

# Tame the Content Beast

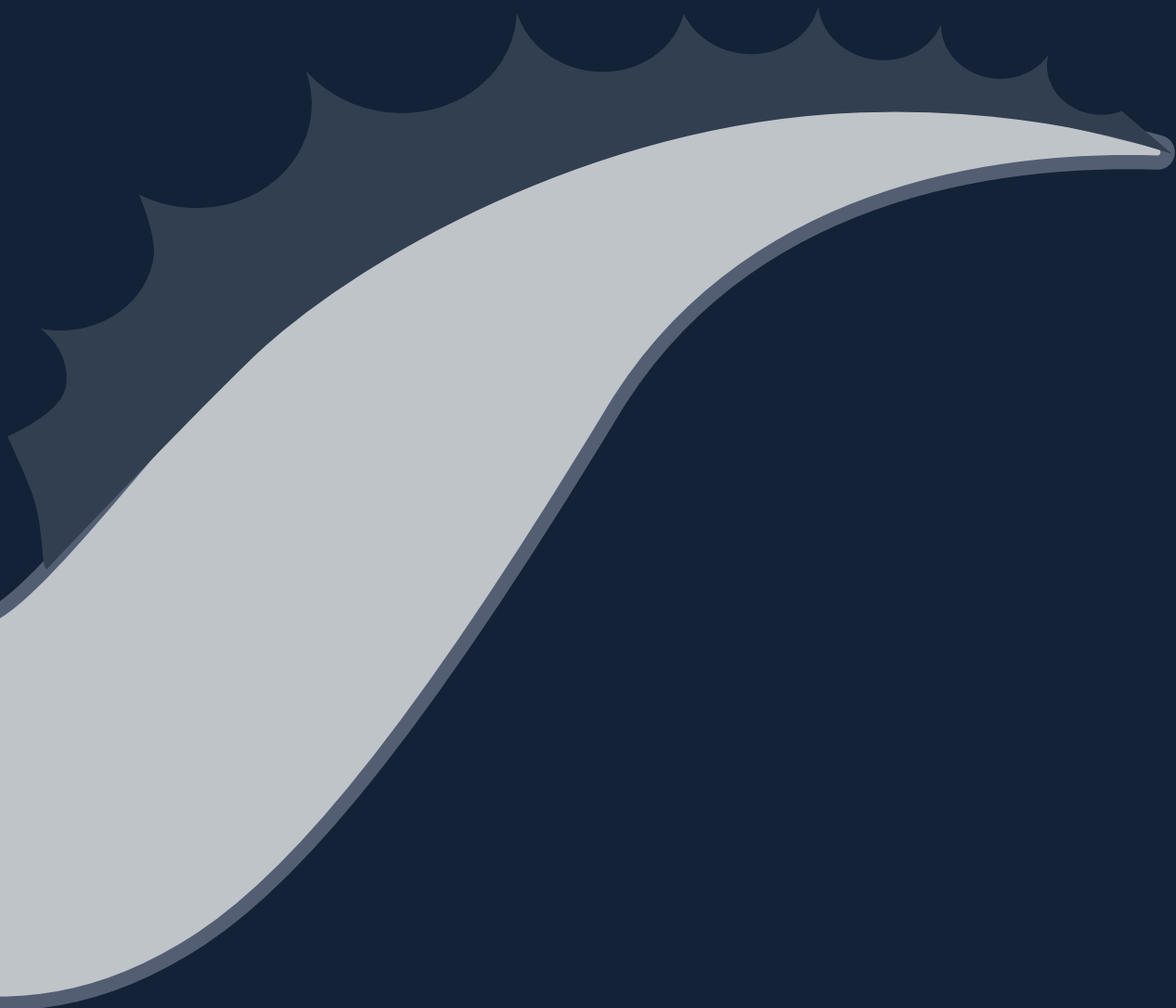
Five principals to get your web content  
beast under control



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We all have our own content beast. You may be writing blog posts, or creating content for pages, or you may be taming several different sites at once. Either way you're in the right place, welcome!

