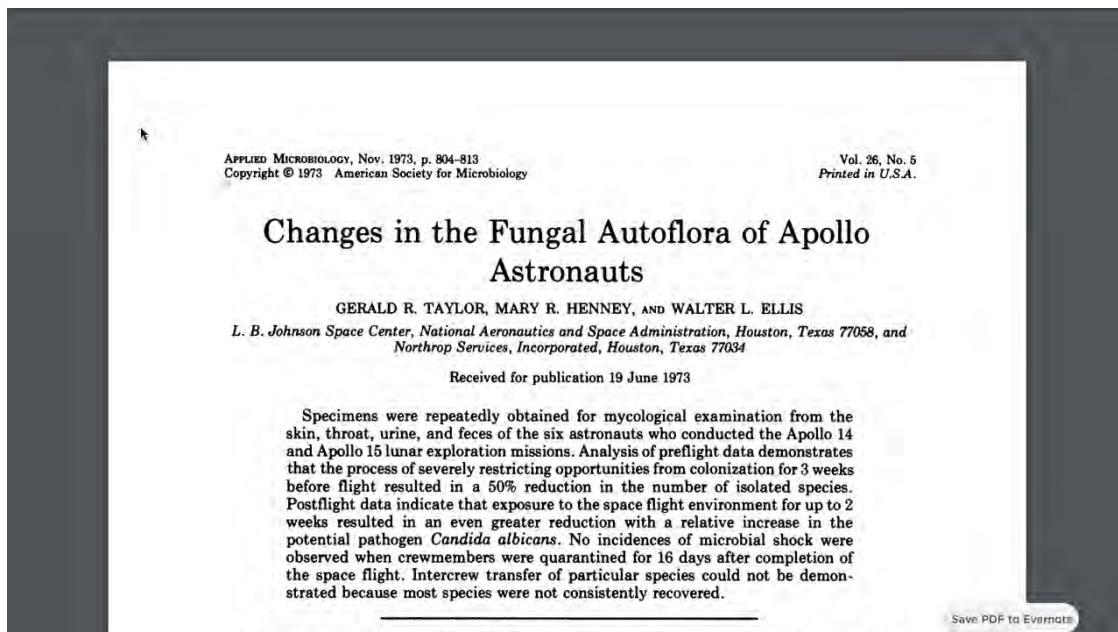
Now, I have to develop my idea.

This is a whole different kind of research, and it's much harder than finding questions. You have to bounce from resource to resource, collecting data. If this is lean, I'm assuming you'll have your own expertise or resources near at hand.

If you don't, keeping lean gets harder. But you can try resources like these:

- Specialists elsewhere, if you have time and want to interview them.
- Sites like Wikipedia, if you carefully check facts.
- Textbooks. You can find many on Google.
- For data, check out the [US Census](#), the [CIA Factbook](#), the [USA](#), [Canadian](#) and [UK](#) open data sites, and dozens of others. Try [Google Public Data](#), too.
- Academic papers and articles. They're often in PDF format, so add "filetype:pdf" to your Google search and you'll limit your search results to that format.

I did the PDF search and found a doozy:



Fungal Autoflora?!

Digging around some more, I realized I could construct a pretty good timeline. I decided that the best content would be the evolution of space deodorant.

It turns out the space programs have benefitted from improvements in deodorant technology. They couldn't take aerosol cans with them. The old roll-ons were messy as heck. And so on.

This is crazy stuff, right? It's also interesting, if you're a fan of human space flight. It'll be a good piece of content.

We just went from

"Yikes. I have to write an article about deodorant. No one cares."

to

"Yeah! Space nerds! They'll love this!!!"

You don't have to get this weird, of course. This process works for more mainstream stuff. By going from topic to question, topic to affinities, or topic to brainstorming, you can come up with great content for anything.

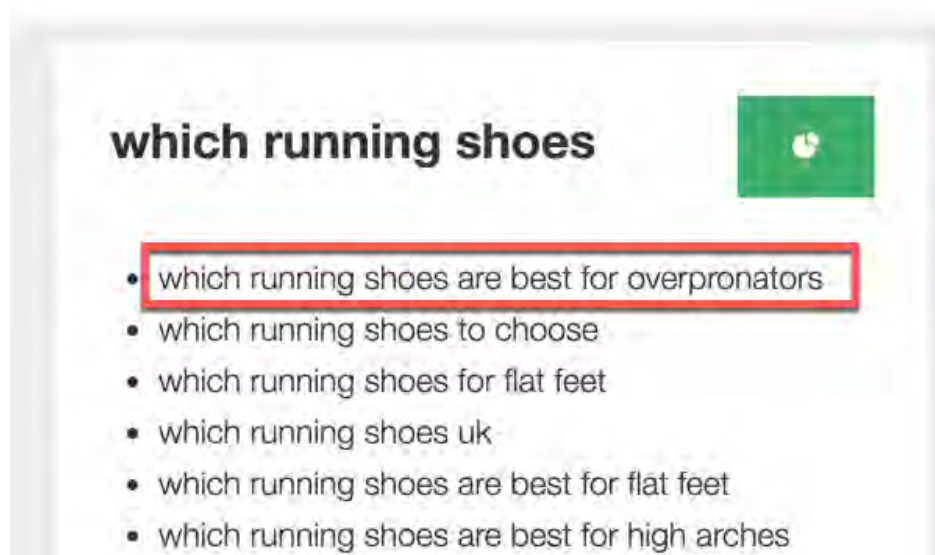
Example: Writing About Running Shoes

Deodorant in space is so bizarre, everyone who read this said "Ian, that is bizarre. Try something a little, er, more normal."

I think deodorant in space is a GREAT SUBJECT, but here's another example: Running shoes.

Say you need to write about running shoes. **Everyone** writes about running shoes. Finding a topic is going to be really, really difficult, right?

Wrong. I go to Answer The Public and find lots of great ideas. Overpronation sounds like something people need help with. I like it right away:



Answer The Public: Overpronation

Google Suggest confirms it's a good idea. People search this question:



Google Suggest: Overpronation

When I wrote this book, the most recent article on the subject was written in 2014. I could easily write an updated piece.

Then, as I got ready to publish this ebook, this popped up. It proves I was on the right track, but it's a hollow victory:

Huge Selection of Overpronation Running Shoes. Free Returns for 365 Days!

[Men's Running Shoes](#)

[Top Rated Running Shoes](#)

[Women's Running Shoes](#)

The Complete List of Best Running Shoes for over-pronators



No.	Name	My Rating
1	Nike Lunarglide 7	4.9
2	Brooks Adrenaline GTS 15	4.8
3	ASICS GT-2000 3	4.7
4	Saucony Omni 13	4.7

6 more rows, 2 more columns

[Best Running Shoes & Sneakers For Over-pronation in 2016](#)

runnerclick.com/best-running-shoes-for-over-pronation/

[About this result](#) • [Feedback](#)

[Shoe Advisor | Runner's World](#)

www.runnersworld.com/shoeadvisor ▾ Runner's World ▾

Answer these questions, and we'll find some shoes that are right for you. Are you ...

Dang. Someone beat me to it.

They even included “in 2016” in the article, emphasizing that their content is timely.

This is another valuable lean content lesson: When you have an idea, publish. Don't wait.

Random Thoughts and Questions

These are questions I get a lot. I figured I'd, you know, create some content by answering them:

Do I Have to Find An Idea In All Three Resources?

These three resources are just that: Resources. You don't have to find an idea in all three, or even more than one. They're tools you use to find ideas. So, if you find an idea in any one of them, use it.

What If I Just Can't Find a Unique Idea?

Impossible. But for argument's sake, maybe you just found the one topic about which every question has been answered. If you can't use a unique idea, improve upon what's already out there:

- If an idea has lots of out-of-date answers/info, write something more up-to-date
- If all the content around an idea is lousy, produce something much better
- Find questions answered in only one format (like blog posts) and try a better presentation of your information in a slide deck, long form, a graphic, or interactive content

Do I Always Have to Answer A Question?

Absolutely not. Questions are a nice starting point. But there are lots of other ways to talk to develop great, audience-focused ideas.

Tell a great story

- Debunk a myth
- Talk about trends
- Help the audience choose

As long as it's in some way useful, it's a good idea.

That Was a Lot of Work

When you read these steps and ideas, developing unique ideas seems like a lot of work. It's not. The whole process from start to finish took me about thirty minutes. It takes a little practice. Like writing, ideation uses a mental muscle. Get that muscle in shape by knowing your tools, learning to brainstorm, and figuring out your favorite routine, and you'll get faster.

It becomes as close to frictionless as you're going to get.

The Four Rules: Where This Fits In

Your ideas kick off your Lean Content project. The topics you choose can affect what you create, how you create it, and where you publish it.

Topics impact all four rules of Lean Content. Your ideas can create or reduce friction by demanding more or less review time, creating liability or compromising your brand. They can be more or less re-usable based on subject matter, timeliness, market

sensitivity and cost. They might require using highly proprietary formats.

Don't let that restrain idea generation. Instead, develop your ideas and carefully plan how you'll use them.

Up Next

Ideas are great. But they need to become content, and that means you have to get through all manner of constraints, choose a format, and decide where you're going to publish.

Time to plan.

Plan

4

In this chapter, consider your constraints, resources, and other gotchas before you start creating. You'll get more done.

Why You Need a Plan

When you lean, you need a plan. When you produce lean content, that means:

Looking at constraints

- Figuring out your first piece
- Considering connections

Look At Constraints

Everyone wants to set goals: Pageviews, shares, likes, blah blah blah.

My first goal is to **deliver**. That's what this book is about. Before your other goals matter, you have to ship it. So you need to examine constraints and figure out what you can and can't do.

That can influence choice of format, how deep you dig into your topic, whether you write one thousand or 100,000 words, and how much research you do.

Constraints might include:

Regulatory requirements: While compliance review can seem tedious, lawsuits are the opposite of lean.

- Approval process: There's no use complaining if your organization has an approval process. Work within it. Plan for it.
- Time: When's it due? My writing really suffers after three 20-hour keyboard marathons. Yours probably does, too. Plan for a sensible writing schedule.
- Topics: In your organization, some topics are taboo. You can't write about them. Don't bash your head against the wall.
- Resources: You don't have a designer available, and won't for three months.

Constraints are a good thing. They ensure you stay realistic, and that you acknowledge the fact that you're going to produce some stuff, rather than bemoan the roadblocks. Constraints help you

keep the process as close to frictionless as possible. It's easy to think big (and it's fun). It's harder to develop self-contained ideas that you can turn into finished product.

That's what constraints are all about. Nothing formal required. But when you're done listing constraints, on paper or in your head, you must know exactly what it'll take to ship a finished product.

In mountain biking, it's an established fact that if you stare at a tree stump, you're going to hit it. Instead, you look where you want to go. The stump steers you in the right direction.

The same is true with content: Don't just stare at the need for a legal review. You'll crash right into it. Instead, plan and account for it. Find an acceptable route to delivery.

In that way, constraints help you get stuff done, because they narrow your options. It's easier to pick your route to completion.

Rule #1 of lean content: Minimize friction. Constraints **help** you do that by helping you focus.

Define the Final Product

Once you've got an idea, figure out your what your final product will be. I apply a few basic rules:

Start with the simplest (a blog or social media post).

- Look at more elaborate products only if they'll more effectively communicate and build your audience. Don't create an infographic because they're trendy. Create one if that format is ideal.
- Re-use. If you have a great longform template, and this is going to be a longform piece, try to use that template before you put in the time to create a new one.

There **are** reasons to deliver different final products: PDF will preserve complex layouts. Kindle will allow delivery via Amazon. Infographics are very information-dense.

But complex formats often kill lean content by introducing friction to the production process. In marketing, unpublished content is worthless. So choose your format carefully, and use the simplest workable solution. You can always create something fancier later.

