

# HOW TO TRAIN YOUR CONTENT CREATION TEAM

## 7 KEY TRAINING TOPICS + HOW TO TEACH THEM



Whether you have an in-house content team, a stable of freelance writers, or one go-to content producer, regular training will keep them producing at a high level.

But there's more to training than sending the team your brand editorial guidelines and hoping for the best. So in this guide, we'll share the areas we tackle when training clients' content teams.

For each topic you'll find out why it's important and get teaching tips, ideas for in-class challenges, and a recommended syllabus.

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#### 7 KEY TRAINING TOPICS

- ORGANIZING THE WRITING PROCESS
- GENERATING IDEAS
- UNDERSTANDING STYLE
- JOURNALISM BASICS
- INTERVIEWING SKILLS
- REPURPOSING CONTENT
- GETTING RESULTS WITH CONTENT

# WHY TRAIN YOUR TEAM?

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Before we get into the training topics: you may be wondering whether you need to train your team at all. The answer is yes. Here's why.

## **You stay up to date with best practices.**

Are all of your content producers up to speed with the latest news in content writing? Not many people have the time to pursue continuing education on their own; taking charge of training your team will keep them current on new, research-based best practices and trends in the fast-changing world of headlines, SEO, CTAs, and more.

## **You create more authoritative content.**

Some content best practices stay the same...but not many producers know about them. Breaking a long-held content standard—for example, best practices around research or interviewing—can come back to haunt you in the form of surface-level, unreliable content. Many content writers are unaware of these principles, since they're rooted in journalism, but they can be taught.

## **Your freelancers stay on brand.**

If you have a stable of freelance content producers, they likely work for multiple clients at the same time. Training them not only helps them do better work for all their clients (great for them), but it also keeps your brand voice and standards top of mind (great for you).

## **You save money.**

Is there a bigger waste of money than having to redo bad content? If there is, it would be failing to get the most out of the content you're paying for. A good training program will help your team create better content the first time around—and will teach them to spot repurposing opportunities, too.

## **You save time.**

Two time-sucks you don't need: doing heavy edits and hand-holding each writer individually when they run into problems. Training the entire team up front, and then re-upping their knowledge with regular refresher courses, will delete these problems from your life.

# 7 KEY TRAINING TOPICS

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You're convinced you need to start offering training to your content team. But where to start? Do you need to delve into grammar basics? Does it make sense to train them on high-level content strategy?

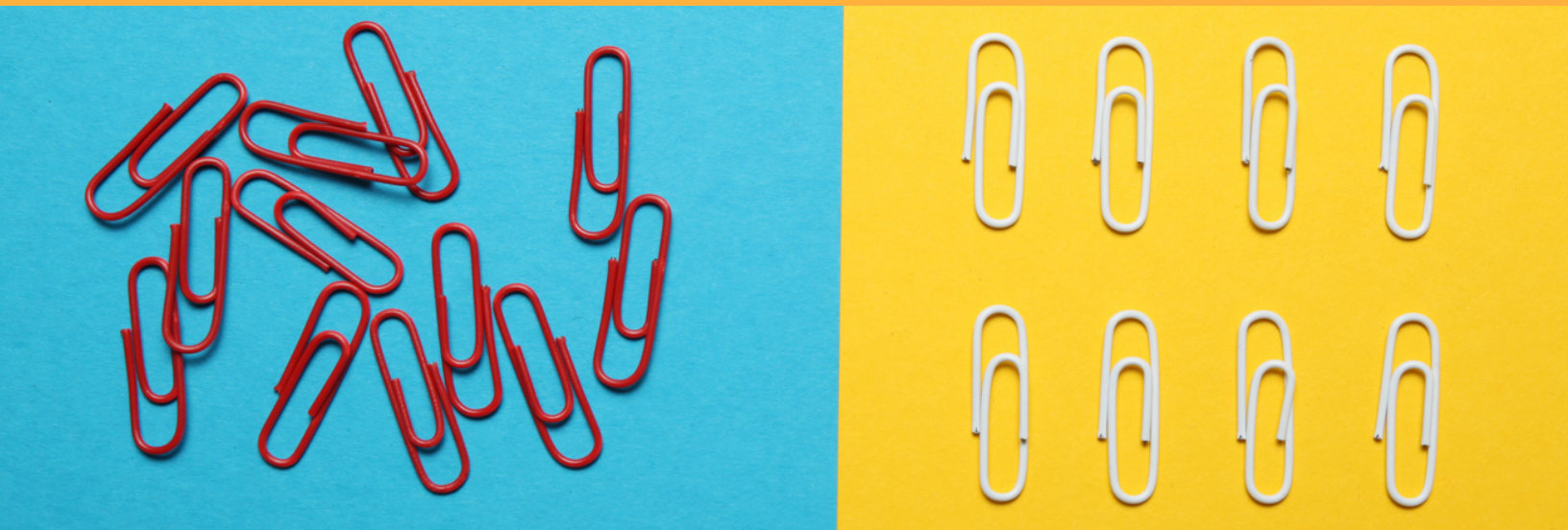
While the topics you choose to train around depend on your brand, your content program, and the make-up of your team, these 7 basics that will give your producers a full set of tools to make content easier and more effective.