In this guide we'll be covering 5 principles that you can use to tame your particular content beast - no matter the breed!



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## Principles

1. **User first**
2. **Design with data**
3. **Be ruthless**
4. **Constant feedback**
5. **This is for everyone (accessibility)**

All of the tips, tools and techniques are simple and easy to implement on a tight or non-existent budget. We recommend you pick one principle at a time, try it out and see the resulting improvements in your work.

The time you're putting into improving your content is vital. No matter how great your web design and functionality may be, your users (and Google) need quality content that works.



# 1

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## User first

There's a crucial question that you need to answer, before you start writing or editing your content.

### Who are your users?

Do you know who they are? What their drivers are?  
And what they are trying to do on your website?

Of course what we are talking about here is research and if you've done it.

Let's explore some of the amazing tools and techniques you can use to better understand your users. We've stuck to ones that you can do on a tight budget, how deep you want to go with these is completely up to you. If you have the budget (or are time poor) you might like to explore some of these techniques further with a digital agency partner.

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## Your detective tools for understanding users

### Card sorting

Card sorting is a fantastic technique for unearthing how your users think about content topics and groupings.

With navigation and page titles it's easy to get stuck in your internal language. For example you might add a new document under your main heading of 'Policies' as it came from your policy team. Using card sorting you might discover that your users would in fact look for that specific document under the 'Resources' heading.

The basics of a card sort are that you create a list (post-it notes work) of all the headings or pages you might have for your website. You then ask users to group these for you under headings that make sense to them. As an example, the users may group together Blog, Contact Us and Staff.

There are some great tools that will let you run a card sort online, allowing you to send it out to people to complete, making it almost like a fun game. You can also run these in-house—using small groups and post-it notes. The beauty of the latter option is that you can observe and ask why they have grouped certain pages and headings.

### Other staff

Some of the simplest research methods are the first ones we forget. One of our favourite ways for gathering a little detective intel is talking to the front

facing staff. This might include your sales team, or a call centre or customer team. Here at SilverStripe, our open plan office layout allows us to hear the calls coming in to our support lines. Some companies even ask any new recruit, no matter what the position, to spend at least a day in the call centre. This is a fantastic way to make sure you are putting customers first and understanding your users' needs!

*Here are a few sample questions to start you off:*

#### **Sales team:**

Who's your ideal buyer? Can you describe to me what their typical working day would be like?

What common objections do they have?

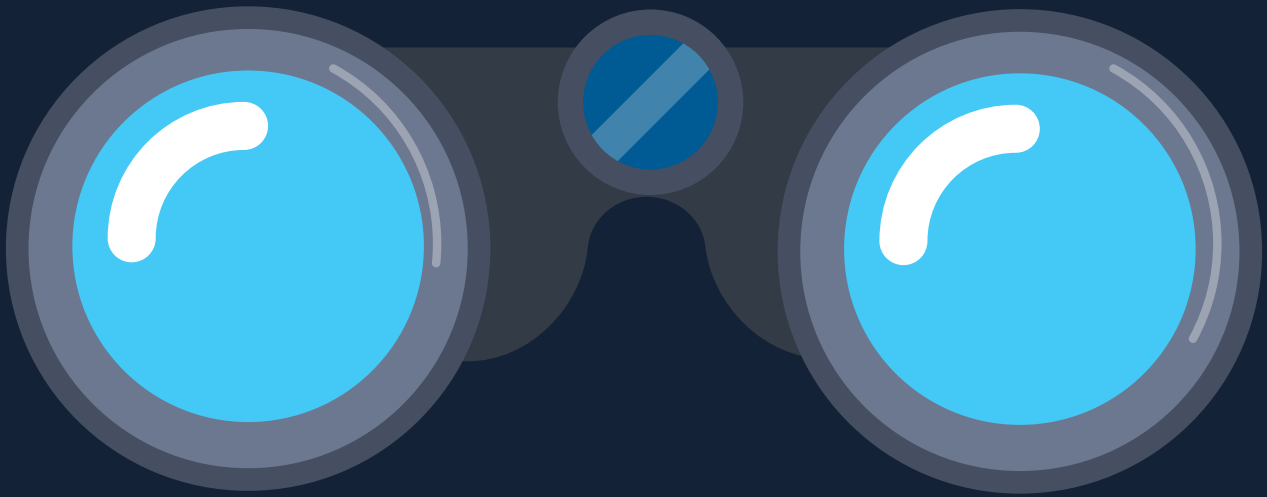
Do you remember the last client you talked to that mentioned our website? Who were they? What did they say? What was it they were looking for?