Your planned final product should follow the first two Rules of Lean Content:

1. Minimize friction
2. Be at least partly re-usable

My rule of thumb: If the format adds more than 50% to delivery time, and that adds up to more than a week, it must significantly add to content user experience and consumption.

I'm talking about blog posts and relatively simple e-books and slide decks. There are exceptions: A really fancy ebook might require more design than writing time.

Remember, lean is an **independent** production process. Doubling delivery time for unnecessary prep work is not lean.

Decide on Delivery

How you deliver content can complicate or simplify your work. If you're publishing a blog post, delivery is easy: It's a page on your web site (or another site—more on that later) that anyone can see. No form, no special security, no payment system required.

If you're gating your content, delivering in a different format or doing anything else more complex than click-here-and-read, you'll have more to do to take your content live. The launch process starts to bog down.

This comes back to constraints. Do you have the resources on hand to ship something more complicated than a blog post? Be realistic. If you don't, simplify.

Make sure you choose your delivery method wisely. It must follow all the rules of Lean Content:

1. It creates almost no friction (see Constraints, above)
2. It's re-usable for later work
3. It's trustworthy, and won't later require lots of troubleshooting and customer help
4. It's future-proof, and won't break when someone updates Wordpress

Pick the Place

Where will you publish? There are scads of options. Your site is only one. If constraints and process make it harder to publish to your own site, consider:

- Third-party article sites, like Medium, LinkedIn Pulse or the Huffington Post
- Longer posts on Facebook or other social media outlets
- Video and images on just about any social network

If you're publishing something other than a principally text-based article, consider:

- Slideshare for slide decks
- YouTube or Vimeo for video
- Soundcloud or similar sites for podcasts (check copyright clauses, first)

Pay attention to the first three Rules of Lean Content:

1. In the context of your resources and constraints, publishing should be as close to frictionless as possible.
2. Ensure your content is re-usable on other sites and in other formats, or at least click publish being aware that you can't re-publish it elsewhere.
3. Publish on reliable, trustworthy sites. New sites offer all sorts of incentives to get your content. That's great. But will that site be around in six weeks? Think about it.

The Wonders of Piggy-Back Publishing

People argue when I suggest publishing off-site. They want to “own” the content, primarily for SEO. If the content isn't on their site, they reason, it won't help them rank.

That's wrong. “Piggy-back” publishing is a really powerful tactic.

First: Content isn't all about SEO. Great exposure is good for your business, and publishing on other sites can give you access to vast audiences. That's good for your overall business, but it

can also lead to links to your own site, as more people find out you exist. And larger content sites often rank for phrases you can't hope to pursue.

Second: Piggy-back publishing means piggy-back SEO. There are phrases so competitive that you can't hope to rank, right? You can't accumulate the links, the sheer bulk of content or the social influence. Big power sites, though, like Quora, Slideshare and Medium, may already have top positions. If they're going to rank anyway, why not make sure you wrote the page?

Don't create a barely-disguised ad. Write something really useful, where the only branding is in the biography, the template or the author page.

Here's an example: I'll never get Portent's blog into the top 10 for "Is SEO dead in 2016?"

This question makes my blood boil, FYI.

But I can write an answer on Quora, which ranks number four. If my answer's good enough, it grabs the top spot there, and poof, I have visibility on the topic:

Is SEO dead in 2016? Why few people are saying in this way and what are the new techniques for SEO in 2016 if it is not dead?

Request ▾ Follow 4 Comment Share Download



You've written an answer

You can edit or delete it at any time.

Powered by Hired.com

Have startup companies apply to you. Learn more now.

We'll pay you \$1,000 when you land your dream job on Hired.

[Learn More at Hired.com](#)

4 Answers



Ian Lurie, marketer for over 20 years. Curmudgeon since birth

Written Wed

SEO isn't dead. Apparently this question isn't, either.

Piggy-backed on Quora

I'd rather Portent rank number one for this question. But it may not be worth the effort. It may not even be possible. This, on the other hand, took me an hour.

By the way, my answer grabbed 300+ views in the first twenty-four hours. Not bad.

Don't ignore third-party sites. They're a great tool.

Connected Content

Whether you're writing a blog post, a tweet or a book, think about how you can connect this piece to past and future content.

Also, think about how you might write one longer piece you can break up and publish as a series or collection of documents.

You don't have to publish all your connected content at once. You don't have to produce it. You can plan it, though. Here's an example:

1. I write a piece about the nutritional benefits of rutabagas. At the same time, I create two recipes and do a photoshoot.
2. I publish the first piece.
3. A week later, I publish the two recipes and link them to and from the first piece.
4. I do a Facebook post with a snapshot of my latest rutabaga salad. That post links to the recipes.
5. I put those two recipes, plus 10 more, into an e-cookbook for download.
6. I create an infographic on the rutabaga lifecycle.

I can't stand rutabagas. I'm mocking them, even as you read this.

And so on. Planning and creating connected content has some advantages:

- It fills the calendar
- It lets you consolidate research efforts for several pieces of content
- You can submit multiple pieces to your approval process at once
- It's a kick-ass SEO strategy, because you create “hubs” of relevant, interlinked content

You don't have to plan this ahead of time. You can find connections as you go. I usually look for high-performing content and build around it.

Dealing With A Long Approval Process

You may work in an organization with a long content approval process. If your content requires engineering, legal and branding reviews, there's no sense getting frustrated.

Reviewers have ten other jobs. The more efficient you can make it for them, the better.

You need to somehow maintain a steady flow of approved content. Repurposing is a great way to make the most of reviewer time. I'll talk about that in its own chapter. First, here are two other methods I like:

Filling the Queue

Figure out how long the approval process takes. Start creating and submitting content. Don't stop and wait for approval of one piece. Instead, keep submitting pieces. You'll start getting reviewed, finalized content back. Once you do, you'll have a relatively steady flow of ready-to-publish stuff.

I'm not naive, though: I rarely see consistent approval times. More often I see one piece of content turned around in a week, another in two months. To deal with that, try batching content.

Batching Content

Batching means creating one larger piece of content that you will publish as many smaller ones.

Say I'm writing for a company that makes archery equipment. Any time you're creating content about firing pointy sticks at stuff, there's bound to be some review time involved. In my case, anything I create requires an expert review to make sure I'm not giving terrible advice that results in someone skewering their car. It also requires a legal review to make sure we won't get sued if someone nonetheless shoots their car.

I could write four blog posts:

1. Selecting the right bow for your activity
2. Selecting the right arrowhead for your activity
3. Creating a safe practice environment
4. Bow safety

Then I'd send each one for expert and legal review. The reviewers would have to read each one separately. Every post requires a separate process, with each post sent via e-mail or otherwise routed from one reviewer to the next. All of this costs a little bit of time.

Also, reviewers are more likely to read one post, then do something else, then read another. It takes longer for me to get content approved.

I can get clever, though: If I write one longer piece, I can send it for review all at once. That means a single "place in line" for review of the same amount of information. Reviewers are likely to read everything at once, then pass it along.

It's more efficient, but batched content may take longer to approve. There's more of it. That's OK. At the very least, you've got a library of ready-to-publish material.

I'll be transparent about it and tell reviewers the plan. This isn't about tricking anyone. And I don't want to get fired.

If You're Just Stuck

Sometimes, the approval process is so long, it's a brick wall. You can plan around that, too. These ideas have worked for me in the past:

- Find content that the organization has already published elsewhere (for example, offline). Re-use it.
- Find content approved and published by competitors, and suggest ideas based on that. I don't love chasing competitors, but your company may be more inclined to approve ideas that are already in the marketplace.
- Take one service area or product. Find three questions customers ask about it. Write answers.
- Give up. Not completely, but switch to editing and updating existing content. For example, if you find great [customer questions](#), focus on updating your FAQ and product descriptions, first. That's less fun, but you can contribute a lot. If your changes improve performance, you'll be able to make a great argument for bigger projects.

Up Next

It's time to create something!

Produce

5

It's More than “Go!”

The word “Produce” is lovely, but you need a real workflow:

1. Set up your folders: Your entire content project folder, with subfolders for images and any other included content
2. Set up backup and version management
3. Write in Markdown
4. Source and prepare images
5. Insert them into your work
6. Edit and proofread
7. Move on to “Polish”

Work in Standard Formats!!

Your process must support the four rules of lean content: Frictionless, re-usable, trustworthy and future-proof.

Yes, I'll keep repeating this. It's almost like it's a mantra or something.

To accomplish that, you must work in standard formats.

If you can't edit your work across different devices and platforms, you'll eventually have to learn a new tool and get tech support. Or, you'll spend time figuring out how to reformat your work when you upgrade to the latest version of Banana Writer 2019. That's not future-proof, frictionless, re-usable or trustworthy.

You need to use file types and formats that work across machines and toolsets, rather than proprietary stuff that only works on a single piece of software.

Remember all the work you did in [Chapter Two](#)? Now it's going to pay off, because you're ready to work in standard formats.

Start Basic: Use Plain Text

Where are you publishing? Probably on the web. Tools like Microsoft Word and Powerpoint have their place, but have you ever converted a Word document to a blog post? It's not pretty.

In lean content production, start with the simplest format and work your way up. **Always start with plain text.** If you're writing a blog post, use a text editor. If you're creating a video, start with a script you write in a text editor. If you're creating a slide deck, start with a text editor. Infographic? "Info" comes first. Then "graphic." Write the text bits first, in plain text.

- Text files are cross-platform.
- Text editors are screaming fast.
- Text files are 100% backwards-compatible. 500 years from now, there will be tools ideally suited to reading and editing text files. Or we'll all have tentacles and write with our minds, in which case none of this is important.
- It's hard to corrupt a text file. I've lost lots of rich text content to crashes and bugs. I've never lost a text file.
- Text files are small and easy to move around.

Do Not Use WYSIWYG Editors

Most content management systems (including Wordpress) have WYSIWYG editors. WYSIWYG = "What You See Is What You Get."

WYSIWYG editors let you write without doing any HTML. They also generate horrible code. It's not quite as bad as Microsoft Word. But it can lead to all sorts of unexpected results.

That's why you're using Markdown. When you get to the Publish step, you'll be able to cut-and-paste nice, clean HTML code right into the plain text editor of your content management system. That will minimize layout surprises—like images displaying in unexpected ways—when you publish. It will provide you 100% transparency into what's making your content look the way it looks. And, even though HTML looks complicated, it will make publishing far faster.

Format Using Markdown

The one drawback of plain text is its lack of formatting. You can use HTML and CSS (Cascading Style Sheets), but they're designed for the web, have a relatively steep learning curve, and don't transfer well to other formats.

Instead, use Markdown. Markdown is a simple, text-based formatting language. “Language” seems scary, but it's a far simpler way to write than, say, Microsoft Word.

It is **the** lean content creation platform, because you can format as you write, without using the mouse. Every time you reach for your mouse, you interrupt your train of thought. Using Markdown keeps you off your mouse and on the keyboard, preserving your flow.

And, Markdown conversion tools let you export to HTML, Rich Text Format (RTF - Microsoft Word and other word processors use it) and PDF.

Markdown is plain text. You can use it in any text editor. I had you set up Sublime Text, because it adds some nice automation. Here's what this book looks like, right now. I'm writing in Markdown using Sublime Text as my text editor:

```
## Using Markdown for enhanced formatting
Plain text is great, but you probably need headings, bullets and :
what Markdown is for.

Markdown is a simple, text-based formatting language. I'm using it

* Here's a bullet
* Here's another bullet
* And another

By the way, these are numbered:

1. One
2. two
3. three

Links are pretty easy, too:
[Here's the link text] ("https://www.portent.com/")
```

Markdown in Sublime text

If you look at the Four Rules, plain text + Markdown is ideal:

1. It's frictionless: The only skill you need is typing.
2. It's re-usable: You can convert plain text to just about anything.
3. It's trustworthy: How often to plain text files get corrupted? Not very.
4. It's future-proof: The day we can't read plain text is the day we don't care.

