KONTENT.AI

Ebook

The content modeling playbook

by Kontent.ai Team

Table of contents

Introduction

Content models that structure an enterprise's content have emerged as a critical capability within content publishing. Yet many people who work with online content don't have a clear sense of how content models can support their work. This Playbook aims to change that.

Why you need a Playbook

People in content-related roles are hearing more about content models lately—in many cases because their organization is considering using a headless content management system. Headless CMSs provide a fundamentally different way to manage content that's focused on the content rather than its presentation. A headless approach opens up new possibilities. To take full advantage of them requires fresh thinking about how to structure content in a content model and moving away from document-centric paradigms.

With content models, content is easier to make and maintain. It's more flexible. But realizing these benefits requires a little planning.

This Playbook will help you and your team understand vital issues:

- What can you do with a content model?
- What do you need to consider when creating one?

This Playbook provides concrete suggestions about goals for your content model. It discusses a range of situations that content teams encounter and solutions they can use. A robust content model will help you manage content strategically. Instead of relying on templates that have a limited purpose, you create a model that can support many purposes and goals.

Who this Playbook is for

We've written the first Playbook on content models for people who develop and manage content. That includes writers, editors, content strategists and managers, and user experience (UX) designers. It will be relevant to all kinds of content from marketing content to technical documentation and beyond. While most of the examples focus on content that is delivered to screens, the same principles can be applied to content delivered to voice interfaces or other non-screen channels. Headless content management is omnichannel and is not restricted by format or touchpoint used.

The Playbook provides a non-technical discussion of content models. It explains the value of structuring content into parts, and how to present and deliver these parts to audiences in a modular way. If readers want a more technical discussion of the mechanics of content models, they can consult other publications that Kontent.ai offers. Our ebook Content Modeling in a Headless CMS is a great place to start.

What this Playbook covers

The Playbook is divided into three parts.

The first one looks at the role of content models and how they can differ.

The second part covers how content models can support editorial planning and operations. It will be especially useful to writers, editors, and content managers.

The third part addresses how a content model supports user experience. This part will also be of interest to writers but also UX designers and front-end developers who design and develop the user experience.

Part 1:
The role of content models

Content models: the foundation for agile content

Content models express how content management systems organize content internally. A robust content model provides a framework that structures content within the CMS that makes the content more useful. Content about a topic is broken into distinct parts, and these parts can be combined in different ways.

From sluggish content to agile content

Content should be able to pivot. It needs to be able to change when necessary. What you created yesterday may not be exactly what you need tomorrow.

Content models determine what you can do with your content. They provide a map of different possibilities for how content can be pieced together to address different situations. But not all CMSs support the structuring of content to the same degree. They are based on different foundations. They have different kinds of content models.

Some CMSs have content models that are rudimentary, providing just a few attributes to describe a generic article. They can't pivot at all. The content models of other CMSs are complicated and rigid. They can pivot only in a limited range of situations.

A limited or clumsy content model will slow down your content operations. Your content will be sluggish as a result, unable to respond to new requirements or address pressing needs.

Content models that follow a headless, Content-as-a-Service (CaaS) approach are flexible and can support all kinds of situations. A CaaS content model is agile. It can let content pivot in many directions.

Flexible versus fixed content models

The first factor influencing agility is whether the content model is flexible or fixed. A fixed content model is a hand-me-down template that was decided by the CMS vendor. Most traditional CMSs offer a fixed content model. The vendor makes assumptions about how enterprises will use their content: what they want to say, and how they want to deliver that to audiences. The users of their CMS must follow the structure the vendor has chosen. The structure may be customized to some degree, but the core structure is fixed and must be used.

Because these vendor choices are generic—trying to please "everyone" (but no one in particular)—the structure isn't granular or precise. The content is difficult to work with as a result. Content teams are hampered because:

- The model does not match the specific business requirements of the enterprise.
- It's hard to update and change details in the content.
- It's hard to personalize and customize content for different audience segments.
- It's hard to reuse specific content.

Content as a Service takes a different approach, empowering enterprises to make their own decisions. It provides a flexible, fully configurable content model, unlike the fixed content model of a traditional CMS. A flexible content model lets each enterprise decide how they want to structure their content. A CaaS content model reflects the enterprise's choices and priorities.

Enterprises can decide what parts of their content are important, such as:

- What wording needs to stay consistent everywhere it is used
- What information appears widely and should be revised in a central location
- What messages and information to customize for different audiences and scenarios
- What content elements, such as calls to action, are critical and need to be optimized easily
- What information changes often and needs to be managed readily

CaaS gives enterprises ownership of their content model. They are in a position to choose how to make content work most effectively, instead of having their CMS vendor make those decisions.

Enterprise models versus website-specific models

A second factor influencing agility concerns alignment. How aligned is the enterprise around a common content structure? The more widely the enterprise takes advantage of structured content, the more agile their content will be. To achieve agility, you need an enterprise-wide content model. You need one model that everyone can use.

Only CaaS supports an enterprise-wide content model that provides a common structure for content everywhere.

A common content model breaks down silos in the organization. Enterprises have distributed teams producing content separately from each other, typically using different CMSs and working on different projects. It's not obvious how the work of different teams is related. Each website has a different content structure, which inhibits collaboration and creates silos.

With a traditional CMS, the content model utilized is specific to that CMS. That means each CMS that an enterprise uses has its own individual content model associated with it. And that makes it difficult to share content between different CMSs.

A content model in CaaS, in contrast, unifies content. All the enterprise's content can be described using a common content model and taxonomy. Different teams may work on separate projects but can use a common model to structure the content they create. When the content follows a common structure, it can be shared and reused across different teams. The enterprise content model provides a common framework for accessing and managing content items. All of the enterprise's websites, apps, and other touchpoints can draw upon shared content items that are structured by the same content model.

Agility comes from having a flexible enterprise-wide content model

With a traditional CMS, the pre-defined content model is typically simple and not very flexible. Content is hard to modify, hard to share across the enterprise, and hard to use in different scenarios. You aren't able to decide much about the model you rely on. You aren't able to plan much about how you can structure your content since the vendor has imposed various decisions about that already. You'll want better options.

A headless, CaaS approach supports an enterprise-wide content model that's flexible. The content structured by it can be shared throughout the organization. You get to decide how you want to plan the structure of your content, based on your goals.

Setting goals for your content model

Content models can seem mysterious because many people don't understand why they exist, how they vary, and what their benefits are. That's unfortunate because **content models are a powerful tool.** To get the most from them, teams need to know how they influence content and outcomes.

A content model is more than a technical specification

Much of the available advice about content modeling relates to traditional page-based CMSs and is not relevant to modeling content for a headless Content-as-a-Service (CaaS) approach. A headless technical foundation manages content with greater granularly and flexibly. That changes the nature of the content model. **With CaaS, the content model becomes a strategic tool.**

A content model should structure the content that the organization creates and offers. It should not structure web pages where that content might appear, which is often the focus of advice about content modeling that's geared toward traditional web CMSs. Such CMSs may offer a handful of pre-configured content types, which can be changed only to a limited degree. In a traditional CMS, you may be told you should limit the number of content types you use because all web pages are really just variations of a generic article and a few generic widgets.

For traditional web CMSs, content modeling is largely about gathering technical details about how the content will live in a back-end database. Teams end up focusing on how many characters to make each field, instead of on what the content can do for them. Content modeling becomes a task encumbered by drudgery—a task that teams want to finish as soon as possible.

The content model needs to reflect the characteristics of your content, not the specifications of a CMS. It should express the potential of what you want to do with your content.

Have goals for your content model

The content that your organization publishes should have specific goals. The same is true for the content model that is managing the creation and delivery of that content. It will be hard to realize objectives for your content if your model doesn't support those objectives.

Unless you have specific goals for your content model, developing your content model will seem like a huge chore. Content models shouldn't be seen as something you have to do because your CMS requires it. The content model is an opportunity for your enterprise to do more with its content.

Make your content model robust

Before you can create a robust content model, your enterprise needs a CMS that is designed to support one. This Playbook will assume you are using a headless CMS, which offers complete flexibility and choice over how to structure your content.