#### **Call centre:**

Do you think you have a 'typical caller'? How would you describe them?

What would be the top 3 questions you get asked everyday from callers?

When was the last time a caller said they were calling because they couldn't find something on your site? What was it?



## Top task research

One of the most valuable pieces of information you can discover in your research is your user's 'top tasks'; what users are trying to do! Knowing this means you can prioritise and start to focus on what matters to your users.

Start by creating an exhaustive list of all the tasks a user might complete on your website. For example on the SilverStripe website, we could start to list: become a professional partner, download open source software, contact the office, search for a digital agency, watch a demo etc. Depending on the size of your site you may want to shortlist these tasks before you move onto the next step.

Next, send out a one question survey for your users to vote on the most important tasks. It's best if you use scoring so you can analyse and limit users to selecting their top 5 tasks.

After these steps you'll have some valuable insights into what users are trying to do on your website.

For a great case study and explanation of the step by step process see this [Digital Gov Case study](#).

## Talk IRL (in real life)

Another simpler form of research that is often overlooked is doing one on one interviews with your users. Inviting them in for a meeting or coffee can be a simple way of starting to gather information about their behavioural drivers. While you're not going to achieve a significant sample size, it will be an effective way for you to start to build empathy with your users. If you're considering doing individual interviews then you can use these to start to form personas.

## Watch them online

Although it sounds a little creepy, it is known in research that asking people how they will behave is not always a good indicator for how they will actually behave. When it comes to buying practices, you may be getting a logical answer for what is actually an emotional decision.

Enter, observation. Caveat to this, always ask for the user's permission to observe their behaviour. The simplest way is to invite a couple of users in for research, add coffee and muffins, and ask them to complete a task on your website while you observe.

Ask them to complete one of your top tasks. You can observe their first click (where did they try first)? How long did the task take? What did they read? What path did they take? There are also tools that will let you perform this type of research from your desk.

## Create personas

If you don't already have them, then we'd strongly recommend creating a set of personas. For this you can complete interviews (often individually) to create a set of personas that represent your users. These will be generalised representations and can be a great way of keeping your audience top of mind. Some companies go as far to give their personas names and fake photos, but be careful not to create fixed personas as no user is ever the same. Personas are always in flux and should be reviewed and updated regularly. A good persona will help you understand and empathise with the challenges your users face and how you can help them. Your personas might include challenges, goals, common objectives as well as their demographics.

[This link](#) explores getting started with personas; including 20 questions to use for interviews.

## Google Analytics

We have omitted our good friend GA here as we will delve into data further on in our next principle. We will however say that making GA your best friend will go a long way into understanding your users on an ongoing basis and is a valuable weapon to have in your toolkit.

## Ask them online

Doing an online survey is often the first thing that comes to mind for research, which is why we've left it to last! You can use an agency to conduct a piece of research like this, or take the DIY option using one of the survey products available (such as SurveyAnyplace). The beauty of an online survey is that it's cost effective and easy to reach a large sample size. Consider a small segment to cover a particular focus area that you are working on, or a wider user base survey to cover off the goals of your site. With online surveys it's easy to get carried away and our tip would be to consider the length as the shorter the more likely its completion rate will be higher. You can also consider offering an incentive to complete the survey if you've got the budget.

Remember this list is not exhaustive. There are numerous ways to get your research phase of work done, you may even create new techniques of your own as you test and learn.



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## User stories

Once you've got a clearer understanding of your users you need to consider ways to keep them front of mind. For this we can steal a brilliant trick from the Agile philosophy. In Agile you create what's called a user story for each new piece of work.