Here's what happens when you go to the other extreme:

The FrameMaker F@@@ Up of 2003

In 2003, I wrote a book called Conversation Marketing. I wrote it in a program called FrameMaker. I loved FrameMaker.

I hired a professional editor.

He only worked with Microsoft Word documents.

OK, I thought, no problem. I exported from FrameMaker to rich text. The editor did great work.

Then, I hired a book designer. She designed the book by pulling the Word file apart, then laying everything out in whatever design tool she used. The result was fantastic. I self-published. With sales of nearly a dozen copies, it was a resounding success.

Two years later, I decided to convert it to an e-book. I realized in horror that we'd gone from editing in Word to designing in another program. My FrameMaker version didn't contain the edits. I couldn't use it to create the e-book, and making the edits in the FrameMaker document would take weeks.

And, of course, FrameMaker had gone through a major overhaul, so the newer version couldn't accurately present the original file. Don't get me started about **that** bit of stupidity.

I tried exporting the Word version to HTML. That generated total code gobbledygook. It was worthless.

I ended up converting the Word document to plain text, then reformatting it all over again.

If I'd started with text, then used Markdown, I could've sent the editor plain text, gotten the plain text back, exported to whatever format the book designer wanted, then retained the edited version for my e-book. Exporting to HTML, PDF or any other format supported by Markdown converters would've been a cinch.

Use standard formats. Really, truly standard. Stick to plain text plus Markdown.

Use Standard Image Formats

Always export specialized formats (Photoshop, OmniGraffle, etc.) to standard formats.

Keep the files in their original .psd (Photoshop) or other editable format. Just make certain you always have completely cross-platform versions, as well.

As I write this, standard formats include: PNG, JPG, SVG

SVG is a little cutting-edge for my taste but has real advantages on the web, and is gaining wider acceptance. But displaying an SVG image that's any bigger than a small logo will bring many computers to their knees. SVG is a very processor-intensive format.

So, use PNG and JPG first. Use SVG if you are generating images “on the fly,” have line art that needs to stay extremely precise, even when re-sized, or if you have an insurmountable urge to try it.

When you plan, pick the formats that create the least friction while being the most trustworthy and re-usable.

I'll talk more about images in a moment.

I Nag

Always, always remember these things:

1. Use standard formats, because they're more future-proof
2. Use plain text and Markdown for formatting
3. Use standard image formats, like PNG and JPG

Set Up Your Folders

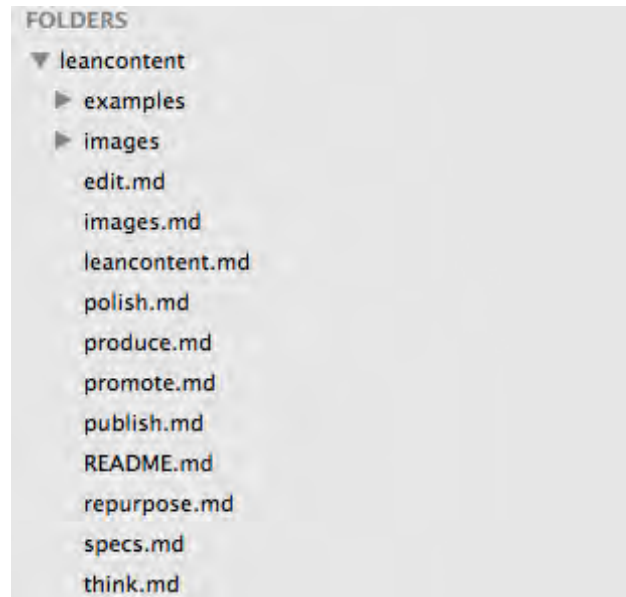
Lean content starts with an organized workspace and a repeatable process.

When you work in plain text or another basic file type, you can't embed images or other media in the file itself. Compare that to Word, where you can cut-and-paste an image directly into your document. In lean content, images, video, and anything else you include will “live” in separate files.

That's a **good thing**. It makes it easier to go back later and modify those images. But it means organization is a little tougher. It pays to use a consistent folder structure that lets you easily track down images, text and other stuff as needed.

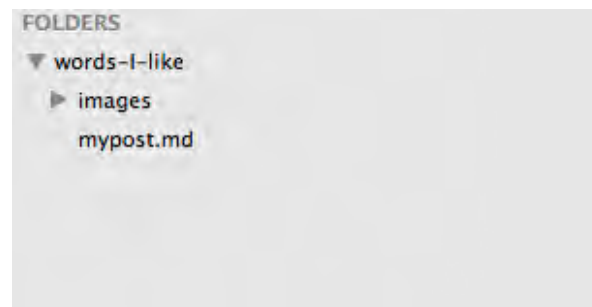
I always create a folder for my document, then subfolders for images, original images and examples (if relevant).

Here's the folder structure for this book:



Lean content folder structure

Here's what I use for a blog post:



Blog post folder structure

If you're using Dropbox, put these folders inside your Dropbox folder.

If you're using Github, create a repository and sync it up.

Create Your First File

This is the easiest thing you'll do:

1. Open your text editor (Sublime Text, if you're following along).
2. Create a new file.
3. Save it with a ".md" file extension.
4. Start typing. You can use Markdown to format.

Working with Markdown

Markdown wipes out one of the biggest sources of friction: The need for designers and developers to create basic HTML content.

It's a nice compromise between plain text and learning HTML. You can format your content with a few symbols, then export to HTML, MS Word, etc.

There's a full Markdown guide [here](#). These are the essentials:

```
# Level one heading
## Level two heading
### Level three heading
```

```
* A bullet
```

```
1. Starts numbering
```

```
**text** bolds text
```

```
*text* italicizes it
```

You can also create links and embed images.

To create a link, use this:

```
[This is my company](https://www.portent.com)
```

That creates a link pointing at www.portent.com with the link text “This is my company,” like this:

[This is my company](https://www.portent.com)

This will embed the image file “foo.jpg,” located in the “images” folder, with the ALT text “This is an image:”

```
![This is an image](images/foo.jpg)
```

You can also create tables in Markdown. I find it maddening and avoid the process, instead creating them in HTML. If you want to learn, try the [Markdown Tables Generator](#).

Use Your Text Editor!!!

Some blogging platforms—like Wordpress.com—support Markdown out of the box. You don’t have to do any conversion. Others, like Wordpress.org, have plugins that let you type Markdown right into the blog post editing screen, in your browser. No files on your computer.

It’s a trap! Don’t fall for it.

I still use plain text, save it to my hard drive, and then convert it. Then I cut-and-paste the converted version into Wordpress.

Why? Because browsers crash. I once typed a 1,500-word blog post directly into Wordpress, only to have my web browser go belly-up. I had to rewrite the whole thing. Argggghhhh.

Also, if you someday decide to use the same content in another format, you'll want the original Markdown and the original images. If you write directly in your blogging platform, you probably won't have either.

If you write in your plain text editor, you can save your file locally and avoid browser-generated heartache. Pasting the generated HTML takes a few seconds. It's worth it.

Nag 2.0

If you want to lean:

Use plain text to write. It's more stable, future-proof and easily transferrable from one program to another.

Format using Markdown. Markdown is a nice, fast way to format text that doesn't require a mouse. Plus, it exports to many other document formats.

Plan your folder structure. Seems like silly housekeeping, but it prevents later drama. Put images in an "images" folder. Create other folders as needed.

Back up your work. Save to Dropbox or use Github, and/or put your files somewhere else, depending on your level of paranoia.

Images

For many of the content teams I work with, images are the biggest source of friction. Writers think they need designers to add imagery to content. Content immediately crashes into constraints. Publishing gets delayed. Teeth grind.

Lean content means you can create a great piece of content—including images—yourself. No designers.

The trick with images is to keep it simple. Limit your workflow to:

1. Get the image
2. Crop it (if necessary)
3. Resize it (if necessary)
4. Annotate it (if necessary)
5. Export it to the desired format
6. Compress it
7. Insert it

Images must add value

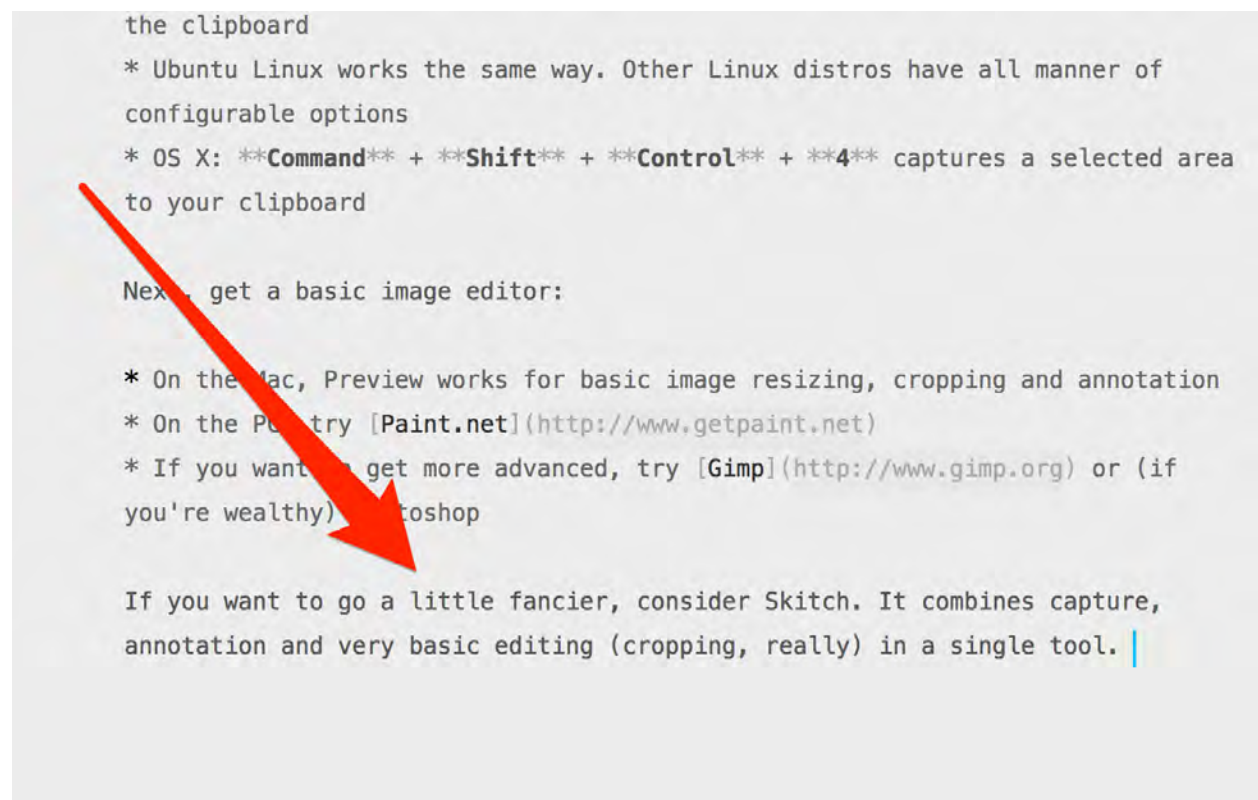
I once suggested that images can provide a “visual break” for the reader. That falls into the “Things I wish I’d never done” category,

like showing my 1-year-old daughter how much fun it was to squish goldfish crackers.

Images aren't a break. They're additional value. They might be useful information. They might be entertaining. But they must provide value.

They need to make a point.

This image points out a specific item on a page. If Assuming it's in context, it's helpful:



An image that points something out

Alfred's cute, but he's not lending any value:



Poor Alfred. He adds no value.

I'm not against a little entertainment, though, if you can use an image to make a point.

I'm a speech bubble addict. I like to use Comic Life and lend a little relevance. Entertainment is fine, **if** it makes sense in context. Here's how Alfred looks when he's making a point:



Alfred has a purpose.

