Content Strategy Inc.

Content audits:

How to conduct them effectively

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Wasted time and space

"It is estimated that the Microsoft.com website has about 10 million pages and that some 3 million of them have never been visited. That means that there are almost as many webpages that nobody has ever visited as there are people in Ireland." - Gerry McGovern

01
Introduction

Taking stock of your assets

Whether you are building a new digital presence, migrating your content to a new platform, or constructing new information architecture, a content audit is a vital step. An audit helps make your website or intranet content more useful to the audience, which will make them more likely to keep using it.

That increased use could result in a number of important benefits, such as:

- More frequent and larger spends on your products and services.
- An increase in audience and employee knowledge, with a reduction in customer service calls.
- An overall strengthening of your brand.

It's a lot like cleaning out your closet

Are there items you never use anymore, or you forgot you owned, or that should never have seen the light of day? How is your closet organized? Is it easy to find things? Or do old, out-of-date things hide the good pieces?

The same questions come up in a content audit, and just like your clothes, some content should stay, much should go, and some of it can be repurposed. An audit will also show you where you should set standards so that everything you keep, edit, or add supports your brand in the best possible way.

Choose a goal, plan your approach

The three most common types of content audits are:

- Quality audits
- Site structure and organization audits
- Migration audits

In this guide, you'll learn how to identify which audit(s) will best meet your needs. You'll also get actionable, step-by-step advice, and the tools to translate the information you gather. You'll also learn about how to automate parts of the auditing process. By the end, you'll know how to analyze your findings and turn them into actions to streamline your site, and improve the way you use content.

02
Quality Audits

What is a quality audit?

A quality audit evaluates your content against a set of subjective, pre-defined quality criteria. To keep your audience engaged, it's important to check that every piece:

- Conveys interesting, useful information.
- Is accurate, complete, straightforward, and current.
- Is well-organized and on-brand.

Why you might need one

Some organizations try to serve their audiences by publishing more content, with the idea that "putting it all out there" means they're being transparent to their audience. But if the material isn't appropriately catalogued, and isn't presented with a tone, style and quality level that makes sense from an audience perspective, your user might:

- Become frustrated with too much detail.
- Be unable to find something to meet their specific needs.
- End up with information that is out of date, poorly communicated, or even inaccurate.

A quality audit documents your content's strengths and weaknesses, and helps you establish a content baseline.

Your audiences rely on you

It's vital that your content conveys the right messages, and makes it easy for people to get what they need.

- If visitors get out-of-date or poorly written information from your website, they may look elsewhere.
- If employees struggle to find current, focused content on your intranet, the work they do will be affected.

When do you need a quality audit?

You should conduct quality audits on an ongoing basis, but they are particularly important to do during the discovery stage of a content initiative, such as a migration or website redesign. Auditing for quality during discovery will help you refine the scope of your initiative, and ensure that the investment in your new site provides better value to your organization.

How do you conduct a quality audit?

1. Make time and dedicate appropriate resources

It's not a fast process, but it's an important one.

2. Get the right people on board

Everyone has a different idea about what constitutes quality, but content professionals bring expertise in the psychology of users and the nuances of language, pacing, and information structuring. They include seasoned writers, content strategists, and editors.

Who are the "right" people?

- Use content experts with strong writing skills specific to the type of content they're reviewing.
- Subject matter experts should review content to verify the factual accuracy of the information, but should not edit beyond correcting something that is inaccurate.
- Content authors can't be objective about their own work, so content professionals other than the authors should audit the materials.

3. Determine an appropriate sample of content

You don't need to audit every landing page, article, and policy statement to get a sense of your site's strengths and weaknesses. Choose samples of pages from different sections of the site, and ensure you review enough pages to see a clear pattern of quality.

When you are choosing your samples, look for different:

- Levels of quality.
- Content types and topics.
- Content authors.

4. Know what to assess

While the value of a specific piece of information is subjective, it's important to define good general principles before you begin.

Content organization

Well-organized content:

- Has consistent heading structures.
- Is easy to scan, with no large, overly long paragraphs.
- Flows from the most important, to the least important information.
- Uses any images, videos, and links appropriately and consistently.