The typical format of a user story looks like this, and can be adapted to suit your teams needs:

— — — — —  
As a <type of user>, I want <goal> so that I <benefit>  
— — — — —

An example for the SilverStripe website might be:

— — — — —  
As a <communication manager in government>  
I want <to learn about open source software>  
so that I <can figure out if it's right for our agency>  
— — — — —

Our final and most important tip is to employ this method in your web content work from now on. Make it a habit to create a user story before your team starts writing any content.

This simple step means that for every piece of content, you've considered who you're writing for (persona) and what they are trying to achieve (top task).

For more on agile read our [Agile Product Owner Handbook](#), for an overview of user research methods visit [www.usability.gov](http://www.usability.gov).





# 2

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## Design with data

Whether you're creating or culling website content, it is important to always start with data. For this, turn to the digital marketer's trusted ally: Google Analytics (GA).

Here are a few content scenarios and how Google Analytics can help you out:

### Scenario 1

You've been tasked to audit a large website with hundreds of pages. The site has had numerous pages added to it over the years which has damaged the Information Architecture of the site considerably.

Start by checking Google Analytics to see what content people are searching for, what they are reading and more importantly, what they aren't reading. You've now got the ammunition you need to start drastically reducing (or changing) the content on your site. If you're in the position of completely overhauling the site, or if no one is even sure how much content exists then you might want a full content audit. Having the data to back up your work will allow you to confidently cull content knowing it is not being viewed regularly.

## Scenario 2

You've been tasked to create content for a new website with the option to migrate existing content from your current beast site to your new site.

Let us save you a world of pain: don't take all your existing content and blindly copy it across! While it's more work up front to perform a content audit, cull and rewrite it's worth it. We'd argue that if you're bothering to invest in a new site then you're wasting money just copying everything across. For a content migration you can use a host of user testing tools as well as GA - particularly in the discovery and usability stage. And a great digital agency will be able to help you with these.

### Help is here

Check out our network of [SilverStripe Professional Partners](#) if you're on the hunt for an agency.

## Scenario 3

There are no beasts to tame, just creating fresh, new content for your site.

The SEO gods crave new content and this is where you can really start to have some fun with data. Data can drive the type of content you write, as you look at topics people are searching for and what has already performed well on your site. You might also choose to create content around specific long or short tail keywords that you are targeting for SEO.

Once you've written your content there's also a host of grammar and accessibility tools that you could consider using to ensure that your writing is short, concise, in plain English and is accessible to everyone.

It's also a great idea to A/B test new or existing content, for example you might like to test different headings, calls to action or even images. If you already eat A/B testing for breakfast, lunch and dinner then you could move to multivariate testing which lets you experiment even further.

### Help is here

[The Hemingway App](#) helps you edit your web content as you write it. This free tool will highlight areas for improvement such as; long sentences, using the passive voice and anything that is hard to read.

### Like to know more about testing?

Have a read through [testing 1, 2, 3](#) for a great outline of some popular testing tools and how the marketing team at SilverStripe uses them.