He adds value to this writing, improving on his normal contribution to the bottom line of carpet cleaning services.

Save Images, Don't Paste Them

Save your images! More than once, I've taken the easy route and cut-and-paste my images into Microsoft Word or Powerpoint, only to realize I need the originals later. Then I have to re-take the screen shots, or try to find the photo on my camera (a camera, I know—very quaint), or go back to the stock photography site and start digging around.

Also, online publications usually want images as separate files, and you can easily repurpose them when you repurpose your content.

Here's what you do:

1. In the "images" folder, create a subfolder called "originals"
2. Keep your non-compressed, non-resized originals in there
3. Resize and compress images **before** you insert them into your content
4. Put the resized and compressed images in the root "images" folder.

Now, you can re-use the originals, insert them into multiple pieces of content and generally get more from each image. And, you can re-use your prepared images throughout your document, annotate them in various ways, and send them to third parties if they're publishing your article. It's the essence of lean: Easy, fast repurposing of images lets you corner fast.

Battlestar Galactica: Why You Save Originals

A few years ago, I wrote a blog post. It ended up being 10,000 words, with 20+ screen captures. We decided to make it instead into a long form piece. That meant different image dimensions and higher quality.

I hadn't saved my originals. I'd uploaded my prepared images to Wordpress but hadn't saved them anywhere else.

Sigh.

So I ended up recapturing every single screenshot. It only took me two or three hours (!!!!). Doesn't sound like much (cough), but **that is at least two episodes of Battlestar Galactica**. Or three hours spent improving the article, instead of redoing work.

Save your originals.

9,000 Steps: Why You Save Originals, The Sequel

I love telling stories, so here's another: Ten years ago, I wrote an article for a marketing web site. They wanted the article in Microsoft Word format. I eagerly got to work.

It's always exciting for me: The idea that someone **wants** my writing. When someone asks, I jump all over it.

After a few days, I sent them a draft. They said, "Great. Can you send us your images in a ZIP archive?"

Oops. I'd cut-and-pasted my images directly into the Word doc. I didn't have them. Since Word does horrible, unspeakable things to images, I couldn't just copy them out and save them.

Once again, I had to recapture screens, track down photographs and then number them by location.

I walk 10,000 steps every couple days. And I'm a little OCD about it. Thanks to my screw-up, one of my walks was only 9,000 steps.

I'm certain I gained at least a pound that day. All because I didn't save copies of my images.

Save the prepared versions of your images, too.

Image Sourcing

I divide image sources into three categories:

Screenshots are captures of software, web sites or anything else that appears on your display. Use them to explain and emphasize. Nothing else.

You can use the built-in screenshot tools for our operating system:

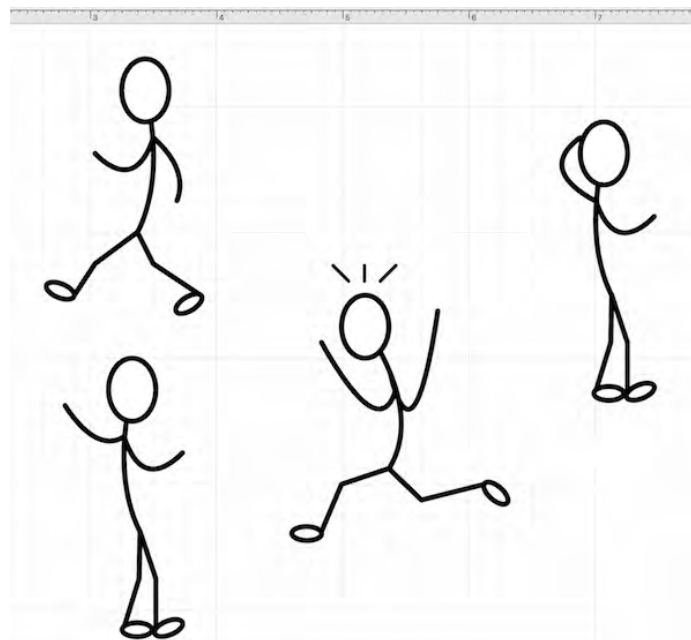
- Windows: **PrtScn**, or **ALT + PrtScn** to capture the active window to the clipboard
- Ubuntu Linux works the same way. Other Linux distros have all manner of configurable options
- OS X: **Command + Shift + Control + 4** captures a selected area to your clipboard

Or use the tools you installed in [Chapter Two](#). I love Snagit and Skitch, but you should use the one that works for you.

Bespoke images are the illustrations, unique photographs and “custom” graphics created for things like infographics. They include fancy illustrations, flow charts and data visualization like graphs.

Most content producers are writers. As a group, we don’t have much in the way of illustration or photography skills. So we tend to shy away from bespoke imagery. You don’t have to.

If you’re as, uh, talented an illustrator as I am, and you’re a Mac user, consider using OmniGraffle. It’s a vector-based drawing program designed originally to create flow charts and diagrams. But you can do all sorts of stuff. I can even draw passable stick figures:



Stick figures!

In all seriousness, you can create some solid informational content:



Client infographic

There are other tools out there, like LucidChart. I don't find them as versatile, but they go a long way toward creating quality illustration.

Photographs are different. I can't help you take better pictures. I'd have to know how to do it myself first. Instead, I take the shoot-a-thousand-times-and-get-one-good-photo route. Every now and then, I get something so bizarre, it's worth keeping:



I have no idea

When it comes to bespoke imagery, the most important rule is: Don't get too ambitious. If you're working alone, keep your own time, resource and skills constraints in mind. You don't usually need a work of high art to make a point. Imagery should help you lean, not slow you down.

Stock images are licensed for reuse. I'm not a fan. It's partly the content. Those conference rooms of perfectly attractive, partially ethnically-balanced, happy people give me the creeps. As does the near-matching water level in their glasses:



Shudder

But stock images are very lean, if you can find some with more personality:



That's better

As a rule: Look carefully, and don't include images for the sake of having images.

Working with Images

In this section, I talk about the image tools you installed in [Chapter Two](#). Go back and read that section if you haven't installed them.

Keep it simple! All you need to do with images is:

- Annotate
- Resize
- Compress
- Insert

Annotating Images

“Annotating” means “adding arrows and words and stuff.” It's how you mark up images to point out important details, offer explanation or comment on an image.

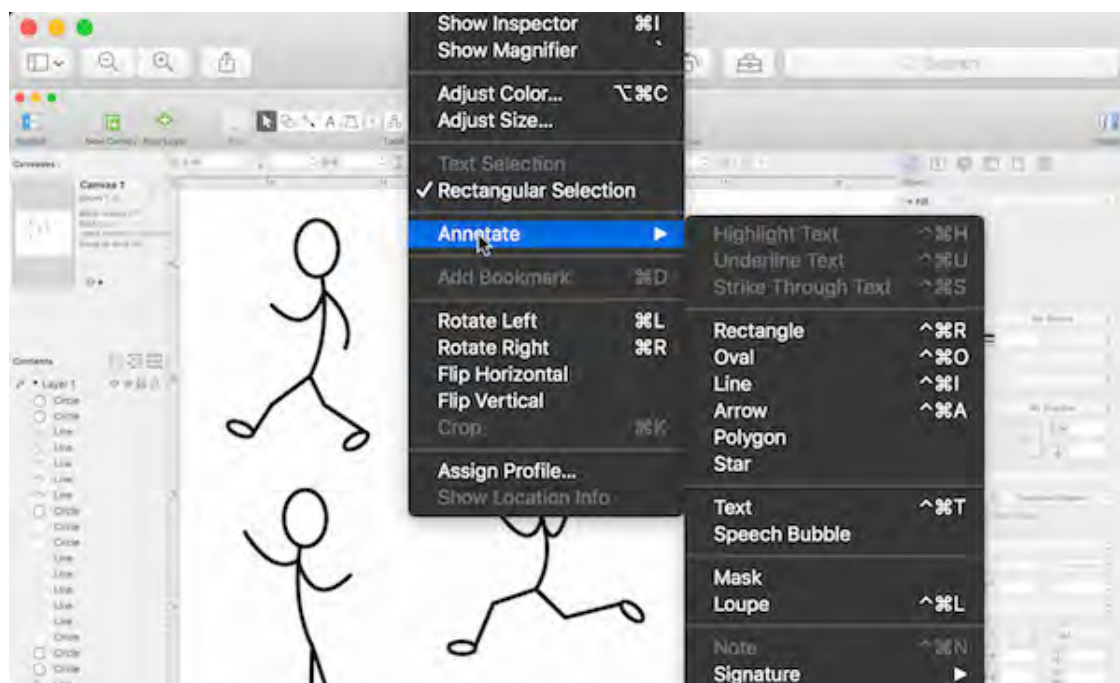
I annotate images and then resize them. I also put mustard on sandwiches after I've put on the meat, lettuce and tomato. Apparently both are backwards. Feel free to resize first, and then annotate.

If you're working with images, I highly recommend installing Sketch or Snagit. But if you can't, here's an option on the Mac that's not too bad:

Annotating In Preview (Mac)

Open your image in Preview. If you're going to annotate a screen capture that you haven't yet saved, use the **Command + Shift + Control + 4** key combination, capture the part of the screen you want, then use "File >> New From Clipboard." That will open a new image and paste in your screen grab.

Now, click "Tools >> Annotate." You'll see a nice list of options:



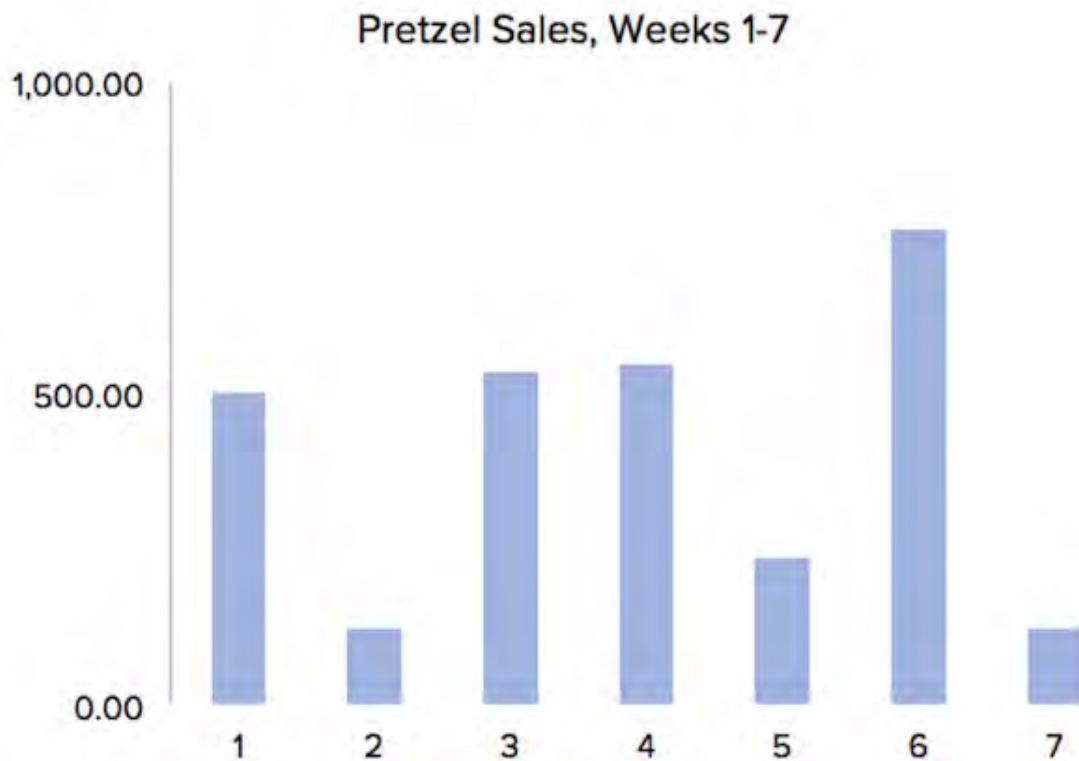
Annotation options in Preview

Best Practices for Images

These are **my** best practices. Use them at your own risk:

Zoom in on screen captures

It's easy to blur a screen capture. If you enlarge it using an image editor, it starts to look out-of-focus. This is a big problem in slide decks, where your image will eventually appear on a huge screen:



Captured at 100% in Excel

Zoom in on web pages, spreadsheets, etc. using the web browser or editing software, not using your image editor. That way, your image stays sharp.