If you want a content model that can address a range of situations that are important to your enterprise specifically, you can't expect the vendor will provide that for you out of the box. The content model is not a predefined CMS feature in the way that auto-saving your text edits is. **The CMS provides the framework for the enterprise's content model. Your organization defines the possibilities that their content model will deliver**. The content team needs to decide what they want their content model to do on their behalf.

A robust content model has certain characteristics:

- It is specific.
- It covers important scenarios your customers face and that your business needs to support.
- It makes content flexible so it can adapt to different needs.

As you learn more about the benefits of content models, it will become easier to see when a content model is a robust one.

A content model can support many kinds of goals

What do you want your content model to do for you? Before getting into the specifics of how to develop the content model, teams should understand the various kinds of content goals that a content model can support. Content models define options and connect resources, so the right content is ready when needed.

It's helpful to think about two broad categories of goals that the content model can support:

1. Editorial planning and operational goals
2. Use experience goals

These goals can support one another, but it helps to consider each on its own so teams can identify opportunities to structure their content to improve their content's effectiveness.

A robust content model can support complex content needs, where an enterprise must be able to respond to a range of requirements. It makes content operations more agile. Some operational goals for a content model would be to:

- Reuse content in similar or different scenarios
- Be able to deliver consistent content where that is required
- Be able to provide variable and granular content to address diverse business and customer needs
- Unify and relate content on a wide range of topics
- Make updates and changes more manageable

Teams can consider how their choices support these operational goals when developing their content model.

In addition to making operations more agile, robust content models can deliver greater precision to support the user experience (UX). By breaking down content and providing more structure, the content model can support a range of UX goals. The customer experience goals for the content model can help customers:

- Benefit from more flexible information that's available just in time.
- Have more control or choice about what to view.
- Access more specific content that's more relevant and richer in detail.

A weak content model will prevent your content from fully engaging with customers. Generic content models result in bloated content that is difficult for customers to use. Robust models, in contrast, are built around concrete customer scenarios.

All these editorial, operational, and UX goals are important. Different enterprises will prioritize some more than others in their content modeling to reflect their content strategy priorities.

Involve the whole team

To tap the full potential of your content model, different roles should contribute to the process:

- Content strategists and writers can suggest how different information and messages need to be available in different scenarios.
- UX designers and front-end developers can suggest how the model can support a better experience when customers view content in products or in different channels.
- Developers can suggest how to implement ideas in a way that is most efficient.

This Playbook will provide many ideas about how to develop your own unique content model that will support your specific needs and goals. Kontent.ai has a range of other resources about content modeling that will help your team plan how to structure your content most effectively.

Part 2:
Editorial planning

Why structured writing needs structured content

This chapter will look at some important questions:

- Is structuring your writing enough?
- How is structured writing related to structured content (the content model)?
- How does structured content make structured writing even more powerful?

Structuring your writing is wise advice

People read differently online compared with print. They may be in a hurry or distracted by other things around them. They often need to find information quickly.

One of the first guides to online writing, the Yahoo Style Guide, offered advice that still holds, “Shape your text for online reading.”

Nicole Fenton and Kate Kiefer Lee, in their book on online writing, Nicely Said, give similar advice, “Break up text.”

The goal is to make online text audience-centered. By structuring writing, you make it more scannable.

Some common approaches to making content scannable include:

- Adding subheadings
- Front loading the content so that important information appears early
- Using bullet lists, numbered lists, checklists, and tables
- Breaking information into discrete parts, such as:
  - Summary and Key Takeaways
  - Examples

Once the writer has developed a structure that works well, they can create a reusable outline or template to guide the creation of new content that is similar in purpose. Writing templates and outlines can serve as "stubs" or "slots" for planning content.

Erin Kissane, in her influential A List Apart article on content templates, says, "*You might think of content templates as a kind of wizard for content development.*" She notes the benefits of templates:

- Collecting information quickly
- Gaining uniform structure
- Identifying gaps in information

Structured writing offers benefits for writers and readers. But structuring an article so that it's easy to read is not the same as structuring content so that it can be used in different ways. Structured content provides additional benefits to both writers and audiences beyond what's offered by structured writing alone.

Let's compare structured writing and structured content:

Structured writing	Structured content
Focused on structuring a specific article or web page	Focused on structuring the meaning of any kind of content into distinct content elements that can be used in many situations
Identifies what information to cover in an article	Identifies what information to cover about a topic and where that information can be used

Structured writing breaks up parts of an article. The article is easy to scan and understand, but the content is fixed and doesn't change and can't be reconfigured in other ways.

Structured content goes a step further; it lets parts of an article switch out and different topics connect to each other. With structured content, information can be changed according to the situation.

Online writing templates don't structure content

As structured writing has grown in popularity, standalone tools have entered the market that provide templates for writers to fill in their content. These tools have arisen because most CMSs do a poor job supporting structured writing.

Some writers use these standalone "content creation" tools to plan their writing. While these tools offer certain conveniences, they also create a range of problems for content operations—an ironic outcome, given that some of these tools claim to facilitate content operations.

Problems with standalone content creation tools

Content creation tools are designed and supported by a different vendor than the CMS being used, and so the tool has no relationship to the CMS where the content is managed. In addition to that, content creation tools require a separate user subscription license, which sometimes means that only some writers even get to use the tool.

Standalone writing tools push problems elsewhere. They may speed up the initial drafting of content, but they slow down its delivery and revision after publication. By using two different tools, content teams end up duplicating lots of work and miss the benefits that structured content offers.

Unfortunately, standalone content creation tools that provide writing templates don't create structured, adaptive content. Such standalone tools prevent content teams from benefiting from the flexibility of using a content model. There is no connection between the structure displayed on the screen within the writing tool and the model the CMS uses to manage content.

When using a standalone content creation tool, the text needs to be migrated to the CMS. It must sometimes be manually copied and pasted to get it into the CMS. Because the content was created outside of the CMS, it isn't defined by the model the CMS uses to decide how to deliver content. What looks like well-structured content to the writer is just a big blob of text to the CMS.

Use a solution that supports structured content and structured writing

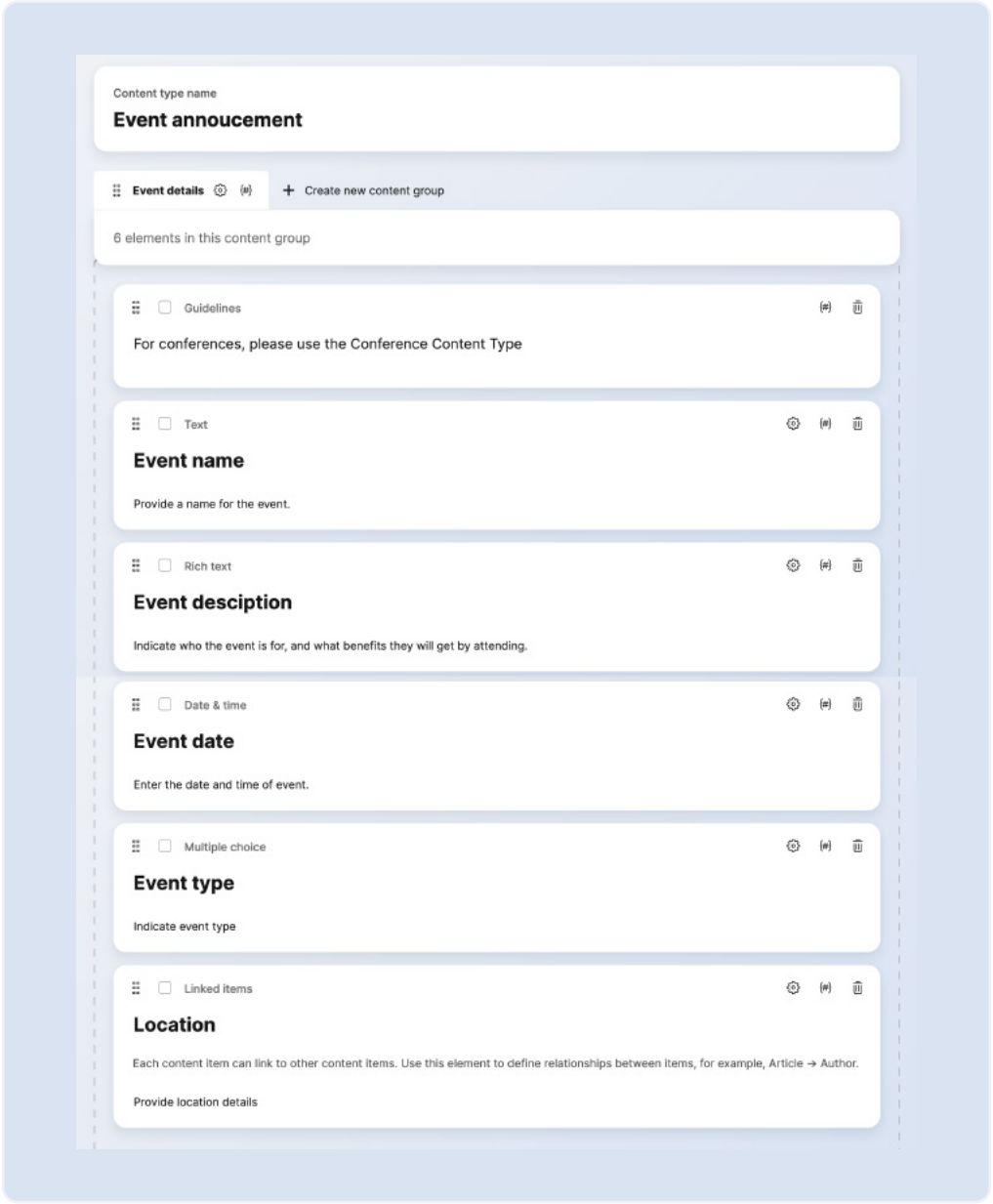
Content operations become inefficient when teams use separate tools to draft their content and to manage and deliver it.