## Scenario 4

**Maintaining the beast. Polish, polish, maintain.**

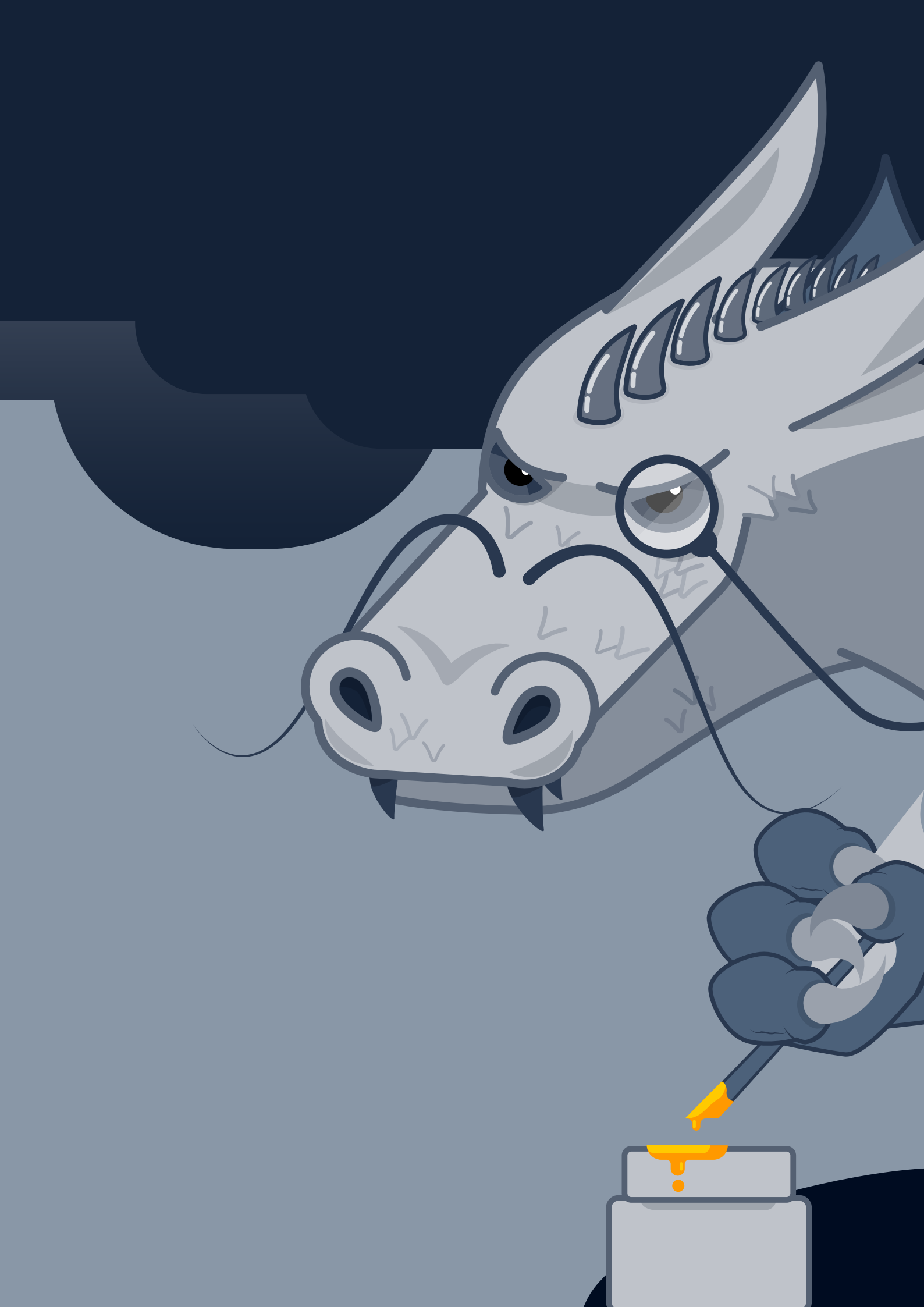
Lastly, the majority of any web/content editor's role is going to include maintenance of your lovely beast (which you've hopefully transformed into a sweet pet). How your friend GA can help here will really depend on the goals of your site. For example, depending on if you are transactional or informational, your analytics tracking will change. Setting up any kind of regular dashboarding and metrics to help you maintain your content can be a daunting task as there are **so many** data points you could potentially look at.

### Help is here

Download the SilverStripe [Analytics Cheat Sheet](#) to get started on your data journey. The cheat sheet includes different tools you can use, how to get started and the type of metrics you could consider depending on your goals.

**Here are a few basic tips for getting started:**

1. Only track data that is relevant to your organisation and audience
2. Avoid overwhelming yourself with data and only track a few pages or actions to start with
3. Identify what is being searched for on your website to identify missing information or content visibility
4. Use A/B testing to measure the effectiveness of your content
5. Use Google Analytics Conversion Tracking to identify when desired actions are made on your website



An abstract illustration on the left side of the page. It features a dark blue background at the top, transitioning into a lighter blue and grey mountain range. A white quill pen is positioned diagonally across the lower part of the mountains. The number '3' is prominently displayed in a large, bold, orange font, partially overlapping the mountain illustration.