Captured at 200% in Excel

Use the right format

Use JPG to store photographs. It preserves colors and allows for better image compression. Use PNG for line art and images with only a few colors.

I may or may not repeat this several times. That's because I've seen it go horribly wrong on almost every content project.

This image is 775kb:



PNG format, 775kb

In JPG format, it's 72kb with no loss in quality. You can control level of compression, too.



PNG format, 72kb

JPG is great for image compression, but it causes artifacts. That's tech-speak for "blurry blocky stuff." That's the nature of the algorithm that makes it so good at compressing images.

The artifacts are less noticable in a photograph. In a diagram or line-art, though, it can get ugly:



JPGs make blurry blocky ugliness

PNG does a better job of keeping lines sharp:



PNGs keep line art looking better

Again: Use PNG for non-photographic images with fewer colors. Logos, diagrams, charts and such are great PNG candidates.

Store original images as un-compressed as possible. I try to use 32-bit PNG and 100% quality JPG. Use TIFF if you're really, really concerned about image quality and have lots of available storage. TIFF files are quite large.

Keep sizing standard (if you can)

If I'm writing a blog post or other simple, one-column layout, I try to keep image widths consistent. That's not always possible, of course, so I set two or three (or four) standard widths.

I start by setting my screen captures to as consistent dimensions as possible.

For this ebook, I've tried for 560, 960 and 1820. Those work best for the layout.

I use the Window Resizer Beta extension for Chrome. It lets me set my browser to the same dimensions and location, every time. That keeps my screen captures nice and consistent.

But I'm keeping the originals! If this were ever re-published in print, low-resolution, 2000-pixel-wide images would look lousy.

If you want really crisp screen captures, and you use a Mac with a Retina display, do your screen capture on that display. Then, in Snagit, save the image with "Save Using Retina Size" checked.

Special Cases

You don't control how your website works, or the electronic publishing format, but you can do a few things to maximize your images' readiness for different scenarios.

If you keep your originals, you can always come back and do this later.

Sizing for responsive websites

If you're producing content for a responsive website—a site that scales per display size—your images need to take that into account:

- Images large enough to scale up to the largest display; or
- A separate image for each display size

Sizing for retina and 4k displays

If your audience uses retina or 4k displays, they've got a lot more pixels. Your standard image will appear blocky. Create a version of each image that's twice as large as the standard dimensions.

Adding Images to Markdown Files

You can include images in your Markdown document using this snippet:

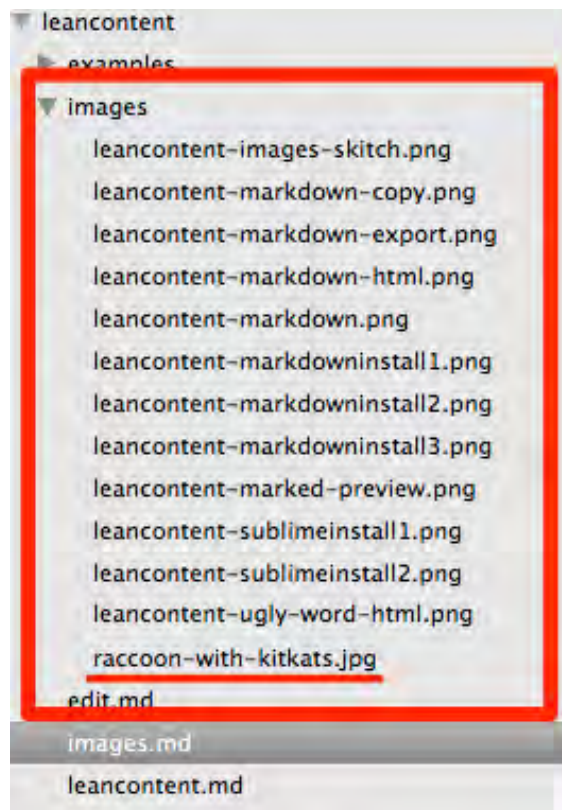
```
![IMAGE ALT TEXT](file folder and name)
```

Remember our folder structure? Your images should live in a folder called “images.” When you want to insert an image into your draft, type:

```
![IMAGE ALT TEXT](images/IMAGEFILENAME)
```

If your images are in a different folder, change “images/” to match. Then it appears, like magic, in Marked. Here’s an example:

“raccoon-with-kitkats.jpg” lives in this folder:



Where the file lives

So I type:

```
![[That raccoon has my KitKats!!!!](images/raccoon-with-kitkats.jpg)
```

And it shows up like this:



That raccoon has my KitKats!!!!

Simple. It's just... typing. Keep the image inclusion snippet on your clipboard, for easy re-use. Use the folder structure above (writing in a folder, images in a sub-folder). If you aren't including images like a champ by the end of the week, tweet me and I'll buy you lunch.

That's just an expression. I won't buy you lunch. I'll help though.

If you're blogging, you'll probably have to upload and re-insert the images in your blogging platform. But it's easy to preview them in Markdown, so I usually start there.

I'm Nagging (again), But Please Remember

Images can be the opposite of lean, bogging down your process, preventing re-use and requiring repeat work. They don't have to. You can use images to turn good content into great content while staying lean:

Images must add value to your content. They might make a point, emphasize a point or deliver crucial information. They might provide relevant entertainment. But regardless, they need to be more than random wall art.

Save originals, so that you have them for repurposing and adjustments later. Also, **save resized and formatting images** you're placing in your content, in case you need to move them or send them to a publisher or designer.

Use the right image format. JPG for photographs and images with millions of colors, PNG for everything else.

To keep things tidy, **consistently size images.**

Valuable lesson: All rules are made to be broken. Lean Content is no exception. When I made this ebook, I found that standardizing image sizes meant many screen captures were unreadable. So, I resized and cropped for readability.

Up Next

Time to polish your work.

Polish

6

In this chapter, learn to **not** cringe when you review that blog post.

Why?

When I started this section, I thought, “Now, how am I going to make a creative appeal to people that they edit and proofread?”

Then I realized: If you write and publish online, you’ve gotten the tweet (argh) or e-mail (less argh) pointing out a typo, asking for help translating an impossible-to-read section of your creation, or gently mocking your painful mistakes.

You don’t need me to tell you. Just keep reading:

Editing vs. Proofreading

A quick distinction for lean content creators: Proofreading looks for mistakes. Editing looks at structure, tightening up language and more general changes to improve content. I'll talk about them separately.

Editing

Editing is hard if you're leaning. It's time-intensive. It's hard to do on your own work. But it's really, really important.

When I'm applying the lean content process, I try to restrict my editing to three things:

Check Facts and Citations

Make sure you've got your facts straight, and that you're giving credit where it's due. This process isn't exactly rigorous, but it makes you consider facts and sources.

1. If you used Google to do research, use Bing, DuckDuckGo or another search engine to verify. They may show you the same sites again. But it forces you to think about your sources,

because you're not looking at the identical search results on the identical page.

2. If you used Wikipedia, find another source to verify. Or cite Wikipedia in big letters. I never trust that site.
3. Check your images. Did you source any from others' work? Cite them.
4. Read through your work. Think very carefully: Is there any assertion or cool saying you're using that isn't yours? Plagiarism sucks. But it's easy to forget where you got that one expression about sandblasting soup crackers (created by Scott Adams, Dilbert).

Finalize Structure

Are you delivering information in the ideal order? I've reordered this damned ebook four times. I'm not kidding. Even a 500-word blog post may need some rearranging.

Ask yourself:

1. Will the conclusion make a better introduction or vice-versa?
Switch them!
2. Am I writing “see below” or “I’ll get to that later” very often?
That usually means you need to rearrange things.
3. Are lists bulleted or numbered, rather than a bunch of
comma-separated phrases? Lists are a lot easier to read.

Tighten Things Up

Be brief. **I’m not suggesting you remove all personality from your writing.** But there are plenty of places you can probably deliver the same information in a smaller package. Readers, watchers and listeners appreciate it.

Use Active Voice

Active voice: [SUBJECT] [VERB] [OBJECT] “I ran into the house.”
“Google crawls your website.”

Passive voice: [OBJECT] [PASSIVE VERB] [VERB] [SUBJECT]
“The house was run into by me.” “Your website is crawled by Google.”

It’s rare that passive voice improves things. Use active voice whenever possible.

Remove Plague Words

Don't use three words where one will do. Don't use one word if none are required.

My plague word bad habits include:

"Under no circumstances" Replace with "never"

"Obviously" 90% of the time, you can delete it. If it's obvious, you don't need to say so.

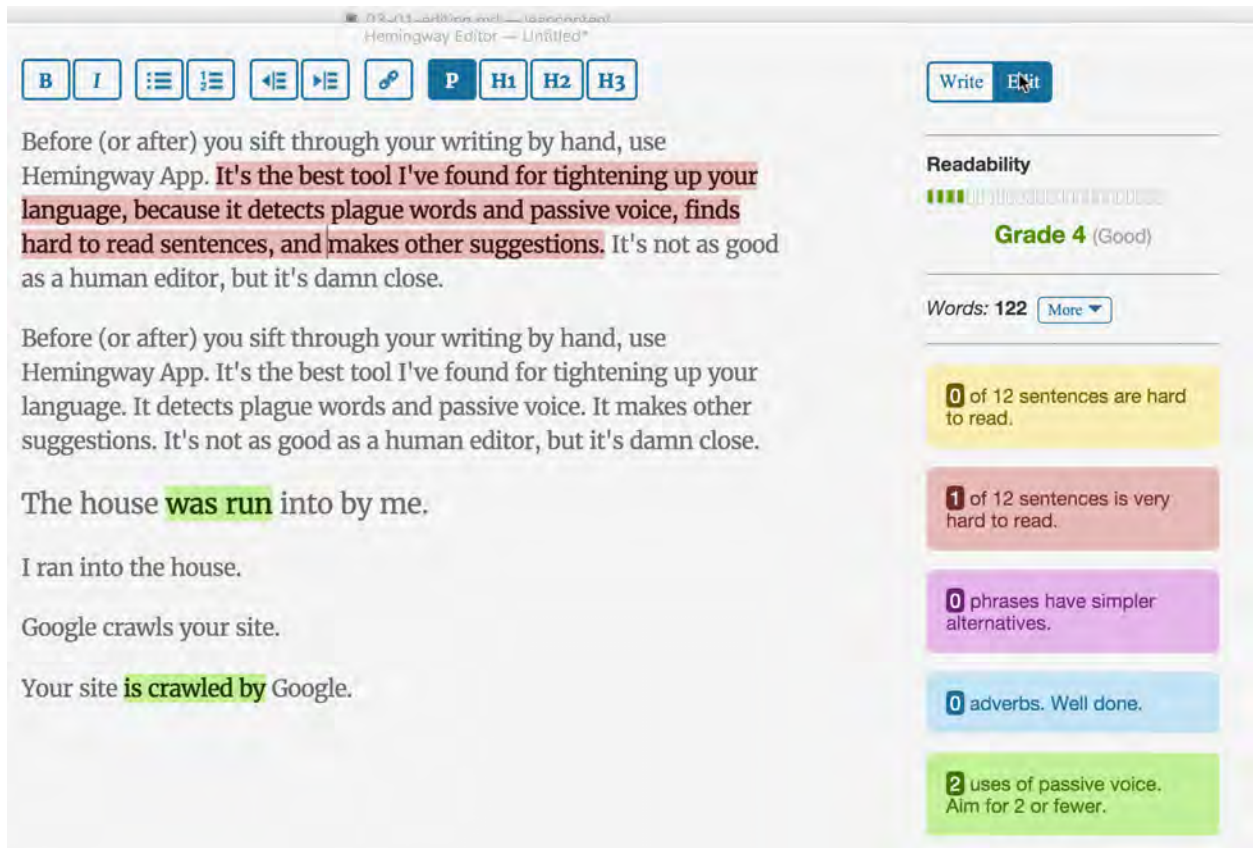
In the event that" Replace with "If" or "When"

I've got a huge list of these. It's an obsession. You can download it at <http://portent.co/plague-wordz>.

