



Web Content Guide

(Version 1)

About This Version:

This content guide is the first version of many. An infinite, ever-evolving many!

Those who attended May's HighEdWeb Michigan Conference at Riverfront Center will note that nowhere in this document is "content strategy" even mentioned.

It is not that this guide fails to address core content strategy concepts. It does. However, the full scope of what the ultimate UM-Flint content strategy will become is too great of a leap to make at this point. We must first lay a strong foundation.

Ultimately, that strategy will enable users of Drupal, the new content management system (CMS), to more easily repurpose content, to deliver specific content to specific users, and to take advantage of other powerful content, customization, and customer service tools. That is the ultimate goal. That is the content strategy we are methodically moving towards.

This guide is written to help departments prepare for the first phase in this ongoing effort.

"Phase 1" boils down to this:

- ***Migrate all UM-Flint department websites into Drupal by October 1, 2013***

One might think of October 1, 2013 as the date upon which the future of the University of Michigan-Flint website really begins.

But before we begin, let's begin...

UM-Flint Web Content Guide

What is this and Who is it for?

This guide aims to provide practical and actionable information about how best to plan, structure, and maintain meaningful content on your University of Michigan-Flint department website.

What is Meaningful Content?

Only your audience, your website's users, can assess the quality (the "meaningfulness") of your content. The best way to plan and structure meaningful content is to begin with a conversation with your audience.

Later in this guide we will share ideas and best practices for how to have those conversations. Before that, there are other broad truths about "meaningful web content" that are important to begin thinking about right away.

Some of the best thinking on the subject of writing for the web is found in Janice Redish's book *Letting Go of the Words* ([available through the Thompson Library](#)).

In her summary of Chapter 1 ("Content! Content! Content!"), Redish shares many of the most **important truths about web content**. She writes:

- *People come to web sites to **satisfy goals, to do tasks, to get answers to questions**.*
- *Navigation, search, design, and technology support the **content that people come for**.*
- *The best metaphor for the web is **phone, not filing cabinet**.*
- *Every use of **your site is a conversation started by your site visitor**.*
- *Social media is pushing the web to be even **more conversational**.*
- *To have **good conversations** through your website:*
 - ***Answer your site visitors' questions** throughout your web content, not only in sections called frequently asked questions (FAQ).*
 - ***Let your site visitors "grab and go"** ("Scan, Find, Act")*

- Engage your site visitors (**Meeting visitors’ needs = engagement**).
- Market successfully to your site visitors by first satisfying the conversation they came to have.
- Improve search engine optimization (SEO) and internal site search.
- Be accessible to all.

Content Considerations for UM-Flint Academic Departments

Again, it is critical that any reworking of your unit’s website begin by talking to your audiences about what they want from your website. Yes *audiences*, plural. In higher education, we tend to think of students as our only audience. While we are right to put students’ needs first, we must not ignore other key audiences—or important differences among students.

Audiences

Current Students

Much of the content on academic department websites describes the department’s curriculum and disciplinary approach. Prospective students, and all audiences, absolutely need to understand what the learning is all about.

However, it is also true that busy students’ lives are all about efficiently finding the day-to-day information they need to be successful learners—something our best prospective students, and faculty, should be looking for evidence of, too.

Current students visit department websites on an ongoing basis seeking basic information like:

- **office hours/locations**
- **contact information**
- **special events/opportunities**
- **dates**
- **times**
- **deadlines**

Addressing the day-to-day needs of the students already here is key to improving retention rates, as well as how students feel (and talk) about your unit and the university.

Prospective Students (and Parents)

High school students say the quality of university websites impacts their decision to enroll or not. When they research an institution, the academic program they want to pursue tops the list of websites to visit. That website is your department's website. To them, your department's website *is* the University of Michigan-Flint. They make judgments about the quality of the academic program, and the entire institution, based on that web experience.

It may be tempting, then, to think that more information, more accolades, and more 'dynamic' content would be more impressive to those students. The adage is true: more is not always better. Helping all students easily find what they came for makes for a better experience. And **better experience = better impression**.

