

How to Think About Content and Write Like an Expert

You hear it all the time: “Write great content and you will get the cases you want.” What makes content great, though? Can we come up with rules that will allow us to elevate the quality of the material we post?

It turns out that, even when we **recognize extraordinary writing** and **agree with others** that it excels, it can be really hard to define what makes great content. That’s why we’re here to help. Before we talk about how to write great content, let’s talk about the different types of online content. There are nuances to each of these types of content that are crucial for you to understand.

There are essentially three types of content that will be on your website.

Evergreen Content

Evergreen content is long-lasting content that doesn’t lose its relevancy over time and will always be relevant to **your** audience. For example, a blog post about “what to do after a car accident” is going to be relevant to anyone searching for information on this topic in your area, year after year. On the other hand, a blog post on which Virginia roadways are the most dangerous *isn’t* an evergreen topic, as the answer can (and probably will) vary over time.

Basically, evergreen content will always be considered up-to-date, and it will be a primary interest to your readers. Evergreen content has several advantages, including the fact that it’s more effective than date-oriented content, as it benefits readers by providing them with basic information that is critical to their understanding and enjoyment of other articles posted to the site.

Simply getting started and finding out what you need to write good evergreen content can be the hardest part of this process. If you’re stuck on what to write about, consider these formats—they may jumpstart your creative juices:

- **“How to” guides and tutorials:** These process-led pieces make for great evergreen articles, assuming the techniques you describe won’t change in the near future. “How to find the best personal injury lawyer for your case,” “what to do after a car accident,” “how to report a dog bite,” “what to do if you’ve been injured in a fall,” or “how to get your medical bills paid after an accident” are examples of this type of content.
- **Resource lists:** Grouping popular industry resources and providing links can provide a great starting point for beginners. You want to make sure you regularly check the resources you provide to verify that the links still work.

- **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs):** Addressing questions is an excellent place to start for someone who is struggling with writer's block. All you have to do is keep your ears open, and answer the questions your best clients are asking you. You can bet that other potential clients are wondering about the same question, and **you** want to be the attorney to respond with factual, actionable information.
- **Industry definitions:** You can't go wrong with evergreen content that defines common acronyms and jargon phrases used in your industry. Obviously, these definitions are not likely to change, and they will be great resources for linking internal pages together and for providing your potential clients with the information they need. One of Foster Web Marketing's best-performing pieces of content is "[What is the difference between a referring domain and a backlink?](#)" Although we have never directly closed a client from this piece of content, it has been great link bait that benefits our entire website. It also solidifies us as experts in the field of search engine optimization (SEO). Go ahead, search for "referring domain." We have been able to outrank acronym.com, Yahoo answers, and the SEO powerhouse Moz.com with this pretty simple post.

One thing to keep in mind with evergreen content is that although the basic information of the post doesn't change, you should go back and review this content over time. Make sure that your content still fully answers the question at hand and describes it in a unique way. Also check to be sure that modules and calls to action on the page are relevant to your current goals.

Evergreen content might not always be a traffic driver, and that's okay. If you have a blog post on your website that addresses the question, "What is unjust enrichment?" it is pretty unlikely that you are outranking websites like Wikipedia, Cornell's legal dictionary, freedictionary.com or law.com. However, if a potential client finds the definition of unjust enrichment on your website through some other channel, then your blog post has only improved his experience. By defining a key term at a critical time, you have helped this reader achieve a deeper understanding of other posts on your website. As a result, you will keep him on your website for a longer period of time *and* earned his good will, and both of these are **exactly what you want**.

Time-Sensitive Content

This is content that has an expiration date. You expect it will lose relevancy over time. Let's say that a car accident occurred on I-95 at exit 71 on September 6, 2010, and you wrote a blog post about it. That car accident isn't really relevant to anyone anymore. Even if someone involved in the accident were to turn around now and start looking for an attorney, the statute of limitations has passed. You don't want someone who was involved in this accident to contact you, because he isn't your perfect client; your perfect client has a case, and you know this person does not.