## TRAINING TIP

You're not the only one with knowledge to share, so invite your content producers to add their own advice, share experiences, and recommend tools during the training. Then compile their tips into a resources sheet to send to the team.

This helps keep your students engaged...and can also teach *you* a thing or two!

For example, in the sessions I teach on organizing the writing process (below), my students have told me about Spotify "focus" playlists, brown noise generators, and distraction-blocking apps that I had never heard of.



## TRAINING TOPIC 1: ORGANIZING THE WRITING PROCESS

Your content team is likely crazy-busy juggling multiple projects at one time. If they're freelance, they also have other clients on their schedule. Helping them organize their work lets them get more done in less time—and if you're paying by the hour, over time this could lead to big savings for you, as well.

Bonus: who doesn't want to feel more calm, organized, and in-charge during their workday?

So start with a session on how to stay on top of projects and produce content on tight deadlines—including advice on how content producers can schedule their week, calendar their tasks, develop focus, and create personal writing systems that work for them.

Start by thinking about the tricks and tools you use every day on the job to stay organized and productive. Are there any apps that help you focus? Do you have a cool calendar hack, such as time-boxing, that helps you structure your day?

Then look to websites and books to gather expert advice for your team. I recommend *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* and *168 Hours: You Have More Time Than You Think*. Many productivity authors offer free worksheets on their websites, which you can share with your team as part of the lesson.

Finally, challenge your team to write out the top three obstacles that keep them from focusing on their content work, and then three potential solutions for each of them. Finally, ask them to choose one solution to put into play over the next week.

### THE SYLLABUS

- Scheduling your day
- Calendaring your tasks
- Developing systems
- Overcoming procrastination
- Organizing your content materials (notes, ideas, drafts, files, etc.)





## TRAINING TOPIC 2: GENERATING IDEAS

Ah, ideas—the lifeblood of any content program. Good topic ideas make your metrics soar, and bad ones can cause your program to flop.

Even if you generate all of the content ideas for your calendar on your own and then hand them to your producers for execution, it's good if your team can at least recognize what goes into a solid content topic.

This will empower them to come to you when they spot a good idea. Not to mention, educating your team in this area can help you gain a new understanding of content ideas yourself. (Sometimes the teacher learns more than the students!)

Try offering your team websites, books, prompts, games, and tools that help kickstart the brainstorming process. Then walk them through a competitor content audit (in person or using screen share) and show them in real-time how you take an idea from “meh” to perfect.

For an in-class challenge, ask your team to jot down 15 ideas around a particular theme in 10 minutes and then put a star by their “worst” idea and circle their favorite idea from the batch.

Your team members can then share their results, talk about what makes their ideas “good” or “bad,” and discuss ways they might improve both.