Additional Information:

Higher education consulting firm Noel-Levitz's "[E-Expectations Research Reports](#)" provide excellent information on how prospective students use and make judgments about university websites.

Prospective students (and their parents) need to know about your unit's:

- **academic approach**
- **academic record**
- **outstanding faculty**
- **course offerings**
- **research opportunities**
- **internship opportunities**
- **engaged learning opportunities**
- **post-graduation outcomes**

Positive outcomes are of particular interest to parents.

EXAMPLE: [UM-Flint's Office of Graduate Programs](#) does a good job of anticipating perspective students' questions and presenting answers to those questions in a scannable, easy-to-navigate way.

Prospective and Visiting Faculty

Potential faculty members are an audience that is not as top-of-mind as potential students, but the way they research and make determinations about institutions of higher learning are nearly identical.

Fellow scholars who come to UM-Flint as visiting professors, conference presenters or attendees, and even Critical Issues Forum speakers also visit department websites to take the pulse of academic discourse on the UM-Flint campus.

Prospective and visiting faculty seek information about:

- **research funding**
- **community/industry partners**
- **research facilities and equipment**
- **faculty research/scholarship**
- **cross-disciplinary opportunities**
- **strategic direction/emphasis**
- **use of technology on campus**
- **governance structures**

Alumni and Potential Donors

UM-Flint Alumni say they feel as connected to their academic unit as they do the university. The relationships our faculty form with students can take credit for that sense of connection. Alums may want to stay connected by learning what faculty members are researching, reading, writing, and assigning. They may want to know if there are department-sponsored events they can attend.

Our most enthusiastic and generous **donors are UM-Flint Alumni**. One way to keep the conversation with graduates going is by highlighting your department's strategic plans for the future. Maybe those plans include enriching learning experiences with projects requiring travel, new equipment, or other resources alumni/donors could help fund.

Alumni and potential donors seek information about:

- **current curriculum**
- **events open to the public**
- **strategic direction/emphasis**
- **what faculty are doing**
- **what students are doing**
- **what fellow alums are doing**
- **specific giving opportunities**

EXAMPLE: David G. Zick is an alumnus of UM-Flint's Department of Physics. Because of his ongoing interest in the department, he knew investments in new equipment would really benefit current and future physics students. Thanks to their generous donation, [David and his wife Francine helped open the Zick Active Learning Classroom in 2012.](#)

Media

UM-Flint academic departments should embrace opportunities to share their educational experience with communities near and far. It is through channels like National Public Radio, print and online publications, local television news, Twitter, and new media outlets everyday where wider perceptions of the UM-Flint educational experience first form.

There are two main reasons members of the media may explore your department's website:

- 1.) They are seeking **expert analysis** of some current event or trend.
- 2.) They are seeking interesting, innovative, and societally meaningful **research, creative projects, and events to profile**—as well as the people behind them.

Content Considerations for UM-Flint Non-Academic Departments

Non-academic units are vital to providing the best-possible educational experience for UM-Flint students. As such, the user experience afforded by their department websites is just as important as academic department websites.

The two main categories of non-academic departments on campus are **student services and administrative/operational support**.

Student Services

Naturally, the primary audience for student service departments is students. However, there are important considerations to make among types of students and other audiences to bear in mind.

Audiences

Current Students (and their Parents)

UM-Flint departments providing student services know their audience well. The same amazing service students experience when they come to your office is what they expect when they come to your website; they want the same **information** and expect to be able to take the same **actions**. Making those experiences simple, straightforward, and positive is what **customer service** looks like online.

EXAMPLE: [The Marian E. Wright Writing Center](#) does a great job of anticipating students' motivations for visiting their website, and clearly guiding users to information and actions like making an appointment online, online tutoring, and other online resources.

Future Students (and their Parents)

Serving the needs of current students is fundamental to all student service departments. Still, certain units are particularly important to prospective students (and their parents) as they make decisions about where to enroll.