Use Hemingway App!

Before (or after) you sift through your writing by hand, use [Hemingway App](#). It's the best tool I've found for tightening up your language.

It detects plague words and passive voice. It finds hard to read sentences. It makes other suggestions. It's not as good as a human editor, but it's damn close.



Hemingway App in action

It only gets a paragraph in this whole book. It deserves trophies and a ticker-tape parade. This app is one of the best lean content tools you'll find. Get it.

Proofreading

You've often got the luxury of asking someone else to proofread your work. That's by far the best way to clean up errors. For something simple, like a blog post, all you need is a colleague with twenty minutes.

But the Lean Content process must also work if you're alone. Here's how you do it.

My Technique

Proofreading is a pain in the tuchus. I want to get someone else to read my work. But leaning often means you can't wait.

Here's my real-world, independent editing routine. Steps 1, 2 and 4 were taught to me by a great writer back in 19muttermutter:

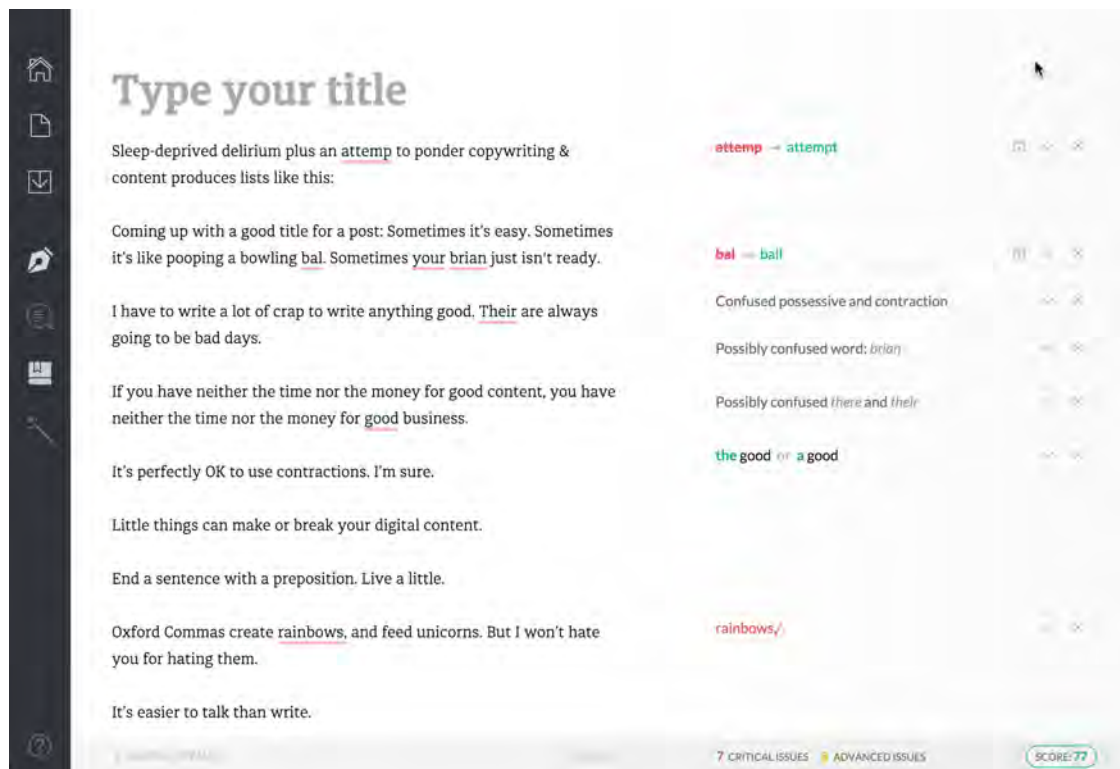
1. Read the document one paragraph at a time, starting at the end. By doing that, I separate them and force myself to read each one. It ensures I don't skim over words and phrases I've already read lots of times.
2. Read the document one sentence at a time, starting at the end.
3. Read the document one word at a time, starting at the end.
4. Run the document through Grammarly.
5. Read it forwards.
6. Verify links. I sometimes use Check My Links, but it's pretty distracting. Clicking each link works, too.
7. Realize that, if you're publishing digital content (how else do you do it?!), you can always go back and fix it later.

It's not perfect, but it catches some of the real groaners.

Again, all rules are made to be broken. I often jump to step 4 because I just don't have the time for top-to-bottom proofreading. Don't feel guilty if you do the same.

A Word About Grammarly

Grammarly is the best alternative I've found to a human proofreader.



Grammarly works its magic

Use it every time you write. **Every time.** I can't tell you how many awful mistakes Grammarly has caught for me.

I have no business affiliation with Grammarly. They may not even know who I am. I just love their stuff.

The Final Polish

You **could** do all of this before you edit and proofread. I leave that up to you. I find polishing kind of fun, so I often save it for last. And now, you've peered into my psyche. I pity you.

Content consumers assign *imputed value* to everything. Imputed value is the intangible worth of something. It's created by all the little things. High imputed value makes the reader happy and comfortable. It's like holding a really nice smartphone in your hand: You want to keep it. Low imputed value makes them edgy and uncomfortable. It's like holding a bag of mud in your hand: You want to drop it and move on.

Polish maximizes imputed value.

In this chapter, I stick to polishing written web content. Most of your content ends up as a web page. And, as I said before, I'm focusing this whole book on written content, not video or audio.

Most web content becomes HTML, so a lot of polish comes from little, smart things you do when you create that HTML. If you used the Markdown workflow I laid out here, most of the polishing work is done for you.

If you didn't, tough luck.

Kidding!!!! I'm kidding! If you didn't use Markdown, read the next few sections.

Use Smart Quotes

Markdown does this for you. If you used it, you can skip this whole section. Nice, huh?

Computers and web pages default to straight quotes:

He said "hi there"

The squid answered 'yo'

That's good for code, but it's terrible typography for most content. Be sure to use smart quotes:

He said “hi there”

The squid answered ‘yo’

This isn't as hard and scary as it might seem. If you used Markdown, you're already all set.

If not, you'll have to create the smart quotes yourself, either when you publish your content or during conversion. Smart quotes use **HTML entities**. Type the entity to get the quote:

To get...	Type...
'	‘
'	’
"	“
"	”

Smart Quotes

So, to get:

“This”

Type:

“This**”**;

That's a lot of extra typing, right? Who cares about smart versus straight quotes? Everyone. This is one of those little things that helps build an aura of legitimacy and quality around your content. It's an easy, lean upgrade.

Use the Right Symbols

There are a bunch of other symbols that look better when you use their entities:

	To get...	Type...
Ellipsis	...	…
Ampersand	&	&
en dash	—	–
em dash	—	—
Copyright symbol	©	©
Trademark symbol	™	™

HTML Entities

There are a lot more symbols to learn. They all make your content look a lot better.

Also, if you want to learn just enough typography to create great content, have a look at Butterick's Practical Typography. Amazing.

Use Real Paragraphs

Again, Markdown handles this for you.

You can create paragraphs two ways.

First, you can write paragraphs that use hard line breaks, like this:

If any city was going to survive The Fall, it was Aventine. Built on bedrock high above the waters of The Gap, she has access to an enormous aquifer from within the city. The Great Lady, as she's called, is surrounded by smooth stone walls 70 feet high and 9 feet thick at the base.

**
**The city climbs up the bluff. A single main road leads in through the Eastern Gates. Trade goods from Dirion and other cities come in the gate. Goods that arrive via the northern docks go out. A smaller road leads in through the southern gate, then across the city to the docks. Local farmers come in that gate to sell their wares at the docks.

Which then looks like this:

If any city was going to survive The Fall, it was Aventine. Built on bedrock high above the waters of The Gap, she has access to an enormous aquifer from within the city. The Great Lady, as she's called, is surrounded by smooth stone walls 70 feet high and 9 feet thick at the base.

The city climbs up the bluff. A single main road leads in through the Eastern Gates. Trade goods from Dirion and other cities come in the gate. Goods that arrive via the northern docks go out. A smaller road leads in through the southern gate, then across the city to the docks. Local farmers come in that gate to sell their wares at the docks.

Oops. It all runs together.

You can use two line breaks to create more space between the paragraphs, but that leads to unpredictable spacing and, in technical terms, looks pooppy.

Or, you can create them the right way, using paragraph elements:

<p>If any city was going to survive The Fall, it was Aventine. Built on bedrock high above the waters of The Gap, she has access to an enormous aquifer from within the city. The Great Lady, as she's called, is surrounded by smooth stone walls 70 feet high and 9 feet thick at the base.**</p>**

<p>The city climbs up the bluff. A single main road leads in through the Eastern Gates. Trade goods from Dirion and other cities come in the gate. Goods that arrive via the northern docks go out. A smaller road leads in through the southern gate, then across the city to the docks. Local farmers come in that gate to sell their wares at the docks.**</p>**

Which will look like this:

If any city was going to survive The Fall, it was Aventine. Built on bedrock high above the waters of The Gap, she has access to an enormous aquifer from within the city. The Great Lady, as she's called, is surrounded by smooth stone walls 70 feet high and 9 feet thick at the base.

The city climbs up the bluff. A single main road leads in through the Eastern Gates. Trade goods from Dirion and other cities come in the gate. Goods that arrive via the northern docks go out. A smaller road leads in through the southern gate, then across the city to the docks. Local farmers come in that gate to sell their wares at the docks.

If this is a blog post or other web page content, and you use `<p></p>`, your site's stylesheets will automatically create the spacing the designers intended.

This may seem trivial, but text in a paragraph element can be managed and formatted across devices, screen sizes and context. Browsers can more easily flow paragraph elements. And paragraph elements are just tidier.

It also enables future changes to site design. If a designer changes the paragraph typography, spacing or anything else,

your content will follow suit. If you use hard breaks, the designer will have to edit by hand, swearing at you the entire time.

WordPress and most other respectable content management systems will do this for you. Just use a regular line break instead of shift-return.

Use Real Lists

If you used Markdown syntax, it creates real lists for you. I'm telling ya, Markdown is the way to go.

You can create lists two ways, too.

Here's the wrong way: Typing in numbers or bullets and using hard line breaks, like this:

1. This is the first item
2. This is another item
3. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipisicing elit. Saepe similique, facere quibusdam ipsa, veritatis necessitatibus rem natus doloribus officia modi, a tempore eum dolor ipsam voluptatibus, dolore ratione nam exercitationem!

That looks awful. There's no hanging indent, so the text for number 3 wraps. Plus, the list items aren't spaced.

Here's the right way:

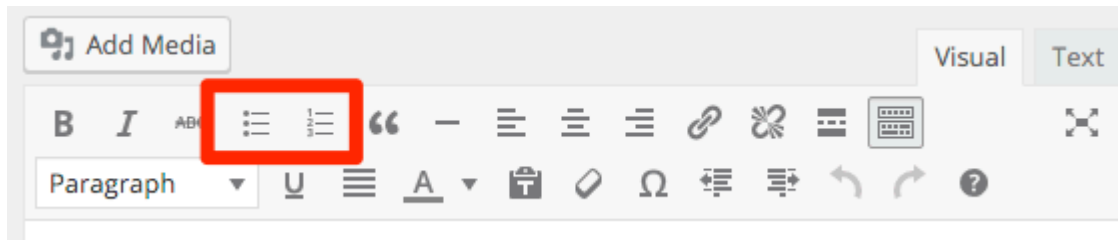
1. This is the first item
2. This is the second item
3. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipisicing elit. Tempora in numquam nam amet commodi, quas necessitatibus, ab quisquam doloribus dolorem voluptatum repellat. Corporis officiis fuga sunt, sint repellendus odit quas.

