

Structuring and designing content

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Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators
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A day in the life of a content designer

Sarah Thomson's day is all about creating content that meets user needs.

My days are varied. No two are alike: some days I'm travelling across the country to work on-site with a client; other days I'm working from home in Plymouth.

The example here includes common threads that appear throughout a content designer's work.

Before work

No matter where I am or what the day ahead of me entails, I always spend time relaxing before work. That might involve pottering in the garden, watching the sun rise or going for a walk. I tend to get up fairly early, which means it's a peaceful time of day where I can gather my thoughts about the day ahead.

I usually work from home, but today I'm working from a client's office. My hotel's near to work, so I decide to walk to the office and catch up on my emails before others arrive.

08:00–08:15: starting my working day

No matter where I am (home or client site), once I'm at my desk I'll turn on my Mac, open up Slack, Skype and Outlook, and then review my user stories (high-level outlines of requirements, written from the perspective of the user). Now's the time for me to be agile and iterate my plans for the day based on whatever I find. My day then begins.

08:15–10:15: designing content

I have several user stories in the current sprint (a short window of time that a team uses to complete specific tasks), including:

1. Creating content for new pages in our service prototype
2. Rewriting technical error messages
3. Writing a guidance document for non-technical users
4. Creating a data dictionary for data scientists.

As I have nearly 2 hours before my first meeting, I spend time reviewing what I did yesterday before continuing to work on it.

10:15–10:30: stand-up

It's time for my team stand-up (a short meeting that sets the context for the day's work). All team members literally stand in a circle and take it in turns to tell one another: what we did yesterday, what we're planning to do today, and whether there are any problems we need help with. It's a really quick and useful way to find out what's going on.

I discover the implementation of technical errors has been reprioritised, which could mean I need to reprioritise my work. I speak to the lead developer straight after stand-up. He agrees to send me the reprioritised list so I can update things accordingly.

10:30–11:00: stakeholder meeting

I've organised a meeting with the Head of Data Science to discuss my proposed changes to content in the data dictionary and technical guidance, both of which he 'owns'. It's important I ensure he's aware of the changes and that I have his full support.

At the end of the meeting he confirms he supports my proposed changes and suggests a couple of things for me to consider. I thank him for his time and agree to meet with him again in a couple of weeks.

11:00–12:30: user research

We've recently added a new feature and user journeys (a sequence of events a user might encounter while using a product) to our service's prototype, so our user researcher has arranged three user research sessions to gather feedback from users.

Each session is run remotely and allows members of the team to watch each user click through our prototype

on their own computer. The user researcher asks them questions throughout, to help us understand their experience and needs.

The sessions go really well, and I make lots of notes about the natural language they're using as well as any words they seem to stumble over, as it highlights potential problems. I also make a note of a possible iteration to one of our screens.

12:30–13:00: lunch

A group of us head to the on-site canteen for lunch. We make a point of not discussing work; we talk instead about today's news and the latest episodes of our favourite TV shows.

13:00–14:00: content clan

I'm very fortunate that the client I'm currently working with has an established 'content clan' (community of best practice) for content designers. I attend weekly content clans where we discuss what we're working on, get support and advice on any challenges we're facing, and carry out content crits (constructive reviews of other content designers' work).

A member of the clan asks for help with a challenge she's facing with her service. We listen to the challenge and offer some possible solutions for her to test with users. I also give her some insights from the research for my own service, as there are similarities. She's going to iterate her content based on our feedback, ask her team's user researcher to test it and then update the clan next week.

14:00–16:00: analysing research

I meet with the user researcher and interaction designer to discuss this morning's user research sessions and any initial findings/trends we think we've seen. We agree to design some alternative screens to A-B test in the next user research sessions. As they involve only minor changes, the interaction designer and I set about creating them in our prototype. Once completed, we let the user researcher know.

I haven't received the reprioritised list of errors through from the lead developer yet, so I send him a friendly nudge through Slack.

I then return to my work on the data dictionary and technical guidance, starting with implementing the suggestions from the Head of Data Science.

16:00–16:30: writing a training course

The client has asked me to run one-to-one content design training with a member of their staff next week. I've already started work on creating a content design training course and exercises to use, but need to finish it. I put my content design work to one side for the remainder of the afternoon and continue working on the training exercises.

It's difficult to distil everything into a couple of days' training, but I'm hoping that the exercises, along with references to books and online resources, will help give her strong foundations to build upon.

16:30: heading home

Throughout the day I've been checking Slack, Skype and my emails, replying to messages and meeting requests as and when I can. Once I'm happy I've dealt with everything, I log off, pack up and leave the office for the day.

After work

It's time to switch off and relax.

My day usually ends around 4:30/5:00pm. Sometimes it can end as late as 9:00pm, but that's an exception and is usually because I'm travelling home from a client site or making significant progress with a piece of content, so don't want to put it down.

When I'm working from home, I'll make a point of heading up to Dartmoor or down to the beach after work. This helps me to relax and unwind from the day and creates a clear break between work and home.

Later on, I'll cook dinner and sit down for the evening before heading to bed, ready for whatever tomorrow brings. **C**

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