

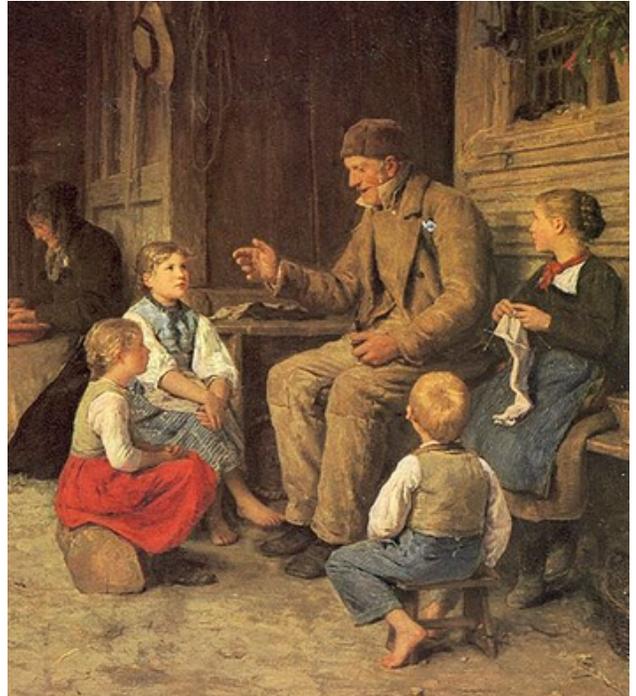
Create Content That Connects

“When we came back to Paris it was clear and cold and lovely.” With these words, Ernest Hemingway opens chapter 2 in *A Moveable Feast* (1964). For grammatical purists, this sentence flouts a few basic grammar rules, with its simple adjectives, repetitive “and” and lack of a comma after “Paris”.

But the sentence sings.

It has rhythm, uses the principle of three (that any brand, advertising and marketing writer knows all too well for its effectiveness) and moves the reader along. The “clear” and “cold”—objective and factual observations— flow into “lovely”—an unexpected emotional, subjective inner thought that ends the sentence, makes you smile and want to learn more.

“Writing is perhaps the greatest of human inventions, binding together people, citizens of distant epochs, who never knew one another”, writes Carl Sagan in *Cosmos*. “Across the millennia, the author is speaking, clearly and silently, inside your head, directly to you. Books break the shackles of time, proof that humans can work magic.”



With today's technologies, everyone has a platform and the opportunity to seek that magic. You, too, write content for your website or other platforms, want to set yourself apart and work that magic with your audience. Think back to content you have consumed lately. Which story lives on in your mind, what was memorable? Odds are that what you remember was attached to a story, something that triggered an emotion, stirred a memory, uncovered a longing. Something that sang. There probably was a story at work.

Why is that important?



Content + Design
Tekla Szymanski

“ CAPTIVATING CONTENT EXPOSES UNIQUE THOUGHTS, VULNERABILITIES, PAIN POINTS AND PROBLEMS THAT LEAD TO SOLUTIONS AND BRING A SENSE OF ORDER. THINK LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD. WHEN YOU READ THAT STORY, YOU CAN SEE HER BOUNCING IN THE FOREST, ENCOUNTERING A PROBLEM, STRUGGLING AND THEN OVERCOMING IT. YOU HEAR THE WOLF MANIPULATING HER. GOOD WRITING IS GOOD STORYTELLING. ”

TEKLA-SZYMANSKI.COM

Because great writing is not just about good grammar, an elaborate vocabulary, or even great ideas. Online content is not just about catchy headlines or the clicks and likes they generate. Great content connects with your readers on an emotional level. There are two kinds of people: Those who think they can write, and those who think they can't," writes author

Anne Handley. "And, very often, both are wrong."

So, good writing follows certain rules that can guide you. More on that later. Great writing, on the other hand, goes way beyond these rules: It sets yourself apart. You write, and use, what you know and find words that inspire to get your

readers involved, offer solutions to their problems and subsequently evoke emotions. You tell stories.

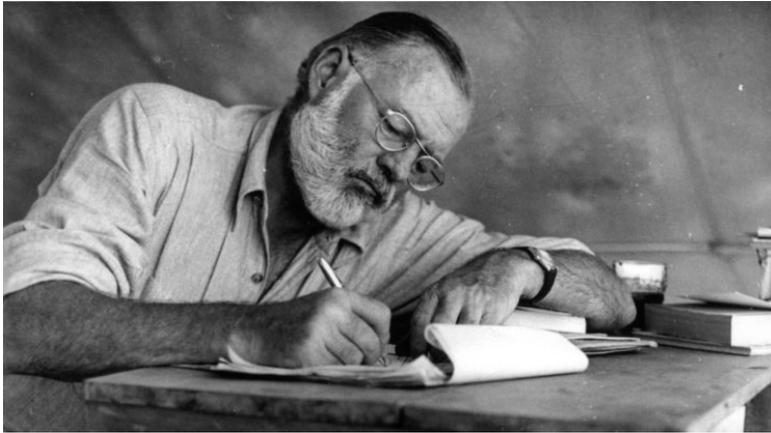
“The human brain has been on a slower evolutionary trajectory than the technology”, writes Pamela B. Rutledge in [*The Psychological Power of Storytelling*](#) (*Psychology Today*, 2011). “Our brains still respond to content by looking for the story to make sense out of the experience. No matter what the technology, the meaning starts in the brain. Stories are authentic human experiences. Stories leap-frog the technology and bring us to the core of the experience.”