Plain language, grammar, & punctuation

Grammatically correct, readable content:

- Is jargon-free, or uses only the jargon that is appropriate for the audience.
- Uses active voice, e.g., "the dog chased the cat," not, "the cat was chased by the dog".
- Avoids nominalizations, e.g., "offer an incentive" is easier to read than "incentivize".
- Avoids clichés, redundant details or words, and long sentences.

Audience mapping

Your content should:

- Be written for a specific audience persona or profile.
- Discuss the audience's known tasks and needs.
- Include the right amount of context.

Efficiency and effectiveness

Good content:

- Stays focused on one topic per page.
- Is succinct.
- Is easy to understand.

Accuracy

To be credible, your content should be:

- Up to date.
- Factually accurate.

Voice and tone

The "voice" and "tone" of your content should make the reader feel they can trust you. To do this, the content:

- Should meet your organization's brand guidelines.
- Follows your organization's house style, e.g., Chicago Style, MLA, CP, etc.
- Should have a tone that is appropriate for the audience, purpose, and channel.

Calls to action or next steps

Each piece of content should clearly indicate what the user should do next.

There may be opportunities for you to use automation tools to evaluate some of the criteria you've selected, either directly or indirectly. Learn more in Section 5: Automate your audits.

5. Measure the quality of the content

Even with the assessment points from the previous step, the overall value of a piece of content will be subjective. But by using a number scoring system, you will have metrics and a framework to rank the content.

Start by ranking pages between 1 (low quality) and 5 (high quality) for each set of criteria, and then average the scores. This will provide an overall quality score for each page, and each area of the website.

✅ Starting out

Download our [quality audit template](#) to get started ranking your content.

The highest-scoring content will follow the best practices from Section 3, while the lowest-scoring content will be frustrating or of no use to your audience. For example, a page with outdated or incomplete information or a voice and tone that don't fit the brand might score a 1 or 2. A page that is accurate, up-to-date, and on brand would score a 4 or a 5 in those categories.

Rank your content quality from 5 (excellent) to 1 (poor)

✔ **Excellent**	High quality, best practice, and delivers considerable benefits.
✔ **Good**	Supports ease of use and a positive customer experience.
✔ **Average**	Some aspects may cause problems for users.
✔ **Below average**	Poor quality and likely to cause problems for users.
✔ **Poor**	Very likely to cause significant problems for users.
✔ **Not applicable**	Heuristic is not relevant to this site or system.

Content quality scorecard

Once your audit is complete, you can analyze and group your results. The scale will give you good data that you can easily turn into a report card to share with your organization's stakeholders.

Score	Grade	Steps:
4.8 - 5.0	A	• Calculate the average score for each audit criteria.
4.5 - 4.8	A-	• Turn numerical results into report card-style grades.
4.0 - 4.5	B+	• Present grades to stakeholders as a holistic view of content, supported by data.
3.5 - 4.0	B	
3.0 - 3.5	C+	
2.0 - 3.0	C	
1.0 - 2.0	D	
0.0 - 1.0	E	

6. Take the next steps

A content audit shows you opportunities and priorities for change. Start by creating a plan that is appropriate to your organizational priorities, projects, and budgets. Sometimes that means sweeping through all content to make sure it's accurate and current, but sometimes it makes sense to work on specific challenges and chunks. For example:

- If 90% of users are using 10% of the content, focus on that in-demand 10%.
- If your organization is focused on improving the brand, revise the most-used content for tone, voice, and structure.

03

Site Structure + Organization Audits

What is a structure and organization audit?

A structural content and organization audit:

- Assesses the way your website content is organized across the site, between pages, and within pages.
- Provides insights about how easy or difficult it is for your audience to complete a task or find what they need on your site.

Why you might need one

You've probably had the experience of visiting a website that should have had what you needed, but was difficult to navigate. Chances are that you gave up after a few minutes, or had to work really hard to find what you were looking for. And those experiences mean that you're less likely to use the site in the future.

