

How to Be Content

An essay by

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The first time I met the term “content creator” I was living in Montreal, slogging through my last month of undergrad and feeling terrified about my job prospects. I’d gone into my degree four years earlier hoping to become a Serious Novelist and instead somehow emerged a poet—the kind of writer whose work makes the best kindling and whose project is hardest to take seriously. My résumé was a patchwork of food service jobs and internships, and the only interview I’d managed to snag after weeks of frantically pitching cover letters into the online void was for the position of personal assistant to a retired Québécois drug lord who was looking to start his own online women’s clothing store.

The job ad said their company was looking for a “technical writer.” This was something I’d never really heard of—let alone been—before, but I kept on reading with the unique combination of untamed hope and ample self-delusion that is the province of the mostly unemployable. *Must live and breathe content*, it said. *Your enthusiasm should show through in every sentence.*

I could do that, right? I was full of content! I was a *poet*. How hard could it be?

In the interview, my future boss skimmed my résumé, glancing at me over the rims of his glasses. “Do you have any experience with this kind of work?” he asked.

I decided it was better to be honest and shook my head.

He placed my résumé face down on the table and looked me in the eye. “That’s good,” he said. “I like it. You’re moldable.”

I’m not sure what kind of shape my face made, but it must have been serious, because he rushed to correct himself. “I don’t mean that in a bad way,” he said, a little too eagerly. “It just means you’ll do whatever we want.”

After that job, I cycled through a few more shaky part-time gigs, moved to Toronto, and eventually ended up in my current position as a “content manager” for a marketing and promotions company. At present, my job mostly consists of writing a bunch of different blog posts for various clients, all for the purposes of Search Engine Optimization.¹

1. If you’re not really familiar with this term, I’d first like to congratulate you on your rich life, and apologize for the small way in which I am about to spoil it. Essentially, SEO is the clumsy art of getting your website a good ranking on Google; it’s equal parts science and desperate, blind stabbing in the dark. It’s also violently dull. Take a deep breath with me now, and we’ll get through this together:

Okay. So let’s say you’re a plucky young parachute manufacturer, trying to make it in the harshly competitive world of Toronto parachute retail. You want your business to be the first one that comes up on Google when someone types in “Toronto parachutes,” and in the halcyon days of the internet, this wasn’t too hard; you’d just have to write “TORONTO PARACHUTES” all over your website, and the hits would come. Google

Every day, I churn out anywhere between five and 50 blog posts. The clients I write for are a weird amalgam of word-of-mouth referrals and people who found my employers online, so the subjects are appropriately scattered: I write about aluminum siding and personal finance and European snowboarding vacations, about fashion for a self-styled designer who mostly makes skorts, and the importance of waterproofing your basement for a guy who does just that in New Brunswick. I write about high-tech fishing rods and eco-friendly lunch containers and artisanal lightbulbs, and why you need a lawyer, an accountant, a plastic surgeon like, *yesterday*. Every single one of these essays reads like a sophisticated fifth-grade book report; my tone is stock-authoritative, stiff and sound-alike, and the facts I cite are usually just five thin things I skimmed off Wikipedia. The phrases I use would seem heavy-handed if what I was writing wasn't lighter than air.

"Nobody ever wants to think about death," I type, an episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race* playing at low volume in another tab,

uses "crawlers"—programs that automatically trawl the web, indexing written content from basically everywhere—to measure how many times words or phrases appear across websites, and then ranks them in its search results accordingly. The more relevant your site seems to a given topic, the closer you get to the golden first page. Simple, right?

And it was—for a brief, beautiful time. But everything in this life must fade; soon everybody was just all "PARACHUTES PARACHUTES PARACHUTES" on every page of their website to boost rankings, and things started to fall apart. Search engines began using a series of escalatingly complex and opaque algorithms to rank pages, and as it stands now, there are all kinds of other magic criteria a website needs to fulfill in order to get in good with Google. These criteria change frequently and without much warning. A few of-the-moment entrepreneurs have built very lucrative careers out of looking after clients' websites, altering and tailoring content (or using sketchier, spammier techniques) to be as appealing to the bots as possible.

What this means is that anyone doing SEO needs a constant stream of carefully written content—from blog posts to good old-fashioned copy and beyond—that strikes a careful balance between sounding like it was written by a person who's just really passionate about a given topic and also being meticulously structured to lure the attention of keyword-sniffing crawlers. This is a tough balance to achieve, and one perfectly suited to, say, someone who's spent an embarrassing amount of their adult life debating the lyric "I" in writing workshops.

Basically, then, my job is to write like just enough of a human to enthrall an audience of invisible, hyperattentive, partially literate robots.

“but its inevitability is precisely why you need to start considering life insurance.”