So much better. It's got hanging indents, everything lines up correctly, To do that, use this code:

```
<li>This is the first item</li>
<li>This is the second item</li>
<li>Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur
adipisicing elit. Tempora in numquam nam amet
commodi, quas necessitatibus, ab quisquam doloribus
dolorem voluptatum repellat. Corporis officiis fuga
sunt, sint repellendus odit quas.</li>
```

If you want to use bullets instead of numbers, replace 'ol' with 'ul.' 'ul'

WordPress and most other content management tools will create numbered and bulleted lists for you. In visual mode, look for these buttons:



To create lists in visual mode, use these buttons

In plain text mode, look for these:



To create lists in plain text mode, use these buttons

5–7 Lines/Paragraph

Keep your paragraphs to 5–7 lines or less. On a screen—particularly on a small screen—people have a really hard time reading longer paragraphs.

Compare this:

The plague is introduced through the water supply. That means the first cases will appear in the palace and Sword's Cross. It was introduced by goblin agents who obtained the vials from, they say, a 'scarred half-elf.' The half-elf is Vivek Narn, who works in the employ of the Sicarii but is a member of the Society of the Nine. It was introduced right in the water supply by the palace. That's why it's working its way down the city. If the players figure it out, the city can order citizens not to bathe while clerics clean the water supply. If they don't, the plague will spread 10-20% each day until 75% of the city is infected. If it reaches 75%, then the goblins will attack and the assassination attempts will take place. The characters are summoned by Arius. Timogen is there along with Farin Blackhammer. They're asking the players to look into this. If pressed as to why, they'll hint that they're not sure who to trust, and that Arius vouched for you. Plus, they're expendable. And, Arius is ill. Farin swears them to secrecy on pain of death. He then tells them to check on Lumpkin's Meats first. It's a logical place to look.

That's a long paragraph. Ick.

To this:

The plague is introduced through the water supply. That means the first cases will appear in the palace and Sword's Cross. It was introduced by goblin agents who obtained the vials from, they say, a 'scarred half-elf.'

The half-elf is Vivek Narn, who works in the employ of the Sicarii but is a member of the Society of the Nine. It was introduced right in the water supply by the palace. That's why it's working its way down the city.

If the players figure it out, the city can order citizens not to bathe while clerics clean the water supply. If they don't, the plague will spread 10-20% each day until 75% of the city is infected. If it reaches 75%, then the goblins will attack and the assassination attempts will take place.

The characters are summoned by Arius. Timogen is there along with Farin Blackhammer. They're asking the players to look into this. If pressed as to why, they'll hint that they're not sure who to trust, and that Arius vouched for you. Plus, they're expendable. And, Arius is ill. Farin swears them to secrecy on pain of death. He then tells them to check on Lumpkin's Meats first. It's a logical place to look.

Paragraphs = so much better

Which would you rather read?

Use Headings

Try to avoid having more than 3–4 paragraphs in a row without a heading.

I know, this is arbitrary. Why not 5 paragraphs? Or 10? Because 3–4 seems more comfortable to me. Try different numbers for yourself. But break up your content with headings. Use headings to group and organize your content. It makes it far easier to read.

Take the paragraph formatted text from the previous section. Add headings:

The plague is introduced through the water supply. That means the first cases will appear in the palace and Sword's Cross. It was introduced by goblin agents who obtained the vials from, they say, a 'scarred half-elf.'

The half-elf is Vivek Narn, who works in the employ of the Sicarii but is a member of the Society of the Nine. It was introduced right in the water supply by the palace. That's why it's working its way down the city.

Consequences

If the players figure it out, the city can order citizens not to bathe while clerics clean the water supply. If they don't, the plague will spread 10-20% each day until 75% of the city is infected. If it reaches 75%, then the goblins will attack and the assassination attempts will take place.

The Setup

The characters are summoned by Arius. Timogen is there along with Farin Blackhammer. They're asking the players to look into this. If pressed as to why, they'll hint that they're not sure who to trust, and that Arius vouched for you. Plus, they're expendable. And, Arius is ill. Farin swears them to secrecy on pain of death. He then tells them to check on Lumpkin's Meats first. It's a logical place to look.

Headings make text easier to follow and scan

Much better.

Don't Succumb to Link Madness

A lot of companies crank out writing for SEO. Which makes me cry.

It also makes their writers go link crazy.

Please: Don't start linking to every single target key phrase in your post. Google knows what you're trying to do. And it's hard to read. Instead of trying to guess the "right" number of links (there's no such thing), follow these rules:

- If you cite, link. If you cite someone else's work, link to it. Don't just name them. Link to it. On the web, links are citations. Simply saying "Jane wrote this" is not. Oh, and use a followed link. Nofollowing citations is like leaving a penny for a tip. It's not just stingy. It's a little tacky.
- If it's useful, link. If you mention something that includes a useful resource, link to that, too. Once. And it really needs to be useful. "Useful" means that the reader will click that link and say "Hey, thanks, that's useful." If they'll click the link and say "Where the hell is my back button," forget it.

Do [create connected content](#).

Don't Forget Images

Head back to [the section on images best practices](#) and make sure you've done it all.

Optional: The Hero Shot

Think about a hero shot. Not a stock photo (remember, we hate those), but something unique you can use as a real “ad” for your content.

You'll include it in your posts on Facebook, Twitter and other social media channels. It may also be the feature image on whatever blog or other site you use. Hero images improve clickthru. Plus, they look keen.

I'm no designer, so my formula is:

1. An image from my content, or (ugh) a really good stock image
2. 5-8 words that describe the content
3. A 16:9 image. Every social media channel uses different dimensions, but this has worked pretty well for me.

I've graduated to Photoshop, now. My hero images usually look like this:



Lean Content Hero

That's a stock graphic of a cyclist, plus text I added.

Here's another one using my tried-and-true Comic Life Plus Animal Method:



Just chill. This took about 30 seconds to create.

And another one, using one of my cats. Unfortunately, her name is Isis:



Poor Isis

I created that using Photoshop by adding a transparent black rectangle and text, which is well within my limited expertise.

You can also use a tool like Pablo. Choose or upload an image, enter some text, and poof, you've got a great hero shot:



Creating a Hero Image in Pablo

The hero image is optional, but you have to market your content, just like you market any other product. The hero is your fancy product labeling. Take a few minutes to create it, and you'll get better results.

The Four Rules

The Four Rules are designed, in part, to facilitate polished content. If you followed those rules during planning and production, polishing is a lot easier.

Up Next

Publish! It sounds easy, right?

Publish and Promote 7

In this chapter, learn why there's more to publishing than clicking "go," and how to promote what you create.

It's Not All Fun and Games

Publishing is easy. And it's not.

Emotionally, you're putting your work out there. I'm usually half-relieved, half-certain I left some humiliating error or misstatement that will enrage readers to the point where they'll key my car and shave my cats.

Tactically, you're converting what you wrote into your delivery format.

You've still got some work to do:

For blog posts

If you're converting your Markdown document to a blog post, select **Edit > Copy HTML Source**. You get nice, clean HTML code. Bullets become list elements, headings become heading elements, paragraphs get the right markup and everything else comes together:

```
<h1 id="produce">Produce</h1>

<p>Leaning requires energy. That means <strong>producing content</strong>. Every day I'm spending too much time discussing content without every producing it. Drives me nuts.</p>

<p>I'm not saying you should ignore content strategy. If resources allow, create content, talk, and you don't give your audience the silent treatment. Start producing content.</p>

<p>In this chapter, I'll talk about the steps, and a bunch of tools:</p>

<ul>
<li>Starting with plain text</li>
<li>Using Markdown for enhanced formatting</li>
<li>Managing versions with Git or Dropbox</li>
<li>Enhancing to final format</li>
</ul>

<p>*The text-Markdown-enhance workflow is my preference. In 20 years, it's been the most reliable way to find. But you may prefer to stick with a word processor. If so, go straight to *</p>

<h2 id="startingwithplaintext">Starting with plain text</h2>

<p>Where are you publishing? Probably on the web. Tools like Microsoft Word and PowerPoint have ever converted a Word document to a blog post? It's not pretty.</p>

<figure>

```

HTML from Markdown

It even creates “smart” quotes for you, no special coding required! As someone who had to type &rsdquo; for every apostrophe, I can tell you, that’s a big deal.

Paste that into the plain text view on your blogging software. Upload your images and you’re good to go.

That little bit of work setting up Sublime Text and Marked just paid off, big: You don’t have to learn HTML to generate a super-clean blog post. You also don’t have to pull in a designer, developer or other resources. You can lean, hard, and take corners at super-speed.

For Word docs

Export to RTF (Rich Text Format), then open the RTF file in Word. You can format and edit as desired.

If you use Marked, you’ll have to re-insert images. Most other previewers and editors have the same problem. It’s annoying. I recommend learning to use Pandoc, which is scary as hell the first time you try it, but the most powerful document generator you’ll ever need.

Pandoc

Or, you can learn [Pandoc](#). Pandoc is a command-line tool, so it ain’t easy. But the results are pretty spectacular. If you’re going to create non-HTML content, I strongly recommend learning it.

This is a PDF I generated with no special formatting:

Part 1. Set Up The Environment

The lean workflow requires some special tools. In this section, you'll get them all set up. It can seem like a lot of work. But remember: You only do it once. And it's easier than you think. A half-hour now will save you time on every project.

1. Install Sublime Text

Lean content starts with plain text. You'll format plain text using Markdown, which is a great, easy, text-based content formatting language. That requires a good text editor. We'll start with Sublime Text. It's my favorite text editor. It runs on OS X, Windows and Ubuntu. The tutorials in this book focus on it. Go get it at Sublimetext.com.

You can always use another text editor. Choose the one you like the best.

2. Set Up Sublime Text Markdown Editing Tools

If you want, you can skip this entire step. These tools make writing and editing Markdown more convenient. They use color-coding and indenting to make raw Markdown easy to read and write. In this example, "Dropbox" is a heading. Sublime Text bolds it:

```
## Dropbox
The simplest option is a cloud management solution like Dropbox. These tools
support all formats. You can automatically sync files to a cloud-hosted copy.
You can recover previous versions. Other people on your team can comment and
edit.

Dropbox and its competitors have drawbacks, though:

* They're not true multi-user version management tools. Dropbox warns you if
there's a version conflict. But that's it
* They don't all keep your backups forever. That's not the worst thing, but
you have to make sure you have another backup solution in place.
```

Pandoc-generated PDF

Pandoc can also convert to Kindle, LaTeX, a dozen formats I've never even heard of, and probably clay tablets.

To create this ebook, I wrote everything in Markdown, then used Pandoc to convert to Word format. It took me half a day to learn the commands and set up the export process. Since then, though, I've edited and re-generated this project four or five times. Each time took a few minutes.

Pandoc is outside the scope of this book, but I'll be writing a blog post about it soon. Keep in touch.

For slide decks

I create my slide deck outlines in Markdown. Then I either export to RTF and cut-and-paste, or use the Markdown outline as a guide as I create my slides, adding in my original images as I go. Markdown is my note-taking format. Nothing fancy.

You can also use Pandoc to generate slide decks. I don't understand how it works, and can only generate monstrosities. If you figure it out, please let me know. I'll add it to the next edition of this ebook, and give you a credit.