Content teams need an integrated solution that provides a template for writing and is connected to a content model that allows the content to be used flexibly. Unfortunately, most tools do only one or the other. When your content operations use separate tools for writing your content and for managing it, your operations are disconnected. Buying another tool to support content creation won't make your content operations more efficient. It will create another silo in your operations.

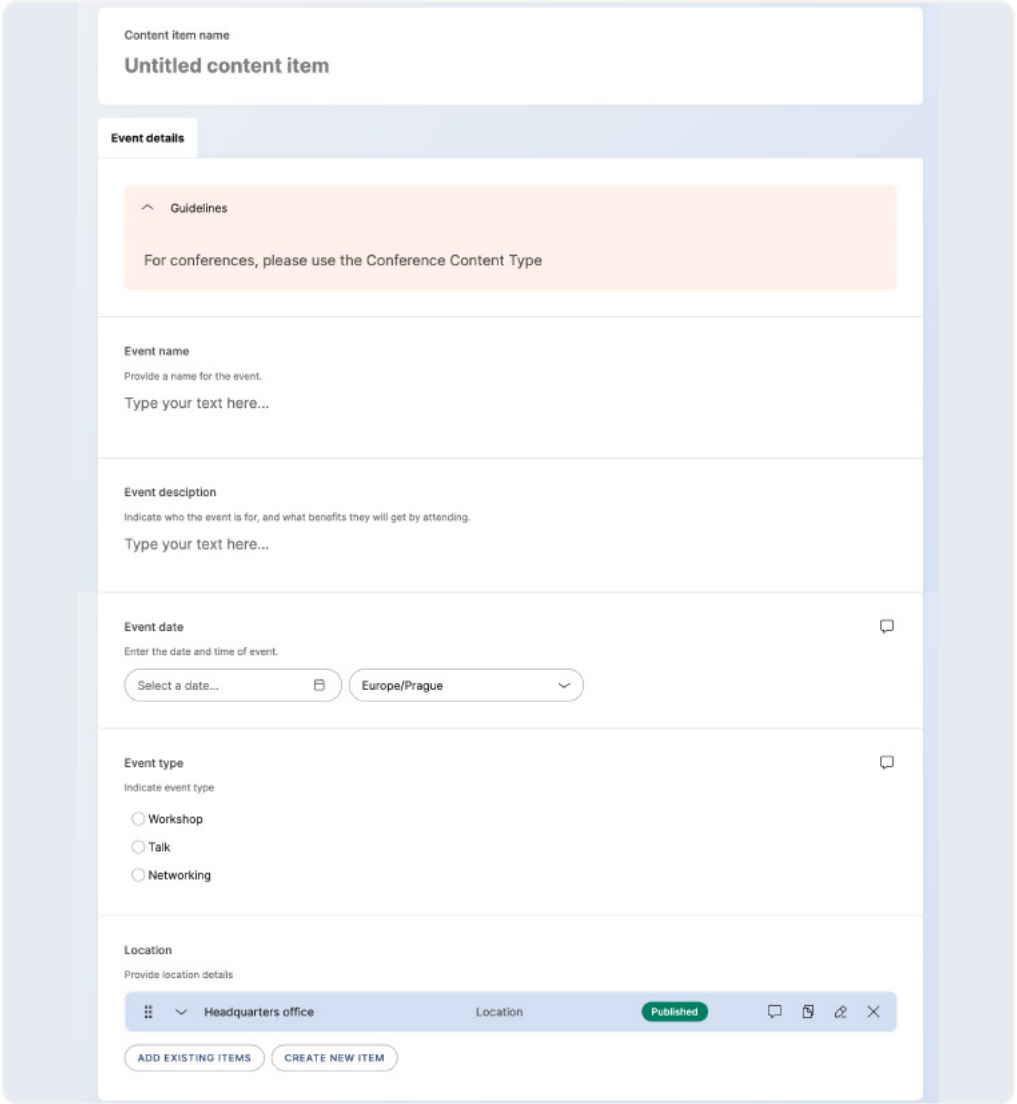
Unify your writing with your content model

When using a Content-as-a-Service approach, you can create the structure for writing while developing the structure for the content type that the CMS uses to manage the content. You create a common structure for both writers and your content management system concurrently. And you can also include guidelines for writers when doing this.

Let's look at a simple example relating to an event announcement. In Kontent.ai, we can create a content type to indicate different kinds of information relating to an event. We can also link the "event announcement" content type to a "location" content type, which will hold information about the venue location. This allows us to keep the information flexible so that we can use it in different ways. At the same time, we can add guidelines for writers so they understand what information to include.



The writers see a content template that is based on the content type. They see different sections that have guidelines about what they need to fill in. Because the location information is already available, they don't have to fill that in—they just choose which location they want, and all the details are added automatically. But if they need to change the location for the event, they could do that easily as well.



Use structure to the fullest benefit

If you separate content creation from content management, you'll end up with separate silos of activity. Content templates are not a substitute for structuring content with a content model. Enterprises need a robust content model to make content flexible. And they need a CMS that lets authors take advantage of structuring the content they create.

The content model is a framework that can benefit everyone on a content team. Itenables both structured authoring and structured management and delivery.

Using content models to support reuse

Reuse is about doing more with existing content. It focuses on important questions: How many times and how many ways can a content element or content item be used?

Content models and reuse

If reusing content is a goal for your enterprise—and it should be—your content model needs to reflect that. Content models enable the reuse of content. However, the model has to identify the content as reusable. Without a content model supporting you, you have to rely on a laborious manual process to reuse content known as "copy and paste."

Let's consider reuse structurally. Reusable content in a content model is any content item or element that can support other content items. **In other words, the same content item or element appears in many places, either within or alongside other content**. The content model identifies instances where this happens or could happen.

You can explore reuse from either an internal perspective (content that you currently copy and paste) or an external perspective (content that lots of people need to see in different situations). Both these situations can be indicators that the content has reuse potential. Reusable content should be separate content items in the content model so that they can connect where needed and can be managed independently.

Content models harness commonalities in an enterprise

One of the superpowers of content models is that they unify content across the enterprise. They provide a common framework for showing the different content parts that are used and their relationships. Content models can help identify duplication and overlap in enterprise content—areas for potential reuse.

Enterprises see content reuse as a priority for many reasons. For example, reuse makes sense when:

- Different people in your organization are producing similar content that overlaps.
- You need to recreate or copy certain content to distribute it in different channels, for example, writing highlights for an email that refers to content on a website, because you currently manage such content in different systems.