Here are some other examples of time-sensitive content:

- **Accident reports:** If you are a car accident lawyer, talking about recent traffic accidents in your area is a great way to target your perfect clients.
- **New laws:** Any changes in laws can spark interest, and talking about it could mean that someone who didn't have a case before now does. However, once these changes in laws are no longer novel, the articles you wrote usually lose the power to attract and excite readers.
- **News:** If there is a big news story that is somehow relevant to your practice areas, someone else in your area may realize that she has been in a similar situation and it's important she speaks to a lawyer. Recalls of defective products are great examples of this type of content.
- **Firm news:** It's a good idea to highlight a big case, which could be great link bait for social media and news outlets. Be sure to follow up with a case result to increase the visibility of your case.
- **Content update:** A change in circumstances can make an older piece you wrote fresh again. If there is an update to a time-sensitive topic, then you can dust off that old piece of content that you originally wrote and add new, relevant information to the original piece. For example, the cause of a truck accident may be discovered, a lawsuit could be filed, a missing person may be found alive, or a new maritime disaster may have features in common with a tragedy from a few years earlier.

The biggest issue we see with this type of content is not writing it in a unique way, or not elaborating. If you just copy and paste a news article and don't add any unique information, or describe what the nuances of this case, then it is very unlikely that you will be able to gain visibility. Although duplicate content is not as big of an issue as it once was, there still needs to be unique value to your piece for it to have the best chance to drive quality traffic. This is the type of content we talk about in detail in the course of a [content audit](#), because you don't want to have a ton of old, outdated content on your website.

At least once a year, you should go back and review all of this time-sensitive content and determine what is worth keeping, what is worth updating, and what should be discarded.

Top-Level Content

Finally, we turn to the top-level pages for your website, such as your homepage and practice area pages. These are very similar to evergreen content, but the writing style is a little different. You want to make sure that the optimization for these pages is consistent with today's current SEO best practices. [You don't want to stuff in keywords](#), of course, but you don't want to go too far in the other direction.

These are the pages that will show up in searches for those top-level vanity keywords all lawyers ask to rank for. These pages are going to be much more conversion-focused than your everyday content pieces, because someone who visits these pages is actively looking for a lawyer in your practice area and in your location.

These top-level pages are more general and often link to more information in other places. On these pages, you are trying to show the reader why you are the best “XYZ” lawyer in your locality. Your other content is meant to educate readers. By doing this, you will build authority and answer questions that your potential clients may have. Pay special attention to these pages, because they will be your best chance for converting or assisting a conversion.

Questions to Ask Before You Start Writing Content

If visitors to your website think your website and content is trustworthy, original, authoritative, and worthy of being bookmarked, you win. Or, at least, you’re well on your way to winning. How do we know that? Studies have found that those four qualities can be definitive in getting favorable attention from search engines. There is a correlation between [sites that have been downgraded by Panda](#) (Google’s algorithm for targeting thin, low-quality content) and readers’ low impressions of the content on those sites.

Here are six of the most important questions to ask yourself before writing and after writing a piece of content:

1. **Could this content be in print?** If it isn’t good enough to be printed, then it isn’t good enough for Google.
2. **Does this piece seem to be written by experts?** Expertise is implied because you are a lawyer, but you need to solidify yourself as *the* expert on the topic.
3. **Does this page have insightful analysis?** I think this is the weakest factor in a lot of the content I read...especially for time-sensitive content like reporting a car accident. Don’t just regurgitate what someone else has written—add value to the story.
4. **Would you consider bookmarking this page?** If you can’t fathom someone finding your content interesting enough to bookmark it, then you aren’t hitting the mark.
5. **Does this seem like original content?** If it seems like you are just paraphrasing others, then what are you really bringing to the table?
6. **Does this content seem trustworthy?** If it seems like there is a hidden agenda, and you are writing to sell or pitch something rather than to inform, you aren’t someone I would trust. It is important to have calls to action, but be sure to mix them up. Always asking your readers to call you for a free consultation doesn’t make sense.