### THE SYLLABUS

- Brainstorming tips
- The key characteristics of a good idea (I recommend: *relevant, timely, specific, unique, service-oriented, surprising*)
- How to audit your competitors' content to develop new/better ideas
- Tricks to make old/overdone ideas new again
- What to do if a content idea doesn't pan out



## TRAINING TOPIC 3: UNDERSTANDING STYLE

Style might seem like a “fluffy” topic since the main goal of your content is to convince and convert—not to be an engaging bedside read. You’re not creating fiction, so do you really need to worry about style?

Well, let’s put it this way: before people will take action on your content, they need to actually read it. And people don’t read content if the style is off. It can be difficult to explain what constitutes “good style,” but readers can sense when a writer has a tin ear for language, cadence, and flow...and it turns them off.

Hopefully you chose writers who can already write well, but even the best writers can always improve.

Want to add this topic to your team’s training schedule? Provide them with resources like the classic book *The Elements of Style* (available for free online!), and links to relevant articles and podcast episodes on the Grammar Girl blog,



Other ideas:

- Go over your brand's style guide, if you have one.
- Deconstruct popular content or even magazine articles or books to figure out how the writers convey meaning and emotions through word choice and sentence length.
- Have your team run some of their own writing through a Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level tool to figure out if they're talking over readers' heads—or dumbing things down too much. (This depends on your audience; many brands find a 5th grade reading level just right, but a big-name tech company we worked with aims for a 9th grade level.)

For a fun in-class challenge, find a dry, boring passage from a website or trade magazine and ask your team to rewrite it as if it were destined for a gossip rag. Then ask them to translate a passage from a gossip magazine into your brand's style.

## THE SYLLABUS

- What is style?
- Analyzing a brand's style
- Concise writing: how to cut out the fat
- Using the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level tool
- Understanding cadence, voice, and tone
- Knowing when and how to break grammar rules



## TRAINING TOPIC 4: JOURNALISM BASICS

When people first started talking about “content,” it was all about frequent, quick-hit blog posts, headlines that shock people into clicking, and other tricks you could use to get people to do what you want.

But the pendulum has been swinging back for a while now as businesses realize that people want authoritative, reliable, solid content that they can trust...especially now, with the spread of fake news and content created by bots. If you can build trust into your content, you’ll be more likely to develop an engaged and loyal audience.

Everyone acts like there’s some kind of trick to building this trustworthy content, but it’s really just going back to journalism basics: vetting your sources, quoting experts, fact checking and proofing, and using the right formats for your content.

That’s what this training topic is all about.

Try:

- Showing your team how to choose (and vet) information sources online.
- Pointing them to the Poynter Institute to learn about journalism best practices and ethics.
- Explaining the elements of content structure (ledes, nut grafs, kickers, etc.) using real examples of articles from well-known publications,
- Sharing your favorite tips and tools for proofreading and fact checking content.

Our favorite team challenge for this session: ask your team to find the best research to prove or deny the statement that fish can blink, and then discuss whether the source they used is authoritative and reliable.

## THE SYLLABUS

- Journalism ethics
- Researching basics
- Packaging (subheads, boxes, etc.) and structure
- The art of outlining
- Proofreading tricks
- Different ways to fact check content



## TRAINING TOPIC 5: INTERVIEWING SKILLS

Many brands include quotes and insights from experts in their content, and B2C brands sometimes even interview “people on the street.” So arm your content team with the right tools to get the quotes and information they need to make their content shine.

This is especially important if these writers will be interviewing your clients (for example for case studies) or executives within your company. You don’t want them wasting execs’ time with poorly planned interviews or committing embarrassing interview gaffes with paying clients.

Problems you’re aiming to solve in this session:

- Fear of interviewing (which afflicts many writers!).
- Sources are who unavailable, too busy to spend much time talking, or uncomfortable being interviewed.
- Not understanding interview best practices: rattling off questions from a list, being afraid to “direct” an interview, asking only “soft” questions, not asking follow-up questions, or not giving the source time to think.
- Not knowing how to edit a quote for clarity or style, or how to weave quotes into the content.
- Tapping “fake experts” for interviews.
- Asking the wrong questions.

The Poynter Institute offers good advice on sourcing and interviewing that you can share with your team.