That's because the site wasn't structured properly for you.

A key part of a good user experience is a predictable information structure that lets users quickly and intuitively get what they need. If your site isn't doing that, it's time to plan for a closer look.

> ✔ **Good journeys begin with good navigation.**
>
> *Like good travelling, a visit to a website should be a comfortable and productive process of discovery. To create that experience, content design companies plan websites with taxonomies, sitemaps, and wireframes. These tools chart the user's journey so they can complete tasks efficiently and effectively.*

When should you conduct a structure and organization audit?

It's good to do structure and organization audits when you are redesigning your site or when you are analyzing the way your audience uses it. The discovery phase of your project is an ideal time to do a deep dive into what's working and what isn't, and identify opportunities for a better, more efficient experience.

Your audit will identify:

- Strengths and weaknesses in the way the website is structured.
- How content is categorized, and the pathways between information.
- How page content is structured, including:
  - Which page elements are used consistently or repeatedly.
  - Whether or not similar page types are structured similarly.

Interconnected layers

In every website, there are multiple layers of structure working together for overall functionality. These include:

- Written content
- Page design, layout, and graphics
- Site usability, also known as user experience (UX)
- Coding and databases behind the site

Information architecture (IA) involves planning a site's optimum structure and flow. Developing IA is a lot like the job of a traditional librarian who organizes publications by topic, nomenclature, author, etc., so that a user can find what they need without having to ask for help.

How do you conduct one?

1. Make time and dedicate appropriate resources

If you give it the attention it deserves, the results could have a significant effect on the way your site is used.

2. Get the right people on board

Structural and organization audits are often done at the same time as quality audits. An individual may have the skillsets to do both, but it may be the case that you'll need different people if you're conducting them simultaneously.

Who are the "right" people?

The people doing your structural and organization audit should have expertise in:

- Information architecture.
- Taxonomy.
- Content models.
- Navigation.
- Usability.

3. Determine an appropriate sample of content

You don't need to audit every page to generalize your site's structural strengths and weaknesses.
- Choose samples of pages from different sections.
- Choose pages from the top two or three levels of the website.
- Choose enough of each section and level to get an accurate, high-level structural view of the categories of information, and how they fit together.

4. Know what to assess

Once you have narrowed your focus and decided what pages you are going to audit, it's time to analyze your content, with a number of factors to consider.

Topics

Topics should be:

- Organized into logical groupings.

- Categorized in a way that makes them easy for users to find.
- Broken into effective subtopics.

Navigational elements

The cues for moving around and between pages should:

- Be consistent and effective.
- Have clear, descriptive labels.

Usability

The structure of the site and individual pages should:

- Support user needs.
- Have consistent and predictable pathways to the rest of the site and similar page types.

Metadata

Metadata is information that helps users find the content that's relevant to them. For each page:

- The meta title should clearly and concisely reflect the page content.
- The meta description should briefly describe page content.
- Consider what other metadata fields are of high priority to your organization, and include them in the assessment.
- Be sure to consider how your metadata contributes to search engine optimization during the assessment.

Publishing metadata

To keep content current, it's important to track:

- When the content was published.
- When the content was last revised.
- Who owns the content, and whether they should continue to own it.

Taxonomy (classification) terms

Classifications and terms should be used consistently, so it's important to consider:

- What type of content is on the page.
- If the content refers to a specific department, product, audience, or topic within your organization, and if the language is consistent with the rest of the site.
- Whether taxonomy terms should be used on the sample page or component.
- If taxonomy terms are not used, what keywords do and should appear on the page.

Content types

Content offering a good UX will:

- Be structured consistently across similar content types.
- Have consistent content components present on similar pages.
- Make it clear where the user should go and what they should do next.
- Have an appropriate amount of information on the page.

Analytics

Analytics tools attached to your site should tell you:

- How many visits each page receives.
- How long users spend on it.
- Whether visitors have taken the page's desired action, e.g., clicked on a specific link.
- Whether they are accessing the most important information.

There may be opportunities for you to use automation tools to evaluate some of the criteria you've selected, either directly or indirectly. Learn more in Section 5: Automate your audits.