Content models keep content DRY

Without a well-defined content model, individual content creators are prone to splash content everywhere. Unless a model is coordinating within the CMS what is being created, content teams tend to produce excessive content that duplicates existing material. The enterprise ends up with a wet mess that needs to be mopped up.

A content model keeps content DRY. DRY stands for Don't Repeat Yourself.

- Don't recreate good content that you've already created.
- Don't make a copy of the content if you can use the original.

Doing these things creates extra work and can lead to problems later on.
The content model tells the CMS how to orchestrate content that has to appear in many places so that only one version needs to be created.

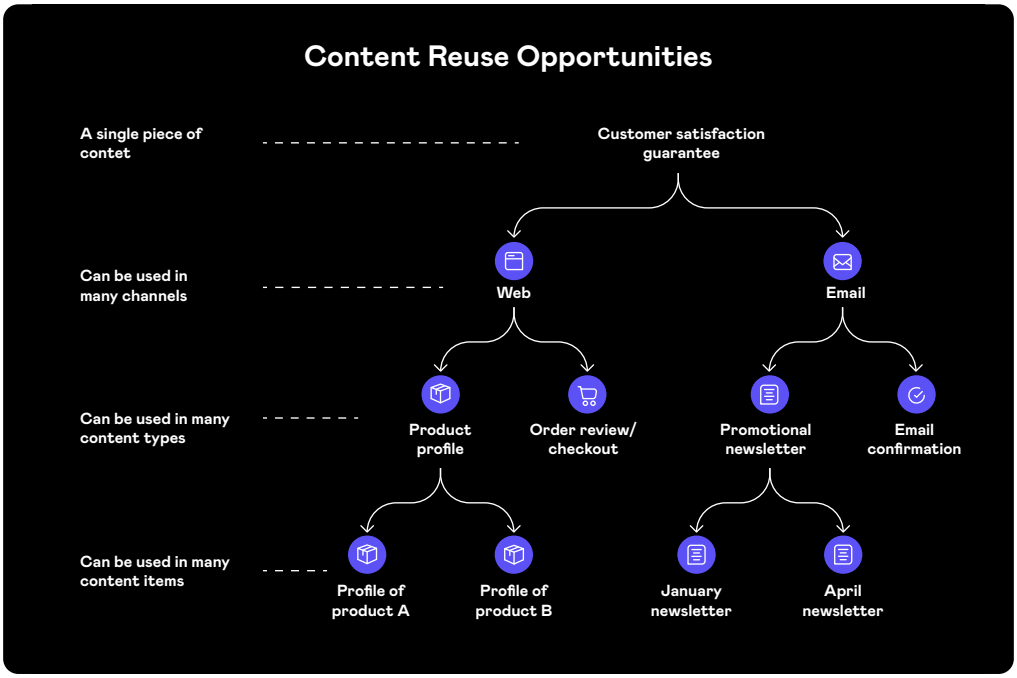
Content can be reused in many ways

By definition, reusable content gets used more than single-use content. Because it is used often, it has more value than most single-use content. But it's not enough to know that the content is used a lot. We also want to understand why it's used a lot, which will reflect either customer needs or the enterprise's business goals.

Reusable content influences other content when they are presented together. Sometimes it plays a supporting role, and other times it plays a leading role. In some cases, customers are pointed to the same content in many different situations because that content is important for helping them decide or understand a common issue or situation. In other cases, the content will appear in many different contexts to support a range of issues, providing background or reference details that might be useful for customers to consult.

Reusable content helps make other content more meaningful. It can connect together with different information. It can be delivered on-demand where it is needed.

Let's consider a single piece of content: a short statement of a company's customer satisfaction guarantee. The company is proud of its guarantee and wants to promote it in both pre-sales and after-sales content. As the diagram shows, one small item can be used in different channels, various content types, and many content items.



This example illustrates how a single content item can support a range of uses. While the item itself has a single focused function—stating the customer satisfaction guarantee—it supports many different purposes across the customer journey.

There is no pre-defined list of reusable content. All kinds of content can be reused:

- Branding collateral and marketing slogans
- Calls to action (CTAs)
- Definitions
- Descriptions
- Examples
- Informational tables
- Instructions
- Notifications and alerts
- Policy information
- Offers and deals
- Reference information

And that's only a partial list!

Content reuse presents opportunities to improve the performance of business-critical content. Look for content that helps customers make decisions. Often user journeys hinge around these high-value content items and elements.

Spotting building blocks for reuse

To specify reusable content in the content model, think about how chunks of frequently used content relate to other content. Once we understand these relationships, we can then formally specify what kind of chunk we are talking about. Think about chunks that could be:

- Content items that can serve as sections of other content items
- Elements of content items collected or displayed in other contexts such as lists
- Blocks of elements such as addresses that could appear in different content items
- Assets such as images or videos that get embedded in different content items

Identifying reusable items for your content model

You likely have more content you can reuse than you first think. Reuse is about looking at individual pieces or sections of content that appear within different content products such as a web page. Look at structural elements within finished content items and see if those same elements appear elsewhere.

To find reuse candidates, explore scenarios where various kinds of information are routinely needed. Look at customer scenarios to discover their recurring needs and expectations for content. And consider common or important business scenarios where you need to deliver or position certain content in front of customers.

To support customer needs, ask how reuse could help. For example:

- What content routinely needs to be presented to customers?
- What content do customers routinely rely on to make decisions in different scenarios?
- What routine information or messages are part of larger content patterns, for example, if you need to show a certain message whenever a customer does process X, Y, or Z?

To support business goals, ask how the same content can work in different contexts:

- What information is used in more than one content type (the information can support more than one purpose)?
- What content needs to be delivered to different channels at the same time, or may be needed in a different channel to support follow-up?

Going further with modeling for reuse

Planning for content reuse is a new way of thinking for many enterprises. They may be accustomed to thinking about how similar content items will say some of the same things because they use CMSs that support templated web pages. But they don't always see the possibility to reuse content across content types or delivery channels. That's where content modeling is powerful: it transcends the confines of web page thinking to allow enterprises to design their content more comprehensively.

When modeling content for reuse, start with patterns in your current content. Separate potentially reusable content from situation-specific information.

But don't be limited by how your current content is designed. **Consider your future needs**. Be open to new opportunities that could arise from having a better content model. Ask where else valuable content can be used. When planning for reuse, your enterprise can extend its delivery of core messages in different situations.

Using your content model to ensure content consistency

It is difficult for content to be consistent unless it's reused. That's especially true when enterprises publish content at scale. Consistency is a specialized sub-goal of content reuse. Reuse focuses on what content can be used again, while consistency is more focused on what content must be reused. Consistent content brings additional requirements to guide how content is selected and changed.

When authors copy and paste existing content, it introduces risks and creates potential problems:

- Are they using the latest version?
- How will all the content be updated when it has been copied many times and put in different places?

A content model offers **a single source of truth about widely used content items** such as the wording or the factual details relating to a topic. Using a content model, a single instance of content can appear in many places, so it is always consistent. There's no danger that new edits were introduced after the content had been copied.

Types of consistency

Content consistency is critical for certain industry sectors, especially finance, insurance, and technical products, where wording and details need to be precise. It is also important for content relating to consumer and luxury goods that rely heavily on brand-managed content and assets.

Any content that requires a high level of internal review should be standardized if it needs to be used in multiple places. When text or assets need to be predictable and unvarying, the content model should indicate what parts within the relevant content type must be consistent. Content items can then be created once and used wherever needed.

Delivering consistent content can involve special requirements around workflow, roles, and permissions. Enterprises should identify in their content model how parts are managed. It's not only a matter of determining what content to reuse; it is also about who can make revisions and the process around when that happens.