Now that we know the difference between the different types of content you can write and what you should be thinking about before you start, let's talk about how to write it! First things first; you need to [know who your perfect clients are](#) and define them so you know whom to target. Doing this will allow you to choose the best topics, write in a way that makes sense to your perfect client, and make sure that your content will attract the visitors you want.

How to Find Content Topics

When you are thinking of topics, remember that you don't always have to write about what you're selling. Red Bull doesn't make content about caffeinated drinks; its content is about energy, adrenaline, and pursuing life to the limits.

Remember that piece about referring domains that I mentioned before? Although it isn't selling websites for us, it is a relevant topic, it solidifies us as experts, and has attracted links that benefit our entire site.

Look at your competitors, listen to your clients, check out great content writing lawyers in your practice area who are located in other states, and look at search terms on your site using Google Analytics. Also, before writing new content, review content that is already on your site to determine whether a new page is needed or if you have content that can be updated or repurposed.

Once you have decided on your topic, do some searches to see what is already ranking in Google. If the answer to the question you are searching for doesn't appear in the first three results, don't bother. You want to find topics that haven't been talked about before, or explain a topic better than anyone else ever has.

How to Write Content

Once you have decided on a topic, I recommend writing the piece before choosing a headline or title. This will prevent you from pigeonholing yourself if you have completed your piece and realize that it took a different turn than you originally expected.

Your writing style is important, too. You don't want to use legal jargon that doesn't make sense to your perfect client, but you can write at a lower grade level without dumbing-down your copy. Some of the best and most popular magazines and newspapers are written at grade-school levels to improve comprehension.

- *The New Yorker* magazine is written at 5th-grade level.
- *The New York Times* is at a 6th-grade level.
- *The Economist* is at an 8th-grade level.

The U.S. Department of Education conducted a study on adult reading proficiency that clearly indicates that the average American still reads and assimilates information at a basic 8th (or even 7th) grade level. So if you want to improve your conversion rates, you have to [present your services in a very concise, reader-oriented manner](#), without relying on unnecessary explanations or adornments that couldn't be understood by 8th or 7th graders.

Once you have a good chunk of your content written, you can focus on the title, meta description and headline because these are very important. Too often, titles and meta descriptions are an afterthought. However, that is a huge mistake for those writing for the web. Remember, these are going to be the first things that someone sees when they are searching for the topic.

How to Write Title Tags

Your title should describe what is on the page. It's a bad idea to stuff keywords that don't make sense into the title. The title is the first line that someone sees; it needs to be relevant, informative, and should make sense in search results.

Only about 60 characters of the title will show up in search results; if your title is longer than that, be sure that the first 60 characters will make sense to your reader if the remaining characters are cut off. However, it is okay to go a little longer if that's necessary for a meaningful title.

The title tag should be straightforward, to-the-point, and tell the user what the page is about in a concise way. The title is a significant element for SEO as well, because the page must be found before it can be read. Following the guidelines here should help you accomplish both goals at once.

How to Write Meta Tags

The meta description should also describe what is on the page, because this is your "elevator pitch": a summary concise enough that it could convince someone else while you shared a one-floor elevator ride.

Give a brief introduction to the piece and entice people to click through from search results. Do not put calls to action—such as "Contact us now if you have been in a car accident"—in a meta description. This is a waste of precious space, and no one is going to be convinced to call you from a lackluster meta description.

Google will most likely change what is shown in search results if you don't have a [strong meta description](#). So think of this as your way to change the world in just 160 characters.

How to Write Headlines

On average, eight out of ten visitors will read headline copy, but only two out of those ten will read the rest of your piece. **This is the secret to the power of your headline, and why it determines the effectiveness of your entire piece.**

Your headline can be a bit more creative and longer than your title tag. Never use the same wording that you use in your title; that would be a waste of space. You want to use a variation of your title tag, but now you can be more creative and descriptive because you don't have a character limit.

This does NOT mean you should have paragraph-long headlines. Think about any other printed publications you read. Look at them and take some pointers on what makes a great headline in these printed publications. The primary purpose of the headline is to get the reader to read the first sentence. When writing headlines, remember:

- Your headline should be unique.
- Your headline should be very specific to what is outlined in the content.
- Your headline should convey some sense of urgency if possible.
- Your headline should be useful.