5. Measuring quality

Use a spreadsheet to track your assessment of each of the qualities in section 4. The results will give you a good overall picture when you're finished. If you are doing a content quality audit at the same time, you can incorporate these items into the same spreadsheet and sort different ways to see patterns and develop a plan.

6. Take the next steps

The next big job is to develop a plan to improve your site structure and organization. Your audit will show you strengths you can build on, and weaknesses that you need to address to improve your audience's experience. These insights may point you to undertaking new or updated:

- User research.
- Information architecture.
- Taxonomy and keywords.
- Page layouts and design.

Your structural and organization audit will help you consider the elements that help or hinder your site's users. Work that you do as a result of it will improve the way your site is used, making it more effective for your audience and your business.

04
Migration Audits

✓ Migrating content moving between homes
Migration audits are similar to the way you might organize your possessions for a move to a new home. Your move will be easier – and your new pad will function better – if you first purge things that you don't need.

What is a migration audit?

A migration audit is the process of taking stock so you can streamline and improve the way your content is used before you redesign your site or move it to a new content management system (CMS).

Why you might need one

If your organization is planning to change your CMS or move your website to a new platform or design, you will simplify the move by first doing a deep review of the content. A migration audit will help you see how your existing content maps to your new site architecture, and you can plan for changes to your content and the proposed new structure.

When you should conduct a migration audit

The best time to conduct a migration audit is during the design stage, after you've made high-level information architecture decisions.

How to conduct one

1. Make time and dedicate appropriate resources

Migration audits are very involved, but the results will make your move more efficient and will make the new site more effective for your users.

2. Get the right people on board

A migration audit shouldn't take any shortcuts, especially in your choice of people to do the work. Content strategists have unique skills and training to identify content that can attract and retain audiences and improve the value of your site overall, and to prescribe what should happen with content that doesn't.

Who are the "right" people?

Use content strategists with expertise in:

- SEO.
- Content creation.
- Content promotion.
- Editing.
- Developing audience personas.
- Social media.

3. Don't neglect any piece of content

Migration audits need to be thorough, so every piece of content must be considered in some way. Depending on your site, there may be ways to generalize. For example, analytics may indicate that you don't need to move certain content over. Or maybe you've sold a line of business so there's no longer a need for content referring to it. But you need an expert to look at every page of content that might get moved over, because you also need to plan for the way it will integrate in the new system.

4. Know what to assess

The range of information your team will want to assess will depend on the unique goals and branding of your organization. Here are some important variables to start with, but there may be other factors you want to add to the list.

ID

Assign each piece of content a unique ID, because titles and locations can change.

Title

Record each page's title at the time of audit.

Current location

This is usually an intranet URL or network drive location.

Audit date

The date the piece of content was reviewed.

Current content type

Mark each piece with a tag that categorizes it, e.g., "training", "news", "product description" or any other type of content that is common to your site. Keep the category names consistent.

New Location

Mark where this existing piece of content fits into the new information architecture.

New content type

Indicate what content type should be applied to the content, so that it's clear what standards and templates should be used when moving the content.

Action

Decide what should happen to this piece of content during the migration, for example:

- Keep it as-is.
- Rewrite it.
- Delete it.
- Split it into multiple items.
- Merge it with another piece of content.

Standards ratings (you may want a separate heading for each)

Compare the page content to the standards that it will need to align to on the new site, including new standards for:

- Usability.
- Accessibility.
- Brand.
- Structure.

Notes

Adding a column for notes is a good place to:

- Support your findings.
- Flag entries that will need further attention.
- Record any other impressions.

There may be opportunities for you to use automation tools to evaluate some of the criteria you've selected, either directly or indirectly. Learn more in Section 5: Automate your audits.

5. Compile and assess your data

Sorting and reporting

A migration audit is a big job and part of the work is reporting on the status of the audit. To be able to do that, as well as to examine all the assessment points from step 4, you'll need to generate a list of the content to audit. Import that list into a spreadsheet with columns for each audit variable, and include the name of the person responsible and the status for each piece.