Standardizing content so that it is consistent when published can be approached in three ways:

1. When there's only one version allowed
2. When there are several versions allowed
3. When there is a preferred version

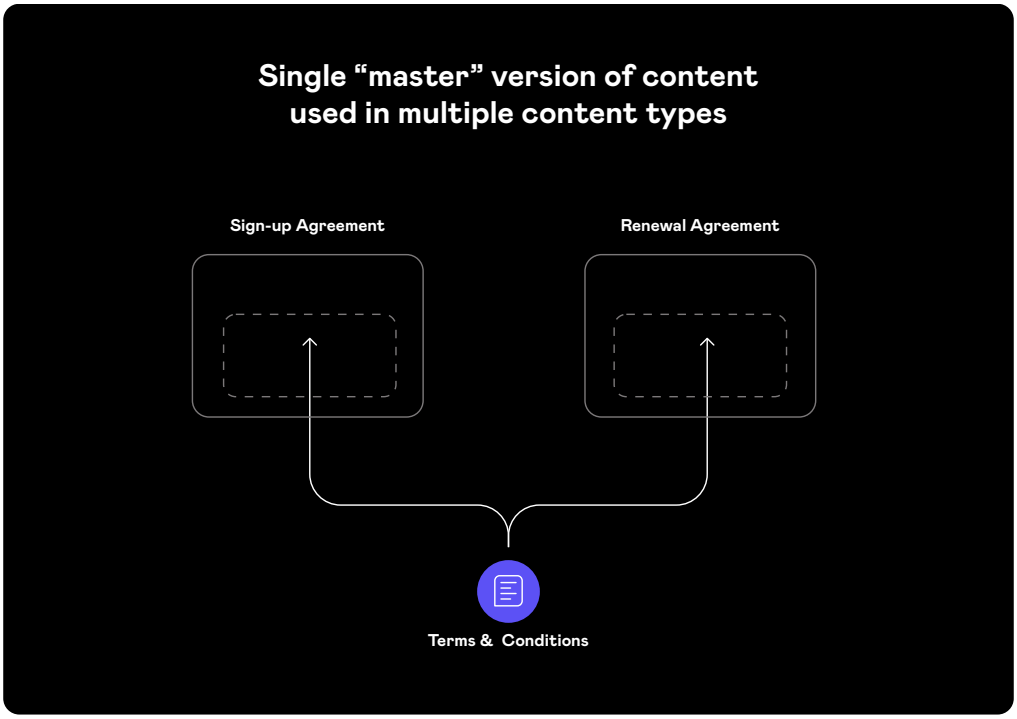
Only one version allowed

Some content will need to be the same, no matter where it appears. It may be related to factual statements or wording. Such content is sometimes referred to as "canonical". Authors generally don't have to do much, because the content is already created and approved and can be inserted automatically where it is needed.

Some common examples of single-version-only content include:

- Legal terms and conditions (T&Cs)
- A master copy of product descriptions
- Service agreement language

Often, this content is subject to legal review. Formal reviews introduce requirements about access permission and rules around publishing changes. Reviewers may need to understand the history of any changes in single-version content over time. Having the ability to compare versions becomes important.



Several versions allowed

A different scenario occurs when authors can choose between two or more versions of items to include within their content—but they should not create their own versions.

The content model can indicate parts of a content type where only “approved” versions of content are allowed. **Often brand standards or policy guidelines will constrain what content says or how it appears**. More than one approved version exists, but all approved versions need to conform to standards and guidelines. Organizations will always present readers with one of the approved versions. A small example of this form of consistency: some organizations have two approved versions of their logo, but no other version should ever be used.

Enterprises use an approval process to ensure consistency among the versions that are used. Their content model can note which parts (assets or sections of text) require approval by a product or branding manager.

A preferred version (at least for now)

A final scenario occurs when the content model indicates the preferred version of a content item. The model can designate when everyone should use a “master” version unless they are in a role that has permission to create and test a new version. We can think about this scenario as promoting provisional consistency.

The goal in this scenario to make sure that authors incorporate the “best-performing” version of content items within the material they compose and curate. These items could be a call to action, a product comparison table, or a case study—parts of content that are widely incorporated into other content. Organizations always want to use the best-performing version of these items—the version that delivers the best engagement. But they can never be sure that the current version will always be the best or can never be improved. As a result, they use a consistent version most of the time but experiment with an alternative version.

The model indicates the preferred version, which is the default available to authors who may need to use it. However, some people may have permission to create their own version (or modify the existing one) to see if it would perform better. That alternative version is added to the model and will remain as long as it is being tested. If it doesn't test well, it's removed. If it tests better than the default version, it may become the new preferred version.

Organizations can test the preferred version of a content item against an alternate version in a couple of ways. In both processes, the master version is the baseline against which a new version is compared.

Organizations may compare their existing content (the currently preferred version) with an alternate through usability testing. Government organizations sometimes employ usability testing to make sure information is complete and understandable. If the content doesn't test well, a second version may be published and tested online to see if it scores better.

In commercial organizations, different versions are often A/B tested concurrently. Most readers see the version that has performed best thus far, but some readers will see a different version that introduces some changes. The preferred version is compared to the new version.

Content models support processes that promote consistency

Whenever items of content need to be consistent, they need to be managed. By using a content model, an enterprise can manage specific parts of content separately from the larger body of content in which they are used. These parts can be assigned specific review, approval, and change workflows to ensure they are consistent with the enterprise's governance and business goals.

Using content models for custom variations

Customized content makes your customers pay close attention. However, delivering such content requires planning and the right capabilities.

A robust content model allows content to be less generic and more focused on specific customer needs. It can indicate what parts of content need to vary in different situations. This enables headlines, information, messages, and other content to be customized. It helps readers understand what they need to know more quickly. And it helps content teams produce content more swiftly as well.

Without a robust content model, content teams will struggle to deliver the right content to customers. Delivering content customization becomes labor-intensive and not scalable. **Any organization that wants to deliver customized content needs to prioritize how this is done in its content model**.

Agile content: managing variability at scale

To manage content agilely, enterprises need a clear picture of the commonalities and differences in the content they produce.

Previously, we discussed how content models can support consistency in content. Now, let's look at how content models support variations. When content is customized to different user needs, it becomes noticeably more relevant.

Variable items are the flipside of consistent items. After identifying what parts of content need to be consistent, the next step is to identify parts that will need to vary routinely. **Look for areas where content needs to change based on specific circumstances**.

Variable content is different from dynamic data such as prices or inventory levels that are sourced from Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems. Rather, the variable content in the model will indicate opportunities to show more specific information or alternative options for how to present a message, according to the scenario.

Any content that needs to change should be a separate item or element in the content model. While many different content types and elements can vary, they tend to be influenced by four factors:

1. Who is publishing the content
2. What it's about
3. Where it's delivered
4. Who it's for

When developing your content model, think about how these factors influence what needs to change in the content.

Who is publishing it: corporate variations

Content as a Service supports an enterprise-wide content model, unlike CMSs that are focused on supporting specific websites. An enterprise-wide content model gives enterprises the ability to manage all aspects of their content: both the parts that need to be consistent and the parts that need to vary.

Many enterprises have business units or subsidiaries that create similar content. If content is shared between organizational divisions or lines of business, what needs to be unique for each? For example, many enterprises have separate divisions to serve business customers and consumers. Their products and services may be similar, but the details about purchasing terms or warranties will be different.

In the past, each division may have produced content separately on different CMSs. **When using a Content-as-a-Service approach, different organizational divisions can share content**. The enterprise should also use its model to highlight content that doesn't overlap, especially cases where related lines of business address a common topic in different ways. This allows all divisions to share common content and still be able to address their unique needs.

What it's about: product variations

Content about products will often involve variation. Many products are similar but vary according to their features or when they were introduced. Products from different brands may be similar but differ in key features. A company may offer a range of product models that belong to the same brand family, and each one can undergo different versions. Enterprises need to track many details concerning what is different when discussing these products.

The content model can indicate what information is unique within content that discusses similar products. When the variable content is identified, the content model can support:

- The comparison of similar products
- Noting the distinguishing features, benefits, and uses of specific products

Where it's delivered: geographic variations

Content needs to adapt to the customer's location. Geolocation has been long used to provide specific content to readers based on where they are accessing content. But the power of geolocation may be limited by the in-built capabilities of the CMS used.

The content model can reflect aspects of the content that should vary by location. For example, the enterprise may want to promote location-specific news, such as announcing a new branch that's opened near customers who live in a certain area. For their part, readers increasingly expect that location-specific details will adjust automatically according to where they are accessing the content.