# 3

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## Be ruthless

As a writer it's your job to be ruthless with your own writing and structure, but more importantly (and a harder feat), is to be ruthless with others.

As the guardian for your website, you need to maintain the quality of your content for the end user. Depending on the size of your organisation keeping your content in hand may often involve working with multiple teams and managing expectations.

*“Successful websites are  
created for their users,  
not their owners.”*

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Always refer to our first principle—start with the user. Especially when egos within your organisation get in the way.

People feel a lot of pride and ownership over their content and they may insist that it needs to be included on the site. This is when you come back to the user; is it important to them? What’s the angle? What parts do they need to know?

If you don’t already, be sure to introduce peer reviewing into your workflow. This removes much of the ego from the room and means content can be edited without one person feeling like the website content police.

Start by creating at least half of the content as an initial goal, ensuring it’s broken up into logical and structured headings for easy scanning. The content can then be shared for peer review.



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It's always good to explain to your contributors why you've cut down their content. Feel free to try these reasons that we've pre-written for you.

*Why have you....*

**Cut my content in half!?**

The average session time for this content is much shorter than what is needed to consume it all. We've kept the essence of the piece but taken out a lot of the fluff.

**Broken up the content with headings?**

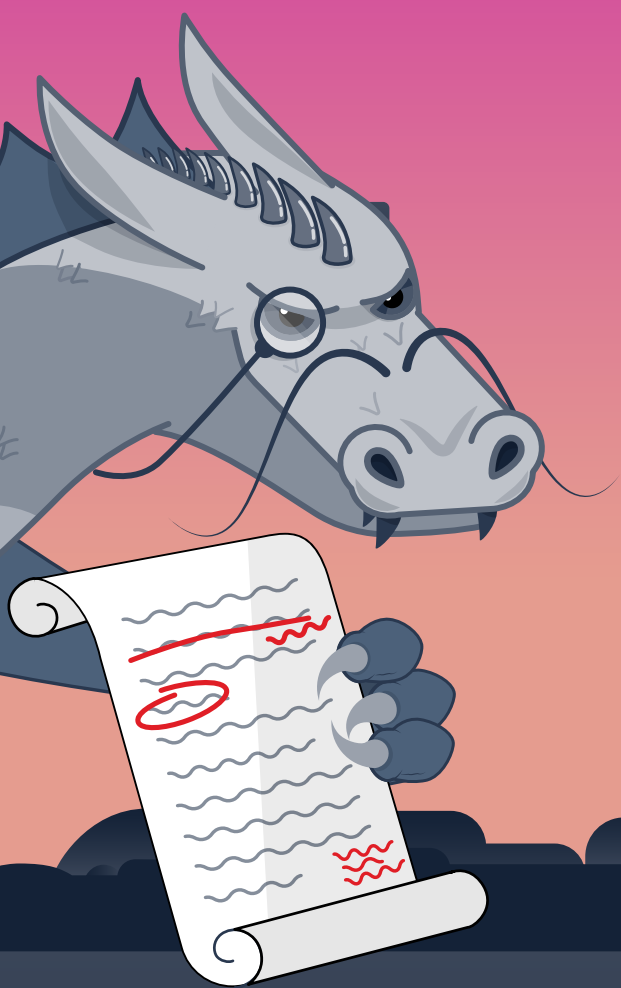
The content now has headings and structure as our web visitors tend to scan for information rather than reading everything we have on our website.

**Reordered the content?**

The order changed because users only scroll through 50-60% of an article page. We need the most important things nearer the top in prime real estate.

**Changed so many words?**

Longer words were changed to plain English. It is now more searchable, plus studies show that plain English makes the writer appear smarter and more trustworthy.





# 4

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## Constant feedback

As we all know, things don't stay still when it comes to the world of digital—and neither should your web content.

