

Foreword:

The Code is a manual designed for contributors to be successful in "The Content Studio."

It is "The Content Studio" because our work is treated with the same respect and detail as a Renaissance painter. Your work should move people and give them a new understanding about the world and their place in it.

This is not a "blog." There are no growth or media hackers here. We write essays. We solve real problems. We lead and create change.

If someone isn't trying to emulate your work, you're doing something wrong.

The Code is a set of rules and principles to help you achieve this level of world-changing greatness and fulfill the vision of The Content Studio.

"If you expect greatness, then you'll achieve greatness."

- Steve Mackenzie

As a creator for The Content Studio, you must familiarize yourself with these rules and principles to perform to The Studio's standards.

Follow this manual carefully.

One: Stick To Code.



- Tom Sachs

Working to Code means adhering to the system of production that is already in place.

Arbitrary decision making and personal inventiveness are discouraged.

The Code is designed to keep you honest, informed, and above all, relevant.

Use data, not guesses. Form hypothesis, not opinions. Do research, not speculate.

This is what is meant by "Creativity is the enemy." It is easy for a publisher or business owner to paint idyllic pictures and speculate as to what works and why. It is difficult to see the data and find out you were wrong.

Keep new inventions and processes within the existing language of The Code. You are not guaranteed to succeed, but you are less likely to fail.

Two:

Don't Paint Idyllic Pictures.



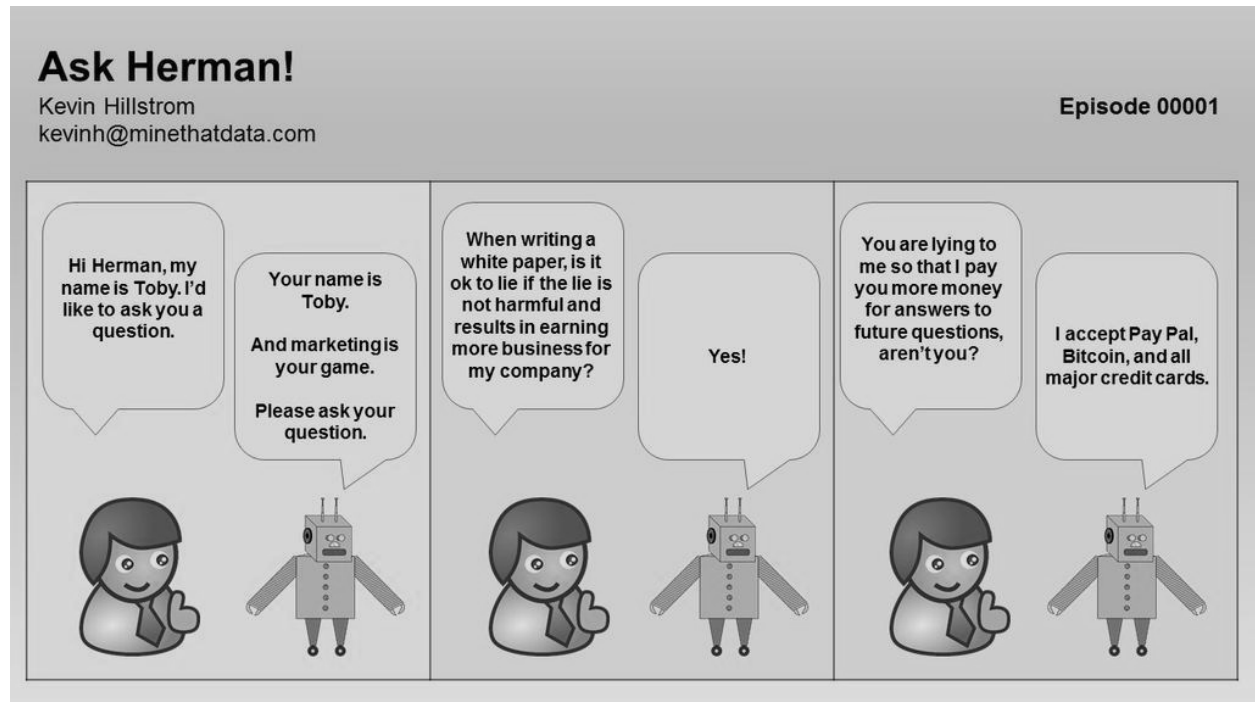
Imagine your reader has had a string of bad luck. Every choice they've made in the last 6 months was misinformed and has left them on the verge of personal and professional implosion.

Their job, their marriage, everything is on the line. Somehow, they've stumbled upon your work, hoping what you've created will help them turn everything around.

These are the stakes you must consider with every line of text you write.

Don't focus on selling positive outcomes. Present the reader with a balanced argument where they can decide for themselves whether an avenue is worth exploring given their existing time and resources.

Idyllic pictures create false realities and unrealistic expectations.