Examples of geographic-specific content that can vary include:

- Localized content, such as a local promotion
- Region-specific information, such as local service schedules

A robust content model can even let you deliver "hyperlocal" content that is relevant to a specific city neighborhood.

Who it's for: customer variations

Finally, content can change based on who will be viewing it. **Many kinds of content can be tailored to customers**—whether they are a new visitor or a returning one, if they are an existing or former customer, or if they are someone who saw an ad or were referred by a partner. The content could be alerts, offers, calls to action, special bonus information, or recommendations. The content model should identify opportunities to tailor content to:

- Speak to specific motivations, such as addressing a customer segment's most important decision criteria.
- Cover special circumstances, such as how to resolve a problem in a certain situation.

Customer-related valuations deliver value to customers—and the enterprise. Your content model can address any content that should change to be more relevant and valuable to customers.

Putting content teams in charge of customization

A robust content model gives content teams and marketers discretion over what content to change under which circumstances. No longer are they restricted to predefined variations that are packaged with their CMS. Content teams have new opportunities to design their content so it is more flexible and powerful.

Customization provides strategic benefits by presenting the most relevant content where it is needed. Make sure your content model indicates where content needs to change.

Managing updates by using content models

Keeping content up to date is a major challenge for enterprises. Because they produce lots of content, it is hard to know which content has become out of date. Fortunately, content models can help teams plan their content so that it is easier to keep up to date.

The web expert Paul Boag has noted the problem of keeping content up to date: "Although there is a cost to producing this content in the first place, there is a far higher cost in maintaining that content over time. It costs huge amounts of money and time to review content on a regular basis and ensure it is still accurate and relevant. This is especially true when some organizations have millions of pages online. In the end, many companies just give up."

The challenge of keeping lots of content up to date can seem daunting. Some enterprises give up and delete all content that becomes out of date in some way, only to recreate much of this content again later on. **A better approach is to plan for the maintenance of content**. Content models can be a big help here.

Using content models to plan maintenance

Planning involves looking ahead: anticipating how content will be relevant in the future. It entails foreseeing maintenance needs for content and projecting the lifespan of the content.

When content has a long lifespan, it's often a signal that it's important. Readers consult it routinely; the piece may discuss a critical topic or be popular because it has a high production value. In addition to that, it may have been expensive to produce, and the publisher wants to make sure they continue to be able to use it.

The value of content is strongly tied to how current it is. Out-of-date content can be harmful—stealthily becoming incomplete, inaccurate, or passé. It hurts a brand's credibility and its SEO.

Whether content stays up to date depends on how quickly it can be updated. Content models can help make updating easier to manage.

We suggest **a three-step process** for planning the maintenance of updates in your content model:

1. Identify content that needs to be available to audiences for a long period.
2. Decide how different parts of that content age.
3. Structure these parts in your content model.

Find content with long-term value

First, teams should look for content types that provide information that audiences need to access for a long time. This content always needs to be up to date. Because of its importance to the business, the content can't be allowed to become stale.

Sometimes these content types do not generate lots of content items, but, nonetheless, the items are in some way crucial. For example, organizations may produce a limited number of long-form items, such as reports, guides, or documentation that are important and need to be kept up to date. They want to be able to revise these larger items easily. If they can't, they may have to throw away content that cost a lot to create but that has become dated and therefore no longer valuable.

In other cases, organizations create many items based on a business-critical content type. If certain details tend to go out of date, teams want a simpler way to manage the updating of these items.

Teams want to leverage content models to extend the lifespan of content because:

- Content that is easy to update will have a longer lifespan.
- Content with a long lifespan will deliver more value over time.

Using the content model, teams can identify the core asset (parts within the content type) they need to maintain so that it stays up to date and can be used over time. With this knowledge, teams can be confident that the asset will have lasting value. They will be more likely to invest in creating a quality asset knowing that it can be used for a long time.

Note how content types get old and outdated

When content that's expected to have a long lifespan becomes out of date, it's worth exploring what parts become dated. Often only certain details become dated: parts that reference specific dates or events, for example. But if the content isn't structured, teams will need to create a new version of the content instead of updating the parts that need it.

Teams can structure this content in the model so that it is easier to update. Let's distinguish two related concepts: parts of the content that go out of date and parts that need updating. However, not all parts that are outdated will need updating—some can be deleted because they are no longer relevant.

More specifically, parts can be characterized in four ways:

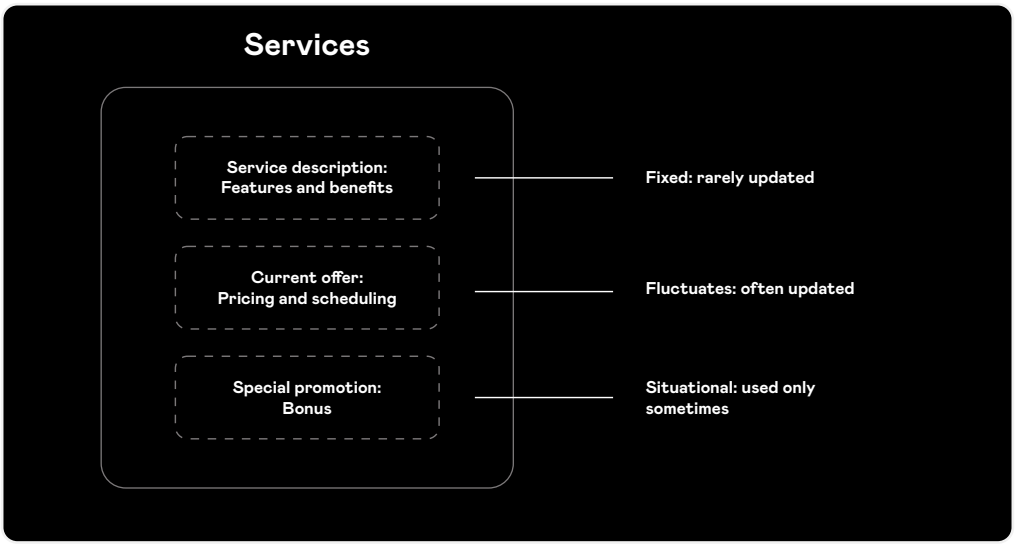
- Static parts that generally don't become outdated and therefore don't need updating.
- Parts requiring maintenance that become out of date but remain important and need revision to stay useful.
- Expiring parts that are no longer important once they are out of date—they are deleted and never get updated.
- Cyclical or seasonal parts may not require updating, but they are not needed all the time.

The table below provides a summary.

Part of content	Will it go out of date?	Will it need updating?
Static parts	No	No
Parts requiring maintenance	Yes	Yes
Expiring parts	Yes	No
Cyclical or seasonal parts	Not needed after a certain date, but useful again later	Maybe, if used later and details have changed

A simple example illustrates how these concepts can be applied. If an organization offers different services, perhaps carpet cleaning, they will have a content type describing the service to prospective customers. They can break apart their content into three aspects:

- The description of the service, which doesn't change
- Pricing and scheduling information, which may be revised often
- Information about a special promotion such as a bonus available to customers, which is included only during certain times



We can see that this content has different parts based on how the information ages. Now, let's translate this into the content model.

Structure parts in the content model

By knowing how different parts get old and outdated, teams can design content types so they are easier to maintain. This involves creating distinct elements with a content type. It can also involve splitting situational parts into separate types so the information is not always connected.

A content model divides content types into distinct parts called elements. Static parts that don't require routine updating can be separate elements from those parts that do. This separation will allow teams to focus on the parts that need revision and not have to worry about parts that won't change. That focus helps teams identify when parts go out of date and accelerates the updating of items.

Next, consider how the content model can support situational information. We can specify two items:

1. The reference item with information that will always be available
2. A separate item that contains situation-specific information

In the content model, situation-specific content that won't be needed later is linked to the reference item. For example, a special offer may expire after a certain date and should no longer appear together with the content it refers to. Or a seasonal promotion may only be used certain times of the year.

When the content is structured this way, teams can remove or deactivate a link between the reference item and the item that has temporary value. This allows the reference item to stay current.