A crucial part of any good content strategy is to iterate and improve. We need constant feedback. For this step we like to refer to two of our own SilverStripe values:

**Collaboration over control.**

**Continuous improvement over perfection.**

Whilst these values sound ideal in theory, they are harder to put in action; if you're like most of us, being in complete control of your content sounds better.

## Collaboration over control.

How can you encourage users (both internal and external) to give feedback and collaborate to improve your content?

For your internal users we strongly recommend that you adopt 'peer reviewing' as a practice in your content team.

When developers write code at SilverStripe they share and peer review. And this practice is just as useful for those of us writing in the English language! Peer reviewing all web content means that the 'approval' doesn't bottleneck with one person (the boss). From our experience working in Agile content and marketing teams, you'll also feel less precious about your content and more open to suggestions.

## Continuous improvement over perfection.

How about getting feedback from external users? This is a tricky concept for those of us with high standards for our web content. The Agile mindset goes like this: it's better to share a minimum viable product (in this case your content) and get early feedback to improve it. The alternative is polishing content for hours, even months only to find out that your users (or search engines) tanked it, e.g. it was miles too long and you only needed 300 words not 3,000.

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Here's a handy guerrilla test that you can ask others to perform on your web content draft.

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*Test originally presented by the digital team at ACC.*

1. Read the page title (hide everything else)
2. Write down 3-4 questions that you'd expect to be answered on the page
3. Read the rest of the page
4. Did the page answer your questions?
5. Jot down any other feedback you have.

Voilà! A quick and easy test for others to give you feedback.

## Creating content in an Agile way

1. Create a basic new page and start testing headings and copy so you can see what is going to resonate with an audience - before you fill in the rest.
2. For a long form piece of content (document, pdf guide etc), why not create a short blog post first to test how the topic is received by your readers?

Think about ways that you can create content experiments that will help guide your writing. Remember when in doubt, start small and share early.

What about when you're creating a whole new website? One you've been toiling away on for months? An all too common approach when building a new site is to do it in a hidden way. Once the site is ready for launch the switch is made. Bam, launch! Applause and balloons rain down from the web clouds! And the old site vanishes (at least to users).

The team at ACC took a more agile approach when creating their new site. They built a beta site and started showing it to the public early.

This meant they were running two sites, and beta pages were gradually integrated to the main site so they could get instant feedback. The pages on the beta site were labelled as such, so users could tell they'd encountered a new page. And there were tools for users to provide feedback on the site pages right then and there.

When they were ready to make the big switch, they did so with confidence as they had already tested and improved the content. As an aside, the team evolved their content strategy from a website of 20,000 pages to 200—content heroes. You can view their new site [here](#) if you're interested.

These tips will go a long way to adopting constant feedback and improvement into your content practice. If you're struggling with the idea of releasing early and often, just remember this sage advice:

*“Done is better than perfect.”*



A stylized illustration on the left side of the page. It features a dark blue mountain peak with a jagged, scalloped edge. To the right of the mountain, there is a light blue silhouette of a person's head in profile, facing right. The background is a solid dark blue.

# 5

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## This is for everyone

Have you ever considered that 15% of people live with a disability? Our next principle is to ensure the content you produce is accessible to everyone.

Web accessibility is ensuring there is equal access to your website information and services; regardless of the person's ability or equipment.

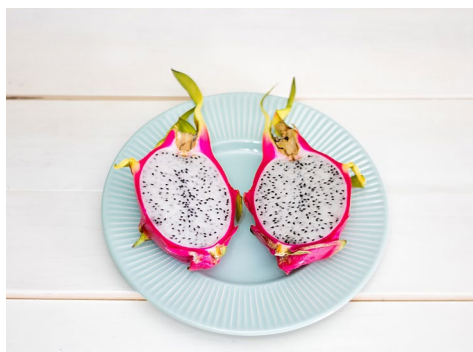
This brings us back to our number one principle: user first. Does someone with a disability have equal access to your content? Someone with a vision impairment could be using a screen reader—would this work on your site? What about that great new video you've loaded? Is it accessible to someone with a hearing or visual impairment?