The emotional grind of a service or retail job comes from the fact that in order to survive, you have to excise every trace of your real self from the person you pretend to be all day—otherwise, you’ll get eaten alive. There are some people who are preternaturally good at building a border between their real-life and work selves, and these are the people who get promoted, who make the best tips. But if you’ve ever done this kind of thing for the paycheck alone—if you’re the kind of person who makes a distinction between your “day job” and your “work”—there’s a good chance you have felt the dull, blunt exhaustion that comes of constantly trying to take off your subjectivity whenever you show up for a shift, of trying to put it back on when you leave.

By contrast, when you are a person working a day job that draws on your creative skills—when you’re a visual artist doing design for a corporation, or a novelist writing instruction manuals—it’s no longer the separation between your two selves that starts to get to you. It’s the overlap. You still need to save a part of yourself from the job to stay whole, if only because you need that part to do the work you care about. But spending your day drawing from the same pool of gestures and abilities that you use to do the stuff that matters to you makes it increasingly difficult to tell where each version of you begins and ends. Even though you still understand the distinction between your job and your work *intellectually*, in practice the borders begin to shift a little, get lighter, crumble.

The only facet of Search Engine Optimization that I really feel like I understand is something I learned my way around in poetry: repetition. In either case, it’s delicate, essential, and way

easy to mess up. At work, if I use a word or phrase too many times in one post the Google bots will flag it; if I don't use a keyword enough, they won't notice me at all. When we talk about an artist having a signature style or strong voice, we're really just saying they obsess well, *productively*. At this point, I might have a more developed voice as a content creator than as a poet.

During my first few weeks on the job, I tried to write down and save the weirdest phrases I'd come up with. I could use them for something later, I thought. Maybe a poem. I kept this going for a while, and then I slowed down, and then I stopped. As I got used to the rhythm of things, the work started to feel less like something I could look at from the outside and more like a fugue state I dragged myself into for eight hours or so every weekday. I started working faster, slipping products into stock phrases indiscriminately without blinking at their strangeness. The last entry in the document, from a month and a half or so after I'd started, reads: "No matter how the world changes, there are a few basic desires humans will always have. Two of the most crucial are comfort and convenience—and nowhere do these two qualities merge more elegantly than in the design and execution of the skort." I remember writing this and then staring blankly at my screen for a minute or two. *Is that funny?* I wondered. Already, it was hard to tell.

There's a sense of double failure that this kind of work can begin to inscribe on your sense of self—like you're faking it in two languages and failing in both. If I were a better poet, I've thought to myself, I would have written a suite of keyword-based villanelles. If I weren't so moldable, I wouldn't just be doing a job. I'd be studying the nuance of optimized repetition, playing the game against itself, being an artist first, always.

Instead, I just do what I'm told.

In your best moods, as a poet or a professional human, you can trick yourself into thinking what you've done that day is important and necessary, that you and what you write can Make A Difference. Likewise, on a bad one, you can make yourself sick with the worry that all you're doing is adding to the pile, making nothing for no one again and again. But the truth of the situation really hovers somewhere in between those two poles.

Holding them up to the light, it's clear there's not actually much difference between the work I do as a writer and the work I do on weekdays. When we talk about a poet, we're talking about somebody who writes for an audience so miniscule it barely exists, but who nevertheless puts an absurd amount of deliberation into every single line they compose. If they repeat themselves, it's on purpose. They pay attention to what they're saying, even if no one else does.

Sometimes, for certain posts, I have to write myself a bio. I get to choose my own pseudonym, and then I'll browse through some copyright-free stock photos to find a new picture. The last time I had to do this, I picked out a woman in jogging gear. She had a high ponytail and was standing in a field, gazing with a strong sense of vague purpose out into the middle distance. There was a sunrise. She looked hopeful and proud. "Alison is a wannabe yogi, social media guru, and mother of two who loves to share her exciting discoveries about the roofing industry online!", I typed, staring into her pixellated eyes as she stared off into the new day.

Every time I have to do this, I wonder if the person in the photo would be unsettled by the fact that their face now has a new name, that it's running a blog about roofing in some dusty corner of the internet—but then I think about my job, about her job, about the idea of remove. The uncanniness of a stock photo, after all, comes from the fact that it's just a picture of the idea of a person. The mess of intent and flaw and personality

that makes this human a human has to be extracted so that they can be more easily recognized as a symbol. Right now, Alison is living her life out in some city, shopping for groceries, programming her DVR, working on her novel. If you showed her this picture, it might take her a second to realize who it was. It's not really a photo of her—it's a photo of her at her job. But the weird thing is, it's sort of a photo of me at mine, too. Being not like myself, but more like *someone*. Trying as hard as I can to sound like a human.