I am a big fan of a formula I got from [QuickSprout](#), which is: Number or Trigger Word + Adjective + Keyword + Promise. So, if your topic is “How to Find the Best Lawyer,” after applying the formula you might generate a headline such as “5 Easy Steps to Find the Best Lawyer After an Accident,” or it could be “How You Can Easily Find the Best Lawyer in Less than 24 Hours After an Accident.”

This formula is good, but it shouldn't be the only way you write headlines. While we suggest using different phrases in the title and headline, these two elements **must** be closely related. If the title (what they click on from search results) leads readers to a page with a headline that is not in line with what they thought they were about to read, they're gone.

Add in the Vital Element: SEO

Now that we have discussed how to write great online content, let's talk about some of the questions I frequently get about SEO best practices:

Should external links be used in blogs, webpages, FAQs, etc.? If so, how often? What are the guidelines?

Use external links as necessary. If you reference a news story, use the link to show-readers where you got the info. If you use a statistic, back it up with the source. You don't want to overdo it, and I can't think of a time recently where I have used more than three external links on a piece of content. However, please do not think of it as a simple math equation or a hard and fast number to stick to. Think of it as a source of information. Don't overdo it, but don't avoid a link because you are trying to adhere to some made-up “optimal” SEO number. There's no such critter.

I also recommend setting the link to open in a new tab if it is an external site. This will keep you from inadvertently sending people away from the site that you worked so hard to get them to.

Are there benefits to using external links?

Yes, to provide information to the reader and give your content more trustworthiness in the user's eyes. External linking can be good for SEO. Don't think that just because you are linking out to another site that it is inherently bad for your website's SEO health.

Should offices, phone numbers, and law firm names (or attorneys' names) be referenced in the call to action or last paragraph of content posted to the website?

Not always.

Teasing contact information in the final paragraph of every content page used to be the conventional approach. Once everyone started doing it for every piece, the strategy lost its effectiveness.

Do you want to read content that is trying to sell you something, or content that is trying to inform you? If every piece of content is trying to get the user to contact you in four different ways, then it becomes a little off-putting. Your webpage gains all the charm of an over-eager and clingy used-car salesman.

There are already lots of calls to actions on the pages of your websites, so you don't always need to include a call to action in the last paragraph of all your content pieces. Switch it up, and ask the user to respond in a different way: ask for the page to be shared on social media, or suggest the reader download your free book.

If you provide the right information in a way that the user enjoys, he is going to find the contact information on that page or on the site. If every piece of content includes a call to action, then you will start sounding very needy...and that isn't really an impression you want to provide. Stay away from overdoing the calls to action and change them up, depending on the information you are providing.

Should geo tags be used in webpages, blogs, and FAQ title tags?

Only include geo tags when they make sense. Do not use a title or headline such as "Atlanta Foot Injuries From Sports Can Be Prevented," because the Atlanta location has absolutely nothing to do with the prevention of foot injuries. There is no magical secret to foot injury prevention that works uniquely in Atlanta and nowhere else. Your reader will feel the headline is deceptive because you forced in that geo-location word.

The truth is that you don't need it. Google can tell your location in a multitude of different ways. You don't need to sacrifice the quality of your content to add a geo-modifier.

There is an exception to this rule. On those top-level pages, such as your home page, practice area pages, and “about us” page, geo tags *should* be used. These pages have been written specifically to attract rankings for those phrases. Other content is meant to bring the long-tailed search. These top-level or skeletal pages are your best bet at ranking for those more competitive, keyword-specific phrases.

In Conclusion

Great content writing is not easy. If everyone could do it, you would find a lot more high-quality websites out there, instead of humdrum content (or even pages we privately call “garbage” when we meet around the office water cooler).

The indexed Web contains at least 4.66 billion pages, so how are you going to stand out? Get unique and write for quality, and not quantity. Hope to see you at GLM, so we can talk about this topic at length.