Record the details and decisions you and your team members make for each piece of content. You can then sort by those different details, and be able to report on the project-management factors, including:

- The entries that still need to be audited.
- An average of how many entries you audit each day.
- An estimation of the date your audit work will be complete.

You can also use the spreadsheet to:

- Show a progress bar for your overall migration effort.
- Display entries assigned to a particular auditor.
- List content that has been marked for deletion.

A migration audit spreadsheet, ready to go

Use our Migration Audit Template to rank your content and manage your audit. Click File, and then click Make a copy. Here's what it includes:

- The Entries sheet holds the data about your content. Use drop-down menus to fill in the data.
- The two Calculations sheets collect the data and start turning it into useful information.
- The Dashboard displays that information in easy-to-read charts.focused content on your intranet, the work they do will be affected.

6. Take the next steps

After completing your audit, you should have useful data you can use to make decisions about your new site. Once you've reviewed the data, you may be able to make bulk decisions that will streamline your move. For example, you might discover collections of content such as:

- Work from authors who are no longer with the organization.
- Stale/non-current content.
- Content with outdated branding.
- Buried content that you want to bring forward.
- Entire sections you can delete.

The end result will be fewer pieces of content to bring over to the new structure or platform, along with an ability to refine your new architecture for better overall effectiveness.

05
Automating Your Audits

Carrying out different types of audits usually involves a manual, page-by-page analysis of your website, or a sample of it, by one or more people. In recent years, increasingly sophisticated tools have become available that can automate parts of this process, which:

- Drastically reduce the amount of time and other resources needed to complete audits.
- Result in a greater amount of consistency throughout the evaluation process.

If your organization has one or more websites with over 100 pages of content, you can benefit from using a content inventory and analysis tool to automate parts of your audit. These tools are especially valuable for larger websites with thousands of pages of content.

How to use automation in your audit

The extent to which you can use tools to automate your audit will depend on two main factors:
- The specific criteria you've selected as part of your audit
- The tools you have access to and what they are capable of doing

Your audit criteria
Criteria that can be evaluated directly

There are some criteria you may be able to evaluate directly using an automation tool, such as whether your content is up-to-date.

For this criteria, the automation tool can quickly identify the date when each page was last modified and/or reviewed. This would allow you to focus your resources on content that has not been looked at in the past, say, 2 years (or whatever your organization has defined as being outdated).

Other criteria that you could likely evaluate through automation include:
- Topics
- Publishing metadata
- Content types
- Analytics
- Title
- Location

Criteria that can be evaluated through a proxy

In some cases, you may be able to use automation tools to evaluate a certain characteristic of your content that indirectly contributes to one of your criteria. Using that characteristic as a "proxy" for your criteria will help you identify pages that are likely to be problematic.

Take, for example, plain language. While your automation tools may not be able to tell whether your content is written in plain language, you could use readability as a proxy. With the automation

tool assigning a reading level to each page, you can quickly identify pages that have reading levels that are too high. Your content experts can then spend time reviewing these pages for plain language, and not pages with good readability scores.

In cases where your tool can't automate the evaluation of your exact criteria, be sure to look for opportunities to use proxies as much as possible. After you've decided on what aspects of your content you'll be evaluating during your audit, you can look at what your automation tool is capable of and see where proxies might exist that can help cut down on the work that an actual person will need to do.

Criteria that you still need humans to evaluate

There are always aspects of your content that a machine won't be able to evaluate, and you'll need humans to step in.

But by automating as much as possible, you can focus resources on evaluating the aspects of your content that software can't evaluate. These include things like:

- Priority organization of content.
- Audience mapping.
- Voice and tone.
- Usability.
- Action (for a migration audit).

Your automation tool(s)

There are several options for different automation tools that may be appropriate depending on your needs. We use **Content Chimera**; it's a work in progress, but is very powerful, and the team behind it created **this tool** to help people find an automation tool that will meet their needs. It doesn't include all options, but it's a good place to start.