Future students seek information about:

- **tuition and other costs**
- **financial aid and scholarships**
- **housing options**
- **student life**
- **the local community**
- **academic and career advising**
- **other available support services**

Other Staff

Students don't always approach the proper department for **answers** to their questions. All they may know is you work for the university and you're supposed to be able to help them.

That's just one of the instances when staff members from outside your unit may visit your website. Keeping a list of the information other units say they need can help you make decisions about content to prioritize and emphasize.

Faculty

Students also expect faculty members to be able to answer questions about student services and processes for attaining those services. Keeping a list of the reasons faculty members visit your office will inform decisions about information they will want when they visit your website.

Media

This audience may seem surprising. Why should media care about student services and why should student services care about media? The truth is many **campus events open to the public** are born out of student service departments and related programs. Those event planners want to get the word out through

media outlets, and members of the media are often looking to highlight events and programs with a public benefit.

It is also true that the state of higher education is always newsworthy, and many important indicators for making assessments about **higher education's current status**, as well as more **forward-looking trends and solutions**, are found in student service units. What is financial aid doing to help students stay out of debt? What career services are available to help graduates get jobs? What role is technology playing in the recruitment and education of today's best students?

Administrative/Operational Support

There is great variety among administrative and operational support departments. From communications to bring prospective students to campus, to maintaining the grounds prospective students enjoy on those visits, all UM-Flint departments play important roles in fulfilling this institution's mission.

Because there is such variety of missions—and audiences—among these departments, it is difficult to fit them under one umbrella. More than anything, what unites these units is the focused nature of their services. And therein lies the guide for creating the best experience for users: **explanation of services and easy access to them** through your website. That's it!

Seriously, that is it. Some units charged with narrow-but-critical functions feel they must add content and functionality beyond that which meets this core mission. Be reassured, your website's users simply want to **find core information** and **take quick, effective actions**—not “fun facts” or “additional reading.”

Understanding Your Audience Through Conversations and Critical Analysis

The content considerations outlined earlier are incomplete. Though they are based on earlier conversations and analysis, audiences' needs—and entire audiences—change over time. It is up to your department to keep pace with and keep track of the constantly evolving needs of your web users.

Here are three common and effective ways of understanding your audience:

Focus groups

No two-way glass? No “statistically significant” sample size? No worries! Focus groups need not be elaborate or scientific to be effective. Be thoughtful. Be thorough. But don’t over think it.

Focus group organizers should:

- 1) Set clear goals.
- 2) Develop 5-8 well-worded questions to meet those goals.
- 3) Invite 6-10 participants with first-hand knowledge of the issue.
- 4) Determine how answers will be recorded and share that information with participants.
- 5) Select a facilitator that will keep the conversation focused, maintain momentum, and get closure on questions.
- 6) Review results with decision-makers and implement findings.

Additional information:

Free Management Library’s [“Basics of Conducting Focus Groups”](#)

Analytics

Analytics is “**the discovery and communication of meaningful patterns in data.**” In the web world, analytics help quantify user behavior and make the abstract more concrete by measuring user interactions with your content. In short, web analytics tools identify which content users use most—and least.

All UM-Flint websites run Google Analytics. If your department has yet to access that information via the Google Analytics dashboard, [contact UM-Flint Information Technology Services](#) for access.

Google Analytics is a powerful performance-measuring tool. It enables novice web developers and content creators to “see what’s working” from a bird’s eye view. It also empowers experienced web workers to “drill down” into the data and tease out more nuanced user behaviors.

Without going too far into all of its capabilities, the following definitions of terms found in Google Analytics’ basic metrics dashboard are very useful. They are derived from the presentation Matthew Adams from the U-M College of Literature, Science, and the Arts delivered at UM-Flint in March 2013.

Additional Information:

Matt's Google Analytics presentation [slides are available via the University Relations blog.](#)

Glossary of terms found in Google Analytics' basic metrics dashboard:

Visit – a user came to your website and consumed content; a session.

Unique Visitors – the number of unduplicated visitors to your website over the course of a specified time period.

Pages/Visit – the average number of pages viewed during a visit to your website. Repeated views of a single page are also counted.