We have a stake in our customer's success. By painting idyllic pictures, we present them with false realities by which they measure their own success against.

Without presenting the full, sometimes unpleasant picture, we risk setting them up for failure.

It may not be ideal, but it is **honest**, and honesty has become a rare and depleted resource in the digital age.

Three:

Don't Talk Down To The Reader.



You Do Not Live Here.

The reader is intelligent.

They might not know what you know, but they have an existing knowledge base to work off of.

Respect that the reader has some background knowledge and assume they are capable of understanding without resorting to condescension.

Research your reader. Draw parallels and build on their existing knowledge.

Talking down to your reader is not a sign that you are a subject matter expert - it only serves to demonstrate that you are insecure in the knowledge or that you are incapable of communicating it with patience and clarity.

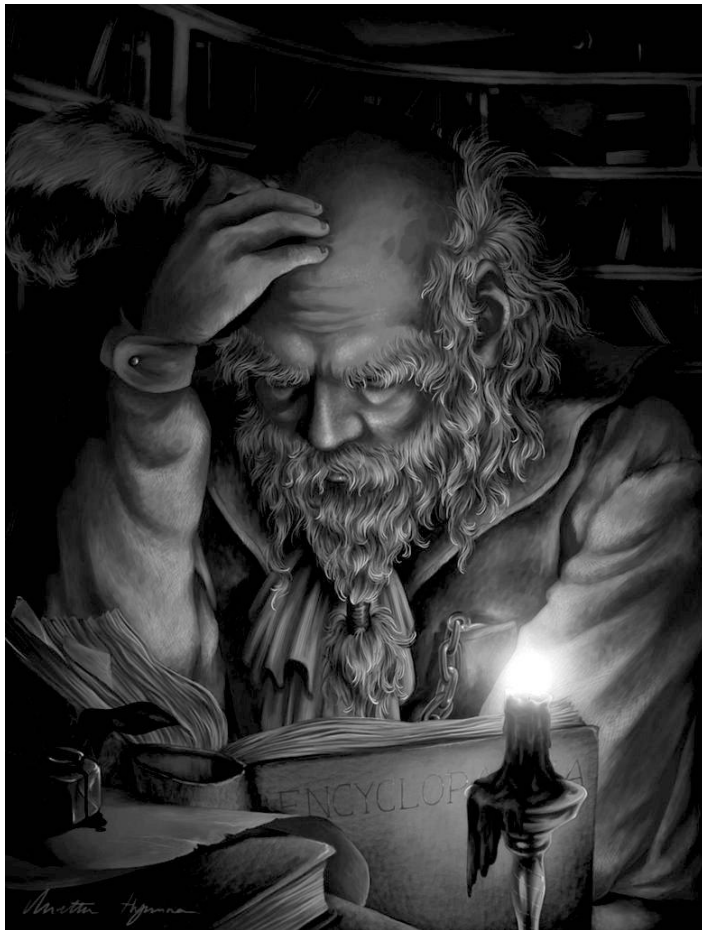
This condescension is encoded into the work, and if unchecked will spread throughout an organization or worse an entire industry.

The most effective way to eliminate condescension and humble yourself, we've found, is to do more research.

Four:

Opinions Are Bullshit.

Do The Research.



Strong writers with uninformed opinions are your mortal enemy.

They spread misinformation like a virus. They have support in numbers, and we are locked in an eternal war to win the hearts and minds of those who deserve to be informed.

Opinions are easy. They are formed out of personal bias and an unwillingness to challenge our own personal beliefs. All an opinion needs to flourish is a strong position and another person to buy-in without questioning why.

War, slavery, and genocide are products of people in power having strong, unchallenged opinions.



In The Content Studio, we avoid publishing opinions whenever possible.

You say "simple websites are better" show a study that validates your point. You say "segmenting your audience leads to more revenue" provide proof with several case studies.

Don't stop there, go beyond the case study and discover "why." Why

does the segment work? Why do the behaviors exist? What psychological factors are at play? What's the research to support this?

"Do research. Feed your talent. Research not only wins the war on cliché, it's the key to victory over fear and its cousin, depression." - Robert McKee

Good research takes time and discipline. It is the quintessence of any successful strategy and lies at the heart of every tactic.

Opinion-driven people ask, "what works?" and speculate into the reasons behind success and failure.

Research-driven people ask "Why does it work?" then engineer solutions given the circumstances [then tweak once given the results.]

In the event that publishing an opinion becomes unavoidable, provide proper disclosure.

"I was unable to find research that supports [why a behavior happens] but it is my opinion that ____"

Disclosing opinions in tandem with deep research shows that your personal bias is informed but also open to interpretation and dispute.

Remember, your reader is intelligent and may help you fill in the gaps, so long as you disclose what you're stating is an opinion.

Five:

Tell a Story.

