

Towards exceptional content

James Buckhouse, on behalf of Sequoia

To transform the mysterious art of *content* into a repeatable and measurable process, we've identified a series of characteristics common to exceptional stories. Please consider these characteristics (or prepare a defense for why they don't apply) for each new piece you create. Did I miss any? Find me on Twitter [@buckhouse](https://twitter.com/buckhouse) and let me know.

EXPRESS A POINT OF VIEW

Express a point of view

Your content should express a unique point of view and provide a sightline into your topic from a distinct vantage point.

GET TO WORK

Get to work

Entice, persuade, or help—your content *must perform specific work* to further your cause. Narrow your focus to increase your effectiveness. Ask yourself what traits you wish to encourage and what actions you hope to enkindle. Design your words to do work.

PROMPT A USEFUL ACTION

Prompt a useful action

Know what your audience needs and design your content to help them achieve it. *Prompt a useful action that generates an instant benefit.* Help your reader to put your ideas into practice.

MEASURE WHAT MATTERS

Measure what matters

Plan what you hope to achieve with each effort and map out how you will codify, instrument, and report on your performance. Every piece of content should come paired with a measurement plan, but not every piece of content will share the same goal. Sometimes you might shoot for extensive reach, other times you'll aim to encourage a specific action by a narrow audience. Careful measurement matters—get it wrong and you'll suffer false institutional knowledge from specious data and ill-conceived experiments.

TAKE THE RIGHT FORM

Take the right form

Adapt your content to match the mechanisms of human behavior inherent in each medium. Get real about what works and design your content to complement the strengths of each format. Explore every channel and pick the right fit.

#SHAREWORTHY

#Shareworthy

Construct Tweet-length section headers to make it easy for people to copy and share. Leave no positive social interaction unanswered and treat every negative social interaction with care.

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SKIM AND DIVE

Skim and dive

Don't force your reader to digest every word from beginning to end. Design your piece for multiple entry points through a process called skim and dive—where the reader first skims through your key ideas and then dives into the areas that matter to her most. Achieve this through layout, markup, and the narrative structure of your work.

SHOW, DON'T TELL

Show, don't tell

Pick the most effective path to comprehension. Your options include text, data visualizations, photos, videos, and illustrations. Strive to *demonstrate* instead of *describe* your insight.

WORK THE LEDE

Work the lede

Seduce your audience with a lede that stuns. Cut lazy first sentences. Skip trite metaphors. Rewrite weak starts. **Make the most of your first impression.** After you think you've finished your piece, go back and demand more from your lede—it should entice, lay out the stakes, and point towards the finish line.

SEEK EXPERT SOURCES

Seek expert sources

Protect yourself from false claims through careful research. Find and cite the best available sources (both internal and external). You'll appear confident, informed, and intelligent when you acknowledge the foundational work of others. People abhor glory hogs (even accidental ones). **I can't say this enough—give other people credit whenever you can.**

TRANSFORM YOUR AUDIENCE

Transform your audience

Any attempt to seduce your audience with *feeds & speeds* or *facts & stats* opens the door for someone else to beat you with a **better number**. No one cares about your features. Instead, transform your audience through an intellectual epiphany, an emotional call-to-arms, or a gut-drop of urgency. **Persuade with emotion; justify with logic.**

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NO VAGUE DESCRIPTORS

No vague descriptors

Investigate the root cause of notable traits and describe them with specific care. Offer memorable details that augur essential characteristics. Tell for a reason. Example: The founder had a moon-shaped callus on her right thumb, earned from her near-constant connection to her iPhone.

OMIT ADVERBS

Omit adverbs

Adverbs poison otherwise reasonable copy. Sublimate your copy with a precise verb and your need to embellish it will evaporate.

DEEP IMPACT

Deep impact

Do not use impact as a verb; use **impact as a noun**. Also, never use that unholy impostor of a word, *impactfulness*.

DO – Every fashion subculture felt the impact of grunge.

DON'T – The app ~~impacted~~ mobile use.

DON'T – I admired the ~~impactfulness~~ of the app.

NOT MASSIVELY GREAT

Not massively great

Avoid trite superlatives such as *great* and *awesome*; instead, pick adjectives that provide specific, extra information that reflects your point of view and demonstrates why we should care.

Please reserve *massive* for items that contain much mass (like an elephant or Mt. Rushmore). Also, note that *masterful* means forceful, not *masterly*.

Use *fewer* for items you can count and *less* for items you can't. Example—*fewer* reported accidents, *less* misery on the roads.

And **most important**, never write *most importantly*—we don't need to add the -ly to get the job done.

Pssst—If such details of usage delight you, seek more happiness from my favorite source, The New Yorker's Comma Queen, found on Twitter [@MaryNorrisTNY](https://twitter.com/MaryNorrisTNY)



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ELIMINATE TO BE AND -ING

Eliminate *to be* and *-ing*

Your sentences will gain purpose and strength as you claim your subjects, objects, and predicates with equal enthusiasm. ***Notice this entire document was written with no am, is, are, were, was, be, or -ing.***

This suggestion rankles many writers—if you find it too onerous to execute, please feel free to skip. And but so—if you like a challenge...



Rare words

Karen Wickre (@kvox), who ran all of content at Google and Twitter, offers helpful guidance on the use of rare words. She suggests that we optimize for clarity, even if it means that every once in a while your reader may have to reach for a dictionary or right-click on a word to learn the ***exact definition***. But don't sneak your hand into the cookie jar too many times—***more than two rare words per piece*** will engender scorn instead of delight. Don't humiliate or exhaust your reader just for sport; love them, and help them grow.

MAKE EVERY WORD TELL

Make every word tell

Craft direct, laconic, and effective text—where each word has a job to do and does it well. Recognize this phrase? Why not pick up my [favorite illustrated edition...](#)

BUILD

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