Average Visit Duration – length of time a visitor's browser has your website open.

Bounce Rate – percentage of sessions on your website with only one page view.

Percentage of New v. Returning Visitors – visitors coming to your site for the first time v. visitors who have been there before.

We encourage you to [learn more about Google Analytics](#) and how your unit can best utilize it.

Personas

One might think of this method for understanding your audience as a synthesis of the previous two. Focus groups yield the subjective opinions of real people, but no hard evidence. Analytics offer objective data, but lose the human perspective.

Personas are archetypal users of a website that represent the needs of larger groups of users, particularly the personal characteristics that can influence their needs and goals. Personas serve as 'stand-ins' for actual users, and can help guide decisions about content, navigation, design, and more.

Like focus groups, personas can be very detailed and complex, but do not have to be in order to provide meaningful insights. The idea is to develop representative characteristics informed by specific realities, bringing users to life, and more carefully considering how their motivations, expectations, and real life situations impact online behavior.

Here's a simple example:

- *Jenna is a prospective nursing student from Montreal.*
- *She accesses the web only through her smart phone.*

- *She does not have a car, but has been saving up for one.*

At first glance, it may not be obvious how this information would impact the content or design for your department's website. But when we look closer, some important considerations surface:

- *Many people in Montreal only speak French. The nursing department might want to make its content available in that language (and others).*
- *Jenna only accesses the Internet via smart phone. Do users have a positive experience when visiting the nursing department website on non-desktop devices?*
- *Jenna doesn't have a car. If she were to visit campus, can she do so by train? If she does enroll and has saved up to buy a car, can she park it on campus? And should such answers appear on the nursing department website or the international center website?*

Whether you employ focus groups, analytics, or personas (or a combination thereof) to better understand your audience and their needs, it is important to remember that audiences and their needs change over time. That is why understanding your audience must be an ongoing effort.

Putting Your Department's Plan Into Action

1. Who Makes the Decisions?

This entire web guide is worthless if department decision-makers fail to make their website a priority. That does not mean every decision about what content to create, how prominently to feature it, and when to take it down needs to be made by the department head. Rather, the department head needs to **empower specific individuals to make needed content decisions** on their own and take the appropriate actions associated with that responsibility.

What is more, those empowered must be given adequate freedom (of time, authority, and even workload) to seize the reins of the department website at a level that will allow them to fully implement the suggestions included in this guide.

Additional Information:

*For more on **web governance** (a.k.a. "the human side of the web"), read Jonathan Kahn's A List Apart article ["Web Governance: Becoming an Agent of Change."](#)*

2. Structuring for Service, Simplicity, and Scannability

While this is a subsection in this web guide, it contains the most **immediately practical and actionable information** for making real improvements to your website—for your users—right away.

Organize Your Content via Card Sorting

[Usability.gov](https://usability.gov) defines Card Sorting as:

“... a method used to help design or evaluate the information architecture of a site. In a card sorting session, participants organize topics from your website into categories that make sense to them. Participants may also help you label these groups. Card sorting may involve physical cards or pieces of paper, or it may be accomplished with one of several online card-sorting software tools.

Card sorting will help you understand your users’ expectations and understanding of your topics. Knowing how your users group information can help you: build the structure for your website; decide what to put on the homepage; label categories and navigation.

Steps:

A. Content Inventory

Determine what pieces of content need to be sorted. Before any card sorting activity, you’ll need an inventory of your current website content. For more information about content inventories, we recommend “[The Content Inventory is Your Friend](#)” by Kristina Halvorson. Essentially, a content inventory is a spreadsheet that captures all of the content you have out there on the web. Once you’ve inventoried it, you’ll know what you’re working with.

B. Sort Some Cards

Using your content inventory as a guide, create a card for each piece of your web content. A card might represent a page, a block of text, or any component you want to make a decision about. Next, get your unit together to help make decisions about how the content (cards) should be organized and grouped. When people have to make a decision about each card they find ways for content to be grouped together and have conversations about what is needed and what is not.