"A culture cannot evolve without honest, powerful storytelling. When a society repeatedly experiences glossy, hollowed-out, pseudo-stories, it degenerates. We need true satires and tragedies, dramas and comedies that shine a clean light into the dingy corners of the human psyche and society."

- Robert McKee, author of Story

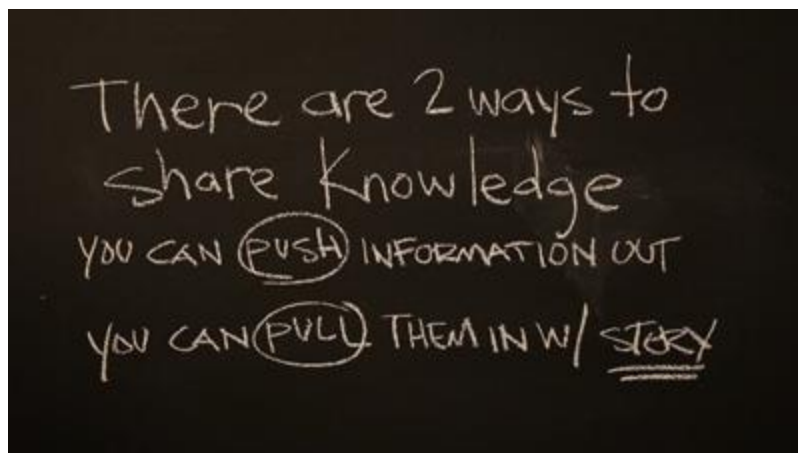
Research alone does not keep your reader engaged.

Every line - every bit of research - needs to flow from one idea into the next. Reading 15 case studies back to back is boring.

There must be a thru-line that guides them through what they're learning, where every bit of information builds on the last.

Stories have an ebb and flow.

Pacing, character development, conflict, fear, uncertainty, victory, and personal reflection; every element matters as it relates to keeping your reader hooked.



Be Thorough.

This is the guiding principle of storytelling in The Content Studio.

Answer every question and provide a well-rounded understanding of the subject at hand. Being thorough does not necessarily correlate with word-count, however, be mindful not to create plot-holes or knowledge gaps that won't be addressed in a future essay.

Your reader should leave confident in their knowledge on the topic, and understand the questions they need to be asking of their own research if they want to learn more.

Six:

We are Not in the Business of Blog Posts.

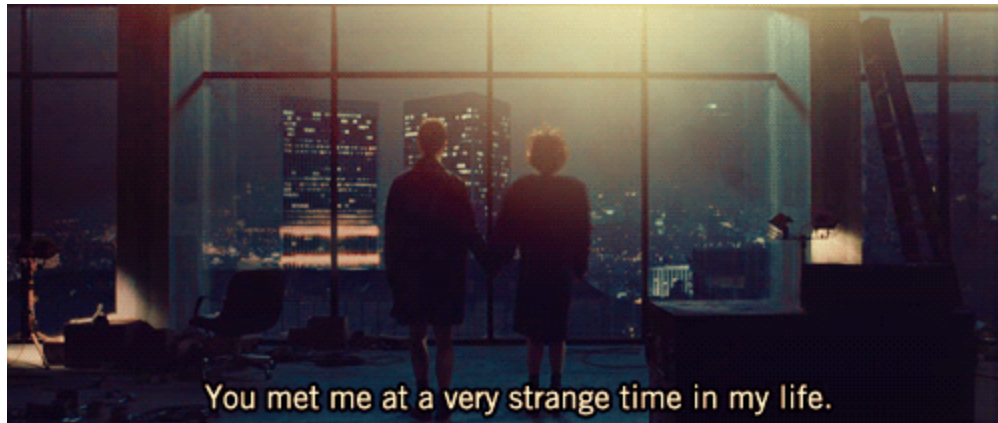
We create experiences. These can not be churned out in an afternoon, nor can they be fully consumed by the reader in one visit.

A piece in The Content Studio must possess a depth that demands the viewer come back to develop a further appreciation for the material with every viewing.

In cinema, a relevant parallel would be Fight Club.

On the first viewing, you're swept up in the story; the characters and their motivations - *why they fight and what are they fighting for exactly?* - the cinematography, the music, etc.

By the time you reach the closing shot - The Narrator & Marla stand hand in hand as the world explodes in front of them, he says "You've met me at a very strange time in my life" [cue Pixies] - you're left a little breathless and need a moment to process everything you've just witnessed.



Fight Club leaves you stunned and excited to watch again. You want to know the details you missed. It's not until the third or fourth viewing that you begin to appreciate the depth and complexity this movie really has.

This is the level your work should aspire to. It is not easy, nor should it be.

Your reader is infinitely distracted. Blog posts that trick them into clicking by promising to solve a real problem, but are forgettable within the first few paragraphs, is the standard in the "content" space today.