Summary

Previously, we covered how content models can support reuse, consistency, and variability across the range of content that an enterprise publishes. With updating, content models play a different role: managing content characteristics over time. In some cases, information that is reused in many content types will need routine updating. Fortunately, when such information is reused, it only needs to be updated in one place. But even when information appears in only one content type, we have seen that it can be structured within the content model to improve its manageability.

Using content models to support customer journeys

One of the major challenges of enterprise content is that much of it seems unrelated. Different teams produce content separately. The content they create may not seem to have much to do with content produced elsewhere in the enterprise. The topics and types of content seem so diverse that they seem to have little relationship. And that hinders the enterprise's ability to get the right content in front of customers when they need it.

Content models unify and relate different content items to support customers and also make it easier for different teams to share and combine their content. The models do this by organizing content according to its purpose and meaning. Organized content can be assembled in sophisticated ways to support customer journeys.

While much of our focus so far has been on how content models allow content to be more granular and manageable, it's also important to recognize that **content models aren't just about splitting up information**. The model breaks content apart so that it can be put back together again in different ways. It provides a map of what's available.

Bringing cohesion to diverse content

When developing a content model, teams should consider two kinds of relationships:

1. Content relationships: how do different content types relate to one another?
2. Item relationships: how do different content items relate to each other?

These concepts will help us understand how to connect the pieces of our model together. Connections support customers on their journeys. Customers want to know what else they should look at and which content they should pick when they have several options. The model shows how items can be presented together:

- Companion items are meant to be used together so that readers can accomplish more.
- Alternative items are meant to offer different perspectives relating to a specific decision so that readers can make the best choices.

Your content model should support both these customer goals. To do that, you'll want to decide when to present companion content and when to provide alternative content.

Connecting purposes: linking content types

First, let's explore content types, the structure for creating and delivering content relating to a specific purpose. The content model can help us understand how different structures can be connected, which influences the scope of information that customers can access.

The way that content types are connected will guide the customer's journey. Customers are more likely to look at information and messages when they're connected to other content they are viewing.

The content model structures content with distinct types that focus on specific purposes. Even though each type has a unique purpose, these purposes may be related to one another. Content types can be connected to each other. Different structures can be combined together. This happens when one type refers to another. For example, some content types are lists that enumerate information taken from other content types.

Two common patterns used to connect content are the **aggregation pattern** and the **association pattern**.

In the aggregation pattern, one content type aggregates information from another. For example, an overview of products will be linked to detailed profiles of these products. The overview highlights some of the information in the profiles. The overview is one content type, while the product profile is a different one. The overview aggregates information from product profiles.

In the association pattern, different types are shown together. For example, a content type describing an event will normally be connected to a content type about the location where the event will be held. These two content types work in tandem as a team. Customers want to get information from both these content types.

When looking for connection possibilities, think about what else customers want to see and what they want to do before, during, or after seeing certain content. These aspects influence the customer's pathways through the content.

Both the aggregation and association patterns can be thought of more broadly as companions. When should different content types be companions? When:

1. Information should be presented together in order to provide a complete understanding of the issue that the reader is trying to understand.
2. Information should be presented as a sequence so that the reader knows what the next steps they can take.

Content types are linked when they belong together. **Linking is a way of referencing other material**. In Kontent.ai, this is done through "linked items."

Teams can specify the kind of links between different content types. They can make the links mandatory or optional, depending on whether different content types need to be presented always or only sometimes.

Now that we have explored how content can be connected according to its purpose, let's look at how content can be connected according to its meaning.

Grouping topics: the role of taxonomies in content models

In addition to tracking the relationships between content types, teams will want to consider how content items are related. There are many occasions when it makes sense to group items together because they are similar in meaning. Such a grouping helps customers discover similar items and make informed decisions.

When grouping items according to their shared meaning, teams can explore two possibilities. First, they may want to group together items that are based on the same content type. Alternatively, they may want to group together items that are based on different content types. As we will see shortly, these possibilities support distinct customer goals.

Enterprises can group items according to their meaning by using an enterprise taxonomy that covers all the content published by the organization. Taxonomies categorize content according to a hierarchical set of terms. Taxonomies play a vital role in helping customers decide what specific information to consult.

Taxonomy terms reveal the meaning and significance of content items. **They denote what a content item is about**, which could be several topics. Taxonomies can indicate relationships between items: which ones are more specific and more general, and which ones overlap in emphasis.

Taxonomy terms categorize not only what the content is about but also **who the content is for** and **when it should be used**. Enterprise taxonomies cover topics such as:

- Product categories
- Locations of services, events, or offices
- People such as experts and executives
- Customer problems and needs
- Procedures and how-to instructions
- Customer segments
- Customer journey stages

Some taxonomy terms are values that are displayed within content items. For example, instructional content may have an element named “skill level”, and that element has a value such as a beginner, advanced, or expert.

It’s also possible to classify content items with terms that don’t appear within the content itself. For example, marketing content may be classified according to the audience segment and buyer journey. These classifications are part of the enterprise taxonomy but would not typically be visible as elements within content types.

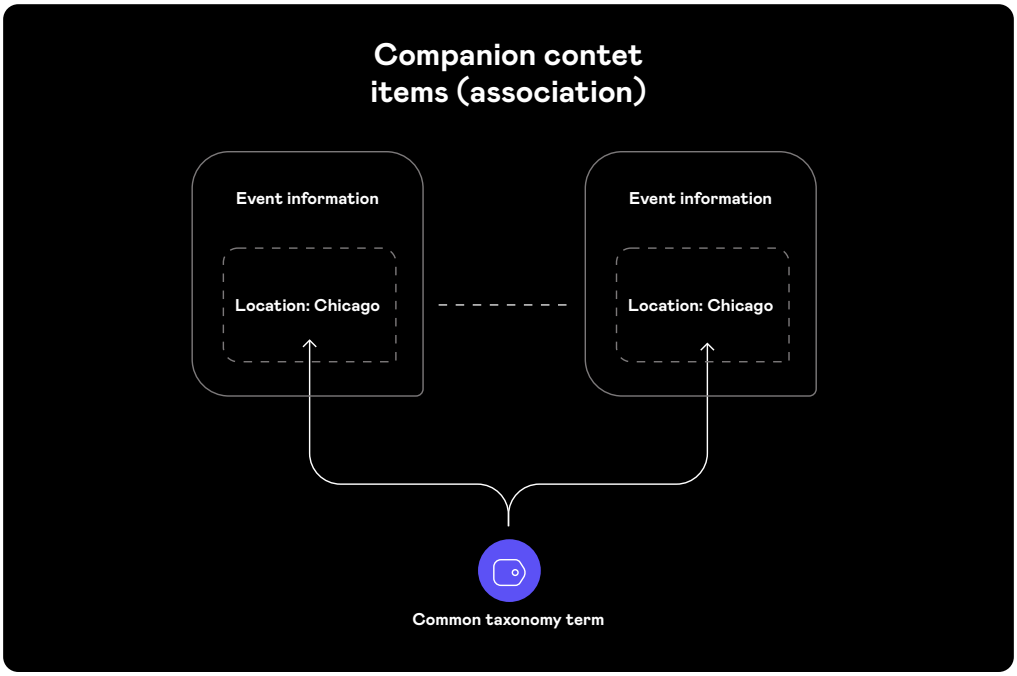
Every content item is based on a distinct content type. But items can have more than one taxonomy term—many items will have several. That means that a group of items may share a single term, multiple terms, or all terms. Teams should decide what terms are important to match in order to support specific customer scenarios.

The taxonomy adds additional detail to the content model. Let’s look at how taxonomy works with content types.

When content items are classified with the same taxonomy terms, they may use either the same content type or two different content types.

If they use the same content type, they are alternatives. For example, a bunch of product profiles of different bicycles are alternative items. The exact information in each will be different, but they all follow the same structure and address the same category.

If items address the same category but have different content type structures, then they are companions. For example, if the topic is retirement planning, there may be different content types that are used to present content about that topic: worksheets, advice guides, etc. Companion items can be related through either aggregation or association.



The table below summarizes how content types and taxonomies interact to provide either companion or alternative items for customers.

