

# Information Management: Developing & Using Content Quality Guidelines

Martin White, Intranet Focus Ltd

[martin.white@intranetfocus.com](mailto:martin.white@intranetfocus.com)

All organisations will have guidelines on how things should be done, from completing an expense form to starting up a new project. Very few provide any guidance to employees on how to ensure that the content they are creating as internal documents or as intranet and website pages is of a high quality. This guidance should be an element of an overall information management policy. At the core of content quality is the ownership of a piece of information by an individual employee who is given support both by their manager and by the information management ethos of the organisation.

Anyone using a piece of content needs to be assured that it:

- Is owned by an employee who has the responsibility and support to ensure that it only remains available for as long as it is valid, accurate and of use to the organisation
- Is the most current version
- Is of the highest quality
- Can be used with confidence to make business-critical decisions
- Can be used with confidence in creating new content
- Presents no risk to the user or the organisation in referring to the content in the course of a business transaction
- Will highlight related content
- Can be shared with others with an appropriate access permission
- Is in a format that encourages use

One particular area where guidance can be especially valuable is in creating good titles for documents. This helps users scan down a list of documents in a folder or in the results of a search. In the case of a search most search engines are biased slightly towards words appearing in a title, so the better the title the better the relevance of the results.

**A case study**

Let me take the case of the website of [Ofcom](#). On 26<sup>th</sup> August I carried out a search on the Ofcom site for “hacking”, which is one of more high profile areas that Ofcom has been playing a role in over the last couple of years. Among the titles of the documents in the first 20 or so results were:

- Review of the television production schedule
- 1 165405454 Response
- 1 202043289
- Obb245
- Content Board minutes 20120403
- RandPFAQ
- Microsoft PowerPoint - MASTER COPY - CER 2013 CHARTS (FINAL)
- 97
- Research
- Title of document (Arial 36pt bold Purple)
- Microsoft Word - pubomni

Many of these seem to be driven by the application and passed straight to the website. Not only are the titles of little value but also most of the summaries are equally unhelpful.

If I take the Microsoft PowerPoint document listed above the summary reads:

Consumer Experience of 2013 Full 1 chart deck Changing use of communications 1 Figure 1: Ownership of connected devices in the home 65 66 68 72 70 76 78 78 80 80% 100% Any\*\* PC 46 52 53 59 65 66 68 56 47 44 4636

Remember that my search was for “hacking”!

Over the last few years I have been developing a set of content guidelines for use by my clients. The table below lists what I would regard as a core set of guidelines from the complete set that I have developed.

Topic	Summary of scope
Audience	Style and language-level should be appropriate to the intended readership
Authors	Defining the authorship of content
Copyright	The copyright owner of 3 <sup>rd</sup> party content should be identified
Date formats	Dates should be unambiguous
File types	Guidance on the applicability of web page, Word, pdf etc. formats
Images	Guidance on the use of images
Links	Ownership of content also entails ownership of links
Metadata	Metadata schema descriptions

Mobile content	Content likely to be used extensively on mobile devices should be written in an appropriate format
Names	How employee names should be presented
Related content	Ensuring that related content is identified so that content can be placed in context
Re-use	Where content is re-used the origin of the content should be declared
Review	The review period of content
Titles	Ensuring that titles are consistent and informative
Version control	Consistent version control designations

**Guideline format**

For each guideline I set out a rationale and then some guidelines. Below are two examples, one on file format selection and one on titles. In a client engagement I would usually illustrate each with an example of good practice and poor practice from within the organisation.

<b>GL5</b>	<b>File formats</b>
<b>Rationale</b>	
There are three primary file formats in which content can be published, namely an HTML page, Office and PDF. The selection of which format to use should take into account the way in which others will use the content.	
<b>Guidelines</b>	
An HTML page should be used when users will need immediate access to content without needing to download the content file.	
As HTML pages are not paginated they should not be used for content that is longer than two screen pages in length unless the content is managed by a hyperlinked contents section at the beginning of the document.	
Office files should be used where it is probable that users will wish to make changes to the content for a particular purpose, use sections of the content in other documents and collaboration with one or more other users in working on or sharing the document.	
PDF format should be used only when the formatting of the document is very important to the readability, when the document is likely to be used away from a device with network access or to restrict the ability to modify the document without the permission of the author.	
PDF files over ten pages in length should provide a means for users to move quickly between sections of the document	
PowerPoint files for internal use should not be converted to PDF format.	
Where any Office file has been published as a PDF the source of the native file format should be indicated.	

GL16	Titles
<p><b>Rationale</b> A good title enables a document to be easily identified in a list of documents. Search applications put more weight into the title of document with the result that it appears towards the top of a list of documents found by the search application.</p>	
<p><b>Guidelines</b> A title should not begin with 'A' or 'The'. Where possible the initial two or three words of the title should be a strong indication of the subject of the document. The title should not begin with a number (e.g. a year date), as this will cause problems in alphabetical lists of documents. A title should not begin with a description of the type of document, such as Report or Assessment. If the document is one of a series of related documents then the title should be consistent with previous documents. A title should not contain acronyms. All words in a title must be correctly spelt. Where appropriate documents that are not in English should have an English sub-title.</p>	

It should be noted that these are guidelines, not standards. If someone feels that a guideline is too restrictive then they can use an alternate approach but should at least discuss with their manager the reasons for doing so. It could be that the guideline itself needs to be modified to take into account particular categories of content. Feedback loops are essential to ensure that the guidelines are kept under constant review. The approach has to be one of 'fitness to purpose' and not 'fitness to specification'.

I am sure that there will be different views to mine on what a 'good title' is, and the same with all the other guidelines. The essential requirements are that the guidelines are appropriate in terms of scope and the work involved in adopting them.

### Guideline governance

Especially in the case of titles I have had intranet managers complain to me that they have no authority to even discuss with content producers the benefits of adopting these guidelines. My suggestion is two-fold. First there should be a blog where issues such as content quality and its importance can be presented. Second, setting out a list each month of some examples of good and bad titles can be very effective! The good titles can be attributed to an individual employee. That may not be as good an idea for the bad titles but people will quickly search for them and track down the miscreant.

### Resources

There is a very good short handbook from [Clearbox Consulting](#) on how to write for an intranet and there is also a free eBook from PebbleRoad on [Managing Digital Information For Others](#), which covers some related topics.