For Teams

If you have a team, you may create your content and then hand it off for layout, design and such. In that case, Markdown is your best starting point, because you can deliver it as raw text, HTML or Rich Text without much effort. That way, your designer or editor can work with everything, regardless of tools. And, you don't waste time formatting something just to have them reformat it later.

Ship It

It's often easier to revise than it is to put your work out there.

Ship it. Remember: You're publishing digital content. You can fix errors later.

I'm not saying you can be careless. Edit and proofread. But don't get paralyzed. Ship it.

Get the Word Out

This book isn't about content promotion. I'm not going to bore or depress you with statistics about the absurd amount of content that gets published every second, or the number of people yelling "Hey, read my stuff!!!"

None of that matters. Focus on **your** content, and how you get it in front of **your** audience, whether that's an audience of one or a bazillion.

You can't count on your audience to read, or even notice, everything you create. Posts and announcements go screaming past in their feeds. Search engines rank what they please, when they want to (also a whole separate, three-volume series). But there are a few things you can do to maximize the odds that your existing audience will consume what you create.

This is the do-it-every-time, takes-a-few-minutes Lean Content promotion routine that lets you ship, promote and move on to the next project when you have minimal resources:

1. Post your content to Facebook. Include the hero image you created in [Chapter 5](#).
2. Post your content to Twitter. Same as above.
3. If relevant, post to LinkedIn.
4. Post anywhere else relevant, but don't spam. If I catch you shoveling your content into LinkedIn groups and Reddit threads, I'll start scolding. And downvoting.
5. Set a small budget. Really small—maybe \$5.
6. Use that to promote your Facebook post to your followers and friends. That ensures it'll show up in their feeds.

That's the lean content, I-can-do-it-myself promotion checklist.

Depending on the content, you can (and should) do more than this: Use paid ads to target followers of influencers. Send a polite e-mail to a colleague. Target specific times of day in specific time zones. And so on. Like I said, this is the bare minimum. It gets your content in front of people you know and relies on them to spread the word.

But like I said, that's a whole other book. And, if you're not a social media marketer, you might want to talk to one before you start buying lots of ads.

If You Updated Something

If you updated your own or someone else's content, you'll want to do a bit more: Target the people who expressed an interest in the earlier version.

This involves more tools, but if you're familiar with SEO and link research tools:

1. Find everyone who linked to the original piece.
2. Send them a note saying that you've got a new version.
3. Find publication that mentioned the original piece.
4. If their site has a "submit" or "tips" link, use it to send them a **polite, personal** message explaining that you have an updated version.

Please don't start your e-mail with "I don't want to waste your time, so I'll make this brief." It gives me a headache.

Additional Ideas

A few other ideas for promoting your content:

1. If you have an e-mail list, upload that list to Facebook and Twitter. Publish paid ads targeting just that list.
2. Use the same list and do lookalike targeting. Be aware that you're now going beyond your existing audience. It'll cost a lot more.
3. This is way beyond lean, but: Run a retargeting campaign aimed at people who've read other content on your site.

Another Nag

Content promotion is as much about persistence as it is about cool tricks. Ask any of the real pros, and they'll all tell you they learned their processes through trial and error. A lot of trial and error.

Don't look for tricks. Use techniques you know you can replicate. See what works. Double down on that.

Repurpose

8

In this chapter, learn to make the most of every piece of content you create.

What's "Repurposing?"

"Repurposing" is a fancy way of saying "turn it into another useful format."

There are a couple of good reasons to make repurposing part of your strategy:

Everyone runs out of ideas, and time, and resources. When that happens, I always look to repurpose existing, high-performing content. Repurposing maximizes your return on investment, draws new attention to older but still useful content, and helps

you expand your reach. It also helps with three digital marketing challenges:

1. It uses existing information, so your compliance team should have an easier time approving it.
2. It fills blanks in the editorial calendar without holding another brainstorming session.
3. It's an opportunistic marketing technique that gives your audience more of what they want.

First, pick the winners

Repurpose the good stuff:

1. Note that this isn't just blog posts. Include all atypical site pages: Anything but product pages, your home page, etc.
2. Take a look at past content. Look at the stuff that's still relevant, or can easily be made relevant.
3. Don't restrict that to onsite content. If you answer questions on Quora, use Twitter or post to Facebook as a company, look there, too.
4. Find the best performers. The best way to do that is to look at analytics: Which content got the best balance of views, engagement (time on page, shares, likes, micro-conversions)?
5. Pick one.

6. Now, get ready to repurpose.

Second, do the work

Take the content you chose, and turn it into something else. For example:

- Turn a top-10 list into a slide deck, publish it on SlideShare and embed it on your site. You've already got the images and text.
- Turn a slide deck into a narrated presentation, post the video to YouTube and embed it on your site.
- Turn a successful slide deck into a blog post. You have the images already, and the slides are a good outline.
- Turn a successful Tweet into a short blog post.
- Turn a successful webinar into an audio podcast.
- Get a video transcribed and post the transcription. Edit it first. Transcriptions are notoriously buggy.
- Turn a top-10 list into a series of tweets.
- Rewrite and update an old post and put it on Medium, LinkedIn or elsewhere.

And so on. I always add a little each time. So my top-10 list may become a top-20 list for the webinar, and then a top-40 list for a new slide deck.

Third, publish

Ship it. When you do:

- Update the original content with a link to the new piece. Say something like “I just did a webinar about this” or “Read the transcript here.” Turn the original content into a hub.
- Link from the new piece to the old.
- Announce it. Don’t expect magical visibility.
- A few days later, remind everyone of the original content, too. A simple tweet like “Here’s the original piece about [subject]” can do a lot.

That’s it. You’ll get a lot more mileage out of your content. You also tap into your audience’s need to consume information in many different ways. Some people are visual learners. Others (like me) want to read. Others want to listen while they wheeze along on the elliptical trainer (also me).

When To Stop

Don’t overuse this strategy. Pick a few top performers. Only expand as far as engagement lasts. If interest declines, stop and move on.

Plan For Infobites

The easiest repurposing breaks one piece of content down into many smaller pieces.

If you're going lean, create content that's comprised of smaller infobites. Then you can break that up into smaller pieces of content: Multiple slides, or social media posts, or something similar. That will make repurposing easy.

For example: I write an article about my cats. I organize it around smaller stories and weird behaviors, like my Siamese cat's habit of patting me on the cheek to get attention. Later, I can take each behavior and make it a slide in a deck. I can also make a single Facebook post for each one. I've just created multiple pieces from one.

There's an added benefit: This first piece goes through your organization's approval process. Later infobites don't have to, or at least don't require as much review. It's a more efficient use of your organization's resources.

Like everything else in this ebook, this isn't a hard-and-fast rule. If your lean content is a great narrative piece, don't kill it by trying to split it into infobites. I couldn't handle the guilt.

An example

I did a presentation titled [8 Little Things To Make Your Blog Post Better](#). I published it on SlideShare. It got 39,000 views. That caught my attention.

I decided to write a blog post titled [14 Little Things to Make Your Content Better](#). That got a few hundred shares, lots of pageviews, and a chunk of new newsletter subscribers.

Finally, I did a webinar: [30 Little Things to Make Your Content Better](#). That got 100+ attendees and keeps generating views to this day.

I linked the blog post to the webinar recording, too, to create connected content.

In the end, I got three pieces of super-relevant content from a single idea. They all performed well. I didn't have to do a completely new brainstorming session.

By the way: This book is the ultimate repurposing of all of those earlier pieces.

The Content Rollup

Deleting content is the **opposite** of repurposing. Don't delete. Roll up!

This is a great idea from Michael Martinez of [SEO-Theory.com](https://seothecom.com). Michael is a font of ideas like this, and a good speaker of truth in the content and SEO biz. Check out his stuff.

In this context, “rollup” means “taking still-useful but old content and rewriting/updating as a new piece.”

It’s a smart alternative to deleting old posts. Pruning your content is important if you’re starting to see indexing problems. But it’s a shame to delete evergreen information if you don’t have to.

It’s also rebuilds traffic to content that previously got a lot of traffic, generated a lot of links or was a great source of conversions.

And it fills the editorial calendar with super-useful, relevant content that builds on existing knowledge: You don’t have to do new research.

An example

In 2002, I wrote a series of blog posts introducing people to pay per click advertising. They generated a lot of traffic and more than a few leads. So I knew visitors liked these posts.

By 2004, though, the blog posts lost most of their oomph. They were buried under 2 years of almost daily writing. That made them hard to find. And, because I hadn’t updated any of them, Google let the posts drop in the rankings.

Slacker that I am, I let it go for some time. I had other work to do, wanted to sleep and eat, and had to raise children.

In 2007, I looked at those sad, lonely blog posts and decided to re-use them. Even back then, Google wasn't a fan of you moving duplicate, old content around. So I took the posts, rewrote them as more of a guide, updated the content and then published the new material on our site.

It immediately generated traffic and leads and continues to perform well today. My team continues to keep it up-to-date.

The process

There's nothing mystical here. What matters is that you're deliberate about it.

1. Review your old content. You can do this by hand (OK if you have a small site), crawl the site using a tool like ScreamingFrog, or ask your friendly digital marketing agency to run an inventory.
2. Look at your analytics data. Make sure your report covers at least the last 1-2 years. If you've recently changed analytics platforms, you'll want to get the archived data. If you can't do that, you'll have to go with your gut instinct and skip to #4.
3. Find the content that performed well one or more years ago but has declined in the last 3+ months. Performed "well" is

subjective, but high-performing content stands out. If you don't have any, that's OK. Proceed to #4 anyway.

4. Pick out content that you know is still relevant. If you have the data from #2 and 3, great. Select the still-relevant content from that list. If you don't, then select the still-relevant content you feel could help your business.
5. If you can, pick a few more pieces of related content. If not, you'll work with this single piece.
6. Take the core ideas and concepts from the old content. Put them together into something cogent. Don't cut-and-paste! Think about how you can assemble and re-order the old content into something better. Rewrite accordingly.
7. Publish it wherever makes sense. If these are old blog posts, publish them as a new post. Or make them a separate resource like a longform article. Then delete the old content and 301 redirect that page to the new one.
8. If this is content on a third-party site, like SlideShare, publish the new slide deck and place a single slide at the old location letting folks know it's moved. Check terms of service before you do that. Some sites are OK with it. Others are not.

Done. Of course, this is all easier when you have the original images, and all of your original content “lives” in plain text format. That makes it easy to combine it.

Do not overthink this. Don't choose content based on keywords. Choose based on past performance, current relevance and/or ability to turn it into something that's once again useful. Please. Don't make this into a keyword thing. I'll cry.

The Four Rules

Repurposing reduces friction, big-time, because you're using content that's already been approved.

What repurposing **really** does is make the most of lean content. If you follow the four rules, you'll have stuff that's future proof, reusable and trustworthy. That means your creation is perfect for repurposing.

Sites That Lean (extra)

I almost made this chapter an appendix, but people tend to have their appendix removed, so I made it a chapter, instead. Read this if your company is planning to build a new site.

If your company is replatforming, you've got an opportunity to ensure the new site supports lean content. Go to the development team ask them if you can provide a little input. If they say "yes," say "thank you!!!"

Then give them this. If the new site includes these features, you'll be ready to lean. The site should support:

1. Separately editable title tags and page headlines. Title tag should default to page headline, but allow editing.
2. A separate meta description tag. It should default to story summary, if there is one, but allow editing.
3. Automatic image compression and resizing (wouldn't **that** save a ton of time).
4. Responsive image sizing (may not be up to the dev team).
5. Editable URL slugs.
6. HTML editing mode. Remember, WYSIWYG editors are bad.

Where to from here?

Start writing.

That's all I've got.

Really.

Go start writing. Use this book to guide your process. I used the lean content workflow to create it, after all.

If you've got questions, tweet me at twitter.com/portentint

I'm serious. I WANT TO HELP. Sure, I might try to sell you a book or two, but I'll answer your questions, too.