Be worthy of their attention. Challenge them to get on your level. Create things that demand to be printed out, passed around, and become the catalyst for meaningful, *transformative* change in your reader's world.

Seven:

Ask Better Questions.

If you don't understand a directive from your editor - Ask your editor.

If your research doesn't provide you with thorough enough knowledge - Ask Google.

If you need a quote or insight from an expert - Ask the expert.

"All the keys to [all the] doors you need opened in your life are in other people's pockets, if humans all stood around and asked for nothing, they would all just die."

- Michael Rodrick, English Teacher Turned Tony-Nominated Broadway Producer In Two Years

Asking better questions is the heart and soul of compelling research and storytelling.

Take nothing at face value and do not be complacent.

If a video on a landing page gets more people to convert, ask why, do not be satisfied with "Because people like video."

What effect does music have in influencing purchase decisions? Why does video editing reset attention spans? How does a video's framing, picture definition, and lighting all enhance or decrease our affinity towards that video? What role does storytelling play in how a video is perceived?

Questions that get you to the core of a behavior - these are better questions.

Eight:

Focus On Wordcraft.

"This sentence has five words. Here are five more words. Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It's like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety.

Now listen.

I vary the sentence length, and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony.

I use short sentences.

And I use sentences of medium length.

And sometimes, when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of the cymbals—sounds that say listen to this, it is important."

— Gary Provost



Throughout human history, nothing has been more powerful than weapons or words. Contemplate which has been the impetus for more lasting change.

There are an infinite number of ways to communicate a single idea. Your words and how they interact are the primary tools that bring your reader into a state of total immersion.

Consider the following:

"Normally, I wouldn't have gone to a motel room with a stranger, but I never gave it a thought. I just liked the guy

so much, and he seemed so kind and together, that it never occurred to me he could be dangerous. But even if he were, I was a U.S. Marine, and of the pure canonical type-hard-core infantry, a rifle range coach at times, finishing the final leg of my four-year enlistment as a scout sniper... And although I served in peacetime, I was not a stranger to hands-on violence."

Jay Roberts, Center of The Universe

In one paragraph, you're brought into the author's world and immediately understand what's at stake.

Science shows that when this happens, a viewer's brain waves change and making them receptive to incoming information.

In a successful state of immersion, mirror-neurons fire, and the viewer on a neurological level, has difficulty distinguishing themselves from the subject they are observing.

Anytime you've felt "drawn in" by a book, movie, or video-game, you have experienced this.

This is why media can affect you so deeply. Your brain develops a parasocial relationship with the world that is being created, and does not understand you are not actually "there".

Building the world where your reader sees themselves solving the problem is the main priority. Wordcraft is where this begins and ends.

Clichés break immersion. When you use cliché phrases, a specter sucks the soul from your talent while you sleep.



Things being “Simple” “Beautiful” “Easy-To-Use” “Compelling” “Epic” or “Awesome” are cliché.

You will be fined \$20 for every use of the phrases “valuable” or “engaging content”

Avoid hyperbole whenever possible. In creative, phrases like “It doesn’t get any better than this.” might make for an interesting tag-line, however, within an educational context, you risk confusing the reader.

Absolute Superlatives are also to be avoided. Nothing is objectively “The best”, “the most” or “the worst.” People don’t all love or hate the same things, nor is there a single thing that always works.

Absolute superlatives conceal weak wordcraft and lazy research.

Nine:

Three Drafts.

Your editor is busy.

First drafts should be well researched, free of high-school English level typing errors, and to the best of your ability, follows The Code.

Your editor will provide detailed feedback to strengthen the direction and vision of the piece on paper as well as a 1:1 live video review.

Your editor will identify areas of the piece that will benefit from stronger research, clearer story & structure, and work to help you communicate your ideas with thoroughness and clarity.

Listen to your editor, ask questions, and follow directions.

Second drafts should incorporate all feedback and discussion from the previous drafts. This draft, ideally, will be ready to publish. This

will not always be possible, at which point, the editor will work with you to sand off the rough edges.

The third draft is the final draft. This should be ready to publish. If it is not, it will not run and you will have to publish it elsewhere.

Your editor is busy.

Ten:

Be Persistent.



Nothing in the world can take the place of Persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan 'Press On' has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race.

(Calvin Coolidge)

The Code is demanding. It expects you to push yourself to a higher level.

It is not easy. You will want to quit. There will be moments where your brain becomes so overloaded with research, it will be impossible to think of anything else.

Be persistent.

Our work in The Content Studio provides readers with a deep understanding of subject matter that everyone else provides lip-service to so they can sell a product.

Be persistent because the digital marketing world is full of passing ego-maniacal clichés & sycophants; people deserve better.

Be persistent because the pursuit of knowledge is pure and will always be recognized and rewarded over the pursuit of money, power, or fame.

★ ★