Captivating content exposes unique thoughts, vulnerabilities, pain points and problems that lead to solutions and bring a sense of order. Think Little Red Riding Hood. When you read that story, you can see her bouncing in the forest, encountering a problem, struggling and then overcoming it. You hear the wolf manipulating her. Yes, all good writing is basically storytelling, using a unique rhetorical style. Effective branding, advertising and marketing copy employs these tactics as well.

As a writer, you are creative, empathic and write what you know, based on facts or experience. “A search for relationships between facts becomes of highest importance in the production of ideas,” writes James Webb Young in *A Technique for Producing Ideas*, 1939. “Words are themselves ideas ... in a state of suspended animation. When the words are mastered, the ideas tend to come alive again.”

Web content that is readable, searchable and scannable by machines needs to be formatted and styled differently than a Hemingway novel, but if the content

doesn't touch your readers on an emotional level (that immediately excludes all bullet-lists written for clicks), it won't be timeless, nor memorable, and will fizzle out quickly.



"The web is both limitless and fiercely structured, and in order for your words to travel, they need to be written for the machines that make the web work: for search engines, voice recognition and assistive accessibility tools, through use

of metadata and in-content structure," write Corey Vilhauer and Deane Barker in [The Web Project Guide](#). "[That] means writing for people and machines. Hemingway never had to stand up to those odds."

You don't want to become Hemingway. But your website needs to tell a story to connect with your audience and deliver your message. Yes, bullet-lists have a place in your writing (I'll use them below) to clearly convey searchable, scannable content—but great content is not about the clicks and the likes but about how well you captivate your readers and recognize their needs. Write from your experience, your knowledge and with passion. Make your ideas come to life and leave your audience wanting more.

"Stories have been like knowledge-keeping vessels for centuries," writes Dhaneesh Jameson, a design leader at Atom. "Good narratives have the power to turn stories into meaningful information. Hence narrative strategies are

responsible for what readers learn from it. In the current context, information available here is nothing but the elements of a story, and all we need is a way to deliver.”

Visuals and design, either in print or online, are necessary for communicating your ideas, but they don't bridge the gap to get your message across; they aren't enough on their own since the content always dictates any visual design. Only great content engages, offers value, connects the dots and seals the deal.

Make every word count because great content...

- drives conversions
- establishes trust
- increases awareness
- boosts engagement
- has an impact
- gives a sense of urgency
- generates support
- evokes emotions
- taps into shared experiences with your readers
- makes you memorable
- leaves a lasting impression

The best stories, however, need a framework and consistent presentation to engage. Here are some basic rules to follow in your writing that help you highlight your narrative, keep your content streamlined and ready to connect and convert your readers into a loyal audience.

- Apply the Rule of One: Write about one idea, subject or concept — Address one reader — Offer one solution.
- Write for understanding.
- Write fast but edit slow.
- Write for a wide variety of people, the widest audience with different levels of understanding... but never dumb down your story.
- Write clear and with purpose, especially if you call for action. Clarity is the key to creating great content.
- Avoid jargon, idioms, metaphors whenever possible.
- Write for scanability and parsability. Break down the content into sections and pieces, short paragraphs and sentences.
- Provide information, give instructions, offer solutions. People don't want a page; they want an answer on that page.
- Say what you mean and convey that meaning clearly.
- Write for action and emotion.
- Be sincere and honest.
- Use consistent voice (your brand, organization, authority; the public personality that doesn't change) and varying tone (the various interpretations of that voice in a specific situation). Both must be real.

- Put everything in context.
- Use action words and avoid passive voice.
- Make the reader the star; position them as the hero. “You can...”, “You will...” Don’t use “we” or “I”. It sounds more conversational, speaks to the readers directly and brings them into the conversation.
- Open and close story loops; point to something specific or to pivotal points or a problem solved.
- Cut empty words: very, really, actually, in order to.
- Don’t rely on too many adverbs and use adjectives deliberately but sparingly (remember “clear and cold and lovely”?)
- Adhere to a style guide and stick with it consistently.
- Cut, then cut again. “I’m all for the scissors. I believe more in the scissors than I do in the pencil.” (Truman Capote, 1985)
- Spellcheck, then spellcheck again.

Writing isn’t easy. “A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people,” Thomas Mann wrote in 1947. That still applies today.

Producing great content is hard. But when you connect with your readers, you’re halfway there.

ABOUT CONTENT DESIGN LLC

Hi, I am Tekla Szymanski, founder of **Content Design LLC**, your one-stop shop for content strategy and web development for content-rich nonprofit and personal websites.

You have a small team and even less time? I hear you. And since your website deserves an editor, writer and web designer who understands how to leverage your unique content and then adapt the right design to it, I can help you.



You have a story to tell, a mission to share or a service to offer, and we will find the right platform to build a website around your unique content needs that converts your site visitors into loyal donors, paying clients or new members.

What sets me apart?

Most web designers and developers don't come from a content-creating background. I do.

DISCLAIMER

You don't want to become Hemingway. But your website needs to tell a story to connect with your audience, deliver your message and convert your site visitors into loyal readers. But the effectiveness, scalability and conversion rates that your website delivers also depend on the design, the theme you choose, the plugins you add and whether you keep all components updated, synced and backed up.

At Content Design LLC, I can help you with your narrative and content-first site design to ensure that you reach the widest audience possible.

- ☑ **Schedule a free consultation call:** bit.ly/AcuityContentDesign
- ☑ **Email me:** editor@tekla-szymanski.com
- ☑ **Visit my website & blog:** www.tekla-szymanski.com