C. Ask Questions Along the Way

Sometimes it isn’t clear what should be done with a piece of content. It may seem important to one of your audiences, or may have sentimental value for one

of your card sorters. In those cases, here are some questions that can help guide decisions:

- Who is your *primary* target audience?
- What action do you want your audience to take?
- How can you better guide visitors through your content and navigation?

D. Some Advice

You'll get the most out of your card sorting when you're able to separate yourself from your current website and consider your content with a fresh perspective. Use the guiding questions above to help you organize what you have, but also consider what new content might be needed. And feel free to let go of content that doesn't directly serve your audience or your goals. Have your content inventory and Google analytics available for reference, but try not to refer to them too much. The goal is to approach your content without feeling obliged to stick to current practices.

Writing Style

Voice

The **voice**, or tone, of the writing on your website communicates a great deal about your department's philosophy, values, and personality.

There can be a tendency within academia to want to "sound smart." But for users who simply want to **find, understand, and act on information**, that is unwise. Users think it is smart to put their needs first, write in plain language, and where appropriate, show some personality that lets them know there are real people behind the words.

We recommend UM-Flint web writers strive for:

- Clarity (to the point)
- Simplicity ("let go of the words")
- Positivity (friendly; positive action; "doing" verbs)
- Conversational tone (approachability)
- Confidence (not boastfulness)

The following examples are derived from U-M Ann Arbor's new editorial guide. They show the difference in tone that arises from putting the emphasis on our users vs. ourselves:

Too UM-Flint Centric

- Our faculty features...

- We are global leaders...
- The University of Michigan-Flint boasts...

More Audience Focused

- You'll enjoy...
- Are you ready for...
- Students will be inspired to...

Vocabulary

Just like voice and tone, word choice should value clarity and comprehension above all else.

This becomes especially important when we **consider our international audience**.

Always try to:

- use the most common term
- avoid slang, colloquialisms, and local expressions (international students may not understand what it means to be “raining cats and dogs,” etc.)
- simplify the complex

Additional information:

[*The U.S. Government's Plain Language Guidelines \(“It's the Law”\)*](#)

Heading structure

Headings help web writers—and readers—**structure content so that its form communicates clearly**. Headings are key to organizing information in an outline that makes sense. After all, logical presentation of content is as critical to its “scannability” as brevity, bullets, bold fonts, and **breaking up big blobs of text** into bite-sized chunks.

Headings are also **key to improving SEO** (search engine optimization) and for screen-reading software to **properly deliver content to blind users** of your website.

At this time, UM-Flint does not have strict guides for how to use headings within the new Drupal CMS. However, we strongly encourage CMS users (and/or content creators) to utilize them. Here is a very general example:

Engaged Learning Opportunities <h1>

Research Opportunities <h2>

Research Example 1 <h3>

paragraph </p>

Research Example 2 <h3>

paragraph </p>

Research Example 3 <h3>

paragraph </p>

Civic Engagement Opportunities <h2>

Civic Engagement Example 1 <h3>

paragraph </p>

Civic Engagement Example 2 <h3>

paragraph </p>

Civic Engagement Example 3 <h3>

paragraph </p>

Internship Opportunities <h2>

Internship Example 1 <h3>

paragraph </p>

Internship Example 2 <h3>

paragraph </p>

Internship Example 3 <h3>

paragraph </p>

3. Continuous Attention Continuous Improvement

If we think of our websites as **conversations**, as telephones not file cabinets, it would be rude to keep retelling the same tired story about ourselves every time anyone initiates a conversation with us. Your website—and more specifically, your **content**—demands continuous consideration.

All content—not simply date-specific event information—has a lifecycle. And yes, the life and death of your content can only be determined by your audience. Is it still relevant to them? Is it still fresh and inviting based on current sensibilities? Are you still having a meaningful conversation?

New content for the sake of new content may not be what your audience wants or needs. As long as you continue to **seek out, understand, and meet the needs of your users**, you *are* continuing to have a meaningful conversation.

Additional information:

Continuous web information, help, and workshop schedules for all UM-Flint communicators, CMS users, content creators, and others is available at [the University Relations blog](#).