You might also offer a recording and transcript of a successful interview you conducted and analyze it right during the session.

As a challenge, give your team an excerpt from an interview transcript and have them edit it into a quote that retains the speaker's intention but also flows nicely.

### THE SYLLABUS

- Where to find authoritative interview sources for your content (and how to vet them)
- Developing questions that will yield unique insights and ideas
- Ice-breakers to put yourself and your sources at ease
- How to conduct interviews with executive clients and high-level SMEs
- How (and why) to edit quotes
- How to weave quotes into the flow of your content





## TRAINING TOPIC 6: REPURPOSING CONTENT

Many writers have Shiny Object Syndrome: once they finish a content project they want to jump right onto a new one. Personally, I work so hard on executing original content that once I'm done I never want to look at it again. I am not one to go back and reread books I've written!

So in this session, your tasks are to:

- Teach your content team why repurposing content is important.
- Show them how to do it.

The skill of chunking down, recombining, and reoptimizing old content doesn't always come naturally. It can help to show examples of repurposed content, such as a webinar that you had transcribed to turn into a blog post or social media posts you repurposed out of case study quotes.

To break up the session, give your team a whitepaper or other piece of long-form content and challenge them to develop five ideas for repurposing the sidebars, quotes, sections, and other elements into new content.

### **THE SYLLABUS**

- How to repurpose content into different formats
- Reusing old ideas that didn't fly the first time around
- When and how to update and reoptimize old content
- How to do a content audit to find opportunities for repurposing



## TRAINING TOPIC 7: GETTING RESULTS WITH CONTENT

This is where it all comes together. Your team now understands how to develop solid, authoritative, useful content, and that in itself goes a long way toward getting the results you want.

Now you'll help them take their content to the highest level by incorporating elements that will boost the metrics you're interested in. (You'll help them understand those metrics, too.)

Getting results is a huge topic and you can get super into the weeds on it. So in this session you'll want to go over often-overlooked basics that can give your team some quick wins—and benefit your brand long-term as well. After all, you're probably not an expert in content metrics and measurement, SEO, headlines, CTAs, and the rest—each of these constitutes its own field of study!—so you can't expect your content producers to be, either.

The “getting results” session is one you'll want to revisit with your team regularly because things change fast in this area. You think you have a handle on SEO and then Google updates its algorithms and turns everything upside-down. Or you think you have headlines nailed down, and then your go-to headline formats become overused and lose all their power.

Want to include a challenge to keep things interesting? Grab a piece of content, strip off the headline, and ask your content team to develop three eyeball-grabbing new headlines for it. You can do the same exercise with CTAs.

## THE SYLLABUS

- The metrics that matter (what are you measuring?)
- Headlines that work
- CTAs
- Elements that build engagement (quizzes, surveys, interactive graphics, etc.)
- The basics of SEO in common content formats
- How to promote content online

# TAKING TIME TO TRAIN

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Yes, all of this takes time. When I conduct a team training for a client, I spend hours writing and rehearsing each script, creating packets of resources, hosting webinars, sending out recordings and transcripts, and answering follow-up questions.

*But it's worth it.*

For a relatively small investment of effort up-front, you'll save time and money over the long run...and get better content that helps you reach your goals.

Keep in mind that after you conduct a training once, you can use the recordings to onboard new members to your content team and also update the information as needed to re-up your team's skills.



# HOW CAN I HELP?

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While I'm retired myself (after 25 years!), I have a small network of hand-picked writers I refer businesses to. Email me at [lindaformichelli@gmail.com](mailto:lindaformichelli@gmail.com) with details on your project (type, topics, timeline, budget) and I'll try to set up intros with some great writers that fit your needs.

[Connect with Linda Formichelli on LinkedIn](#)



**“Recently Linda shared helpful industry insights and content marketing strategies with college students enrolled in a PR course that I teach. Without question, Linda was the ideal professional to present to my class. She has a no-nonsense and creative approach to training other professionals and students.”**

**—Tamara Gibbs, Marketing Communication Manager,  
ChannelAdvisor**