# Your accessibility checklist

Not sure where to start? We've compiled a handy 7-step checklist you can run through when crafting your content. It won't take long to go through, but will go a long way to ensuring your content is available to everyone.

## ✓ Make ALT text your friend

ALT text is the useful text that you can provide when you upload or use any image on your site. Best practice is to use an ALT text description for all images on your website. That way a screen reader knows what information the picture is conveying. For this reason try and make your ALT text descriptive of the picture, rather than generic.



Generic:

`alt="dragon fruit"`

Descriptive:

`alt="dragon fruit sliced in half on a blue plate"`

## ✓ Plain English

Many of the principles of writing for accessibility, are simply good writing principles. To make our writing accessible it needs to be in plain English. Think simple sentences, active voice and cutting out any jargon from your writing. If you need to include a few acronyms or technical words, then provide a glossary. Remember long complicated sentences won't impress your users.

## ✓ Ban the "click here"

A website is often full of links - helping people navigate, make sense of content and of course for SEO purposes. Have you ever created a link that says click here? We have, but for accessibility it's critical that we ban the 'click here' from our sites. Instead each link that you create should mean something to the reader, viewer or listener.

CLICK HERE



Download our 5 step marketing eBook





## Bad contrast



## Good contrast



### ✓ Check your contrast

Someone with poor vision or colour vision deficiency (CVD) will have trouble seeing text against a low contrast background. To help you with this there are free tools like the [WebAIM Contrast Checker](#). Remember that your links should also have a visual difference, such as an underline or highlight.

### ✓ Tables are only for data

Tables are for displaying data as this makes sense to screen readers. If you're tempted to use a table just to get the layout right (lining up words or creating space on a page) then resist. Remember, if you're using a table then there needs to be a relationship between the data, row and column headings.

### ✓ Break that text up

Have you chunked content together using the inverted pyramid style (crucial info at the top), and used structured headings to make the content easy to scan? Remember most people scan a page rather than reading word for word, so this is good practice. On the CMS editor side of your page you'll want to ensure that you've used logical heading tags; for example H1 first, H2 second and so on.

### ✓ Can everyone watch that video?

If you're wanting to use interactive multimedia on your site then best practice is to make sure everyone has access to it. For this you'll want to ensure you're using closed captioning and offering a full transcript. You can see detailed video notes on the [W3 site](#).

*"The power of the Web is in its universality. Access by everyone regardless of disability is an essential aspect."*

*– Tim Berners-Lee, Creator of World Wide Web*

## “In their shoes” test

When you want to test the accessibility of your content, get started with these two exercises:

### Test one: The two minute version

Consider the page you’ve published, now imagine this page without any colour, images, audio or video elements. Can you still make sense of what the page is trying to achieve? Have you missed a couple of pieces of information? This will give you a great starting point for where there might be gaps.

### Test two: The 20 minute version

Spend 20 minutes browsing your website and content using a device that someone with a disability might use, such as a screen reader tool. Set yourself a couple of tasks and see how long it takes to achieve these (e.g. buy an item, use a website service). This exercise is great for empathy building and for spotting the accessibility gaps in your site content.

If you’d like to delve into this important topic further, we’ve included a range of resources below to explore. Your number one go-to resource for any accessibility work is the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). The W3C published the official standards.

## Accessibility tools & further reading/resources

[W3 Resources and articles](#)[W3 Multimedia accessibility](#)[W3 Official standards](#)[Accessibility Cheat Sheet](#)[WebAIM Contrast Checker](#)[Chrome Extensions for accessibility](#)[Nibbler Site Checker  
For an accessibility score](#)[Hemingway App  
For plain English writing](#)[Plain English writing advice](#)

As well as the external tools above there are modules that you can add directly into your CMS. Allowing you to embed accessibility into your natural workflow. Chat to your digital team about this for your CMS.

[Explore the modules](#)

With this guide in hand you are now ready to go forth and tame your content beast! We wish you luck in putting your user first, falling in love with data, being ruthless, gaining feedback and embracing accessibility.

Need help managing your content? Talk to SilverStripe.

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