There are many other tools with varying levels of sophistication, but here are a few we've come across:

- **Screaming Frog**: A website crawler that can extract a list of URLs of your website and audit for common SEO issues.
- **Sitebulb**: A website crawler and SEO tool that allows you to gather actionable insights and includes data visualizations.
- **MarketMuse**: A tool that helps you research, plan, and craft your content.
- **ContentWRX Audit**: A tool that can create detailed, automated content inventories.
- **Blaze**: An inventory, audit, and analysis platform that helps you analyze your content, identify gaps, and map your strategy.

The skillsets you'll need

To get the most out of whichever tool(s) you choose to help you with your audit, it's important to have the right people using it. Depending on how your organization is structured, you may find them in Marketing, IT, Communications, Web, or some other department. You might also find that you don't have the appropriate skillsets within your organization, and may need to hire someone or use a third party.

The right person or team to implement an inventory and analysis automation tool should have a good understanding of how to:

- Sift through data and find meaningful insights and patterns.
- Connect these to actions that should be taken for maximal positive impact for your business.
- Effectively leverage data visualization, including charts and graphs, as communication tools.
- Manipulate and understand data, and express patterns to a computer.
- Look beyond the details, see the bigger picture, and turn it into something your organization can act on.

Other benefits of using audit automation tools

While content inventory and analysis automation tools can significantly cut down on the time and resources needed for content audits, they have other benefits as well.

Some of these tools are incredibly sophisticated, and can provide insights you didn't even know you needed. Seeing all the content from one or more of your websites represented visually, and being able to slice-and-dice and evaluate different aspects of it, allows you to identify patterns you otherwise would not have found.

This is almost its own type of audit; an exploratory audit that identifies inefficiencies and inconsistencies in your content, and makes it visually clear which are the more pervasive problems you should focus on first. Tools that provide visual representations of these patterns also make it much easier to communicate about the data, and build a compelling case for what needs to be fixed and prioritized.

06
Tools And Resources

The tools and resources listed below will help you assess your content as you carry out your audit.

Tools

Hemingway editor: Checks plain language and readability, including passive voice, complex phrases, and reading level grade.

Check My Links extension for Google Chrome: Checks for broken or problematic links, and the number of links on a page.

Google Analytics: Tracks and reports on your website traffic.

ChromeVox screen reader extension for Google Chrome: Provides assistive technology to users who are visually impaired, and can be used to assess how accessible your content is when using screen readers.

VoiceOver built-in screen reader for Mac OS X: Provides assistive technology to users who are visually impaired, and can be used to assess how accessible your content is when using screen readers. Specific for Mac OS X.

Lighthouse Developer Tool for Google Chrome: Audits web pages for performance, accessibility, progressive web apps, SEO, and more.

WAVE Accessibility Tool: Audits web pages according to accessibility best practices.

aXe browser extension: A Google Chrome extension that audits web pages according to accessibility best practices.

Content Chimera: A content inventory and analysis tool that can help you automate parts of your audit, and identify high-level patterns and insights about your digital presence as a whole.

Content Inventory Tool Recommendation Tool: A quick quiz-like tool created by the developer of Content Chimera that will help you find the right tool for your needs.

Resources

MOZ SEO Learning Centre: Information on best practices for search engine optimization.

World Wide Web Consortium: Best practices for web accessibility.

Nielson Norman Group Articles: Best practices for user experience.

Content Science Review: Discusses what's possible with content inventory and analysis automation tools.

07
Conclusion

If your website or intranet hasn't been tightly managed over time, it may include content that

- Doesn't meet your organization's current brand standards.
- Is outdated or even inaccurate.

Your website may also have information that is important and of high quality, but that is hard to find or badly communicated.

Auditing your site in any of the three ways we've outlined is an opportunity to clean up, streamline, and improve your audience's experience. Some of the improvements can be done incrementally, or contractors can support your internal staff if you want things done more quickly.

Content Strategy Inc. is also here to help you, whether you need us to execute your audit, or need training or copywriting services to carry out the recommendations. Call us and let us know about your complex content challenges. We'd love to talk.

Get in touch.

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