If	And	Then	Examples
The items have the same taxonomy terms	The items are the same content type	The items are alternatives	Descriptions of different products in the same category
The items have the same taxonomy terms	The items are different content types	The items are companions	Different types of travel-related content that address the same destination

Connecting purpose and meaning together

The content model links together content types that have related purposes in the customer journey. The taxonomy shows how specific items are related. Working together, content types and taxonomies shape the purpose and meaning of content.

The table below presents a framework for how content relationships (purpose) and item relationships (meaning) intersect. The content model can support many different combinations of content. This flexibility makes it possible to support a range of customer needs.

		Meaning: Item relationship	
		Related items (same taxonomy terms)	Unrelated items (different taxonomy terms)
Purpose: Content relationships (customer journey pathways)	Association of different content types	Companion items	Connected but unrelated items
	Content type aggregation (one is an aggregation of another)	Companion items	Connected but unrelated items
	Single content type	Alternative items within a grouping	-

How can teams leverage this flexibility? They should pick the item relationship according to the goal they need to support.

Goal	Item Relationship
Provide customers with a more complete view or the next steps in their journey	Companion items
Provide customers with options to compare similar items at a specific journey step	Alternative items
Make a suggestion to customers about something different to explore, allowing them to start a new journey	Connected but unrelated items (Links to other kinds of content)

As discussed elsewhere, the development of content models should be guided by goals. We can see that the relationships within the content model are important in helping customers navigate through the content and discover what they need.

Planning combinations collaboratively

Designing a content model is a team activity.

It's valuable to get a range of perspectives when thinking about goals and identifying useful content relationships and item relationships. As the content strategist Carrie Hane has noted: "*If you are creating your model collaboratively with stakeholders—and you should be—you are now on the cusp of creating a shared language around content structure and taxonomy. The stakeholders can see clearly how classifying or categorizing is more than just a list of words.*"

Content models specify the characteristics of content items. **But, more importantly, they're about what customers can do with that content**.

Editorial optimization using content models

Is getting content "just right" a matter of art or science? Actually, it's a bit of both. It requires skillful editorial judgment combined with an experimentation mindset. How can content teams get these two capabilities to support each other?

Structuring content gives writers and editors the ability to refine their messages and lets marketers and business users measure the outcomes of editorial changes and revisions.

Content models enable content items to be fine-tuned. The structuring of content allows different parts of an item to be changed easily.

Writers and editors face choices about how to position their content—**the wording to use** and **the messages to include**. And their colleagues in marketing and product roles want to know how these decisions are influencing outcomes. Everyone shares the desire to have content perform as strongly as possible.

Let's consider a couple of common issues that content teams must decide:

1. Which content items should be highlighted to get the best results?
2. What parts of a content item should be changed to get the best results?

Content models provide the missing link between editorial decisions and the measurement of performance.

Content models enable experimentation, which has become an essential activity. As Ron Kohavi and Stefan Thomke have noted in the Harvard Business Review, "At a time when the web is vital to almost all businesses, rigorous online experiments should be a standard operating procedure."

Accentuating the right mix

Certain content types are aggregations of other types. A “homepage” is the classic example of this, providing links to various items. But many other content items also feature information that is available in more detail elsewhere. Editors must choose which items to highlight. They curate information from other content items and need to decide what items to feature that will generate the most interest from audiences. What mix yields the best results?

Curating which items to promote is like deciding the right mix of ingredients in a recipe. **What ingredients to use?** The content model indicates what kinds of items can be linked. Editors can choose different items to see which ones generate the most interaction from audiences. The models support analytics on interaction with items.

Editors can optimize which items should appear together. The performance of items can be influenced by their context: where they are placed and which other items they appear with. For example, an item might perform well within an email but not on a homepage. The content model makes changing the context of where the items appear easy to do. **The possibilities to experiment are extensive**.

Tweaking the message

Now let’s shift from considering which items to highlight to what those items should say.

Individual content types can be structured by elements that address specific subtopics or messages. When content items are structured, teams can optimize the wording and information in specific elements.

Content types can use a variety of structures. Much content is based on common structural patterns, such as introduction, main body, and conclusions. They may incorporate widely-used elements such as a list—for example, a list of supplies or a list of steps. Other common patterns are:

- Pros and cons
- Problem and solution
- Issue and example

Teams may want to structure their content types to reflect the specific goals they have. Whether the structure they use is a custom or a common one, they can tweak the elements.

Martin Cutts, in his book The Oxford Plain English Guide, introduces a content structure he calls **the SCRAP model** (for Situation-Complication-Resolution-Action-Politeness).

The model is used to communicate information to individuals. The elements are:

- Situation (the triggering event: why the reader is getting the message)
- Complication (the problem to resolve)
- Resolution (the suggested remedy from the sender)
- Action (the proposed CTA for the reader)
- Politeness (the closing message from the sender)

The SCRAP model could be used to structure a content type for an email.
The enterprise needs to notify customers when an order item is out of stock and needs to know if the customer wants to wait until the item is back in stock or cancel the order.

Such notifications are recurring and need to be handled carefully (since we'd expect that the customers will be disappointed). With this kind of business-critical content, it can be useful to test different versions of the message. Perhaps the customer's attitude is influenced by how the Situation or the Complication are worded. Or perhaps changing the wording of the Action will influence whether customers choose to cancel their order. Alternatively, the wording may not be critical; instead, the terms of the resolution might be such as whether shipping fees get waved if the customer waits.

Because the content type is structured with elements, each of these aspects can be changed and evaluated. Enterprises can make editorial changes and measure different outcomes using whatever analytics or optimization tool they choose.

Planning for editorial experiments

The scope for experimentation with content choices is broad. Yet only some enterprises experiment with their content beyond testing headlines or button text. Make sure your content model can offer your team insight into the dimensions of your content you'd like to test.

Kontent.ai integrates with popular analytics and optimization tools. Look into how your tool supports experimentation. These tools will often have detailed tutorials about how to set up experiments and interpret results.

Part 3:
User experience planning

Structured content as building blocks of the user experience

How you plan your content will influence your customer's experience. To be effective, content needs to engage its users. Enterprises must be able to compose the right experience to address a range of user needs. Structuring content with a content model provides that flexibility.

Anything that's designed depends on structure. A building needs structure, or else it will collapse. Designs need a foundation. The design of content depends on the foundation: the content model.

The role of structured content in the customer experience is sometimes overlooked or undervalued. In this chapter, we will look more deeply into how **structuring content supports the customer's experience of content**: how easy and enjoyable it is to use. Specifically, we will look at how structured content enables more engaging customer interaction with content—the user experience. By thinking about customers as users of information, authors can plan how they will interact with information.

How structure supports user experience

Structured content provides the building blocks for user experiences.
Good user experiences don't just happen; they must be designed. The content structure provides the elements to compose those experiences.

Alternatively, you look at it from the opposite perspective: it's harder to plan the best experiences for customers unless your content is properly structured.

You need to plan both **what you want to say and how users experience that** sounds hard to do, but the task is made easier when we realize that both authors and readers rely on the same building blocks. Authors compose experiences, and users consume experiences, chunk by chunk.

The building blocks are collectively referred to as “chunks” of content. We can think of these as individual elements in a content type, groups of elements, or rich media assets (images, video, or audio).

Although all these building blocks are called chunks, it’s important to **keep in mind that not all chunks are the same**. Some are small, some are bigger. And they convey different kind of detail.

From a communications perspective, a chunk represents a meaningful unit of content, such as:

- A message about an opportunity of something new
- Nuggets of useful data or facts
- A description
- A thumbnail of an object that a reader might want to learn more about
- An audio snippet

These chunks may summarize, preview, or promote more extensive content about the topic. A chunk of content is successful if it helps the user move toward the next step in their journey.

Chunks help busy readers

Readers are busy reviewing content on their smartphones and other devices. They expect information will be presented in scannable, bite-sized chunks.

An important reason that authors should structure content is to improve the reader’s experience of using the content. **Structured content is easier to scan and understand**. It’s easier for readers to digest.

When content is structured into different elements, it can provide breakpoints in the amount of information presented so that only some of it is shown initially.

Readers see a headline and decide to read more. Or they scan a question in search of an answer. With structure, authors are able to plan how readers will encounter chunks of content.

And as we will see shortly, chunks can do even more. Chunks can:

1. Make sure that the right information is displayed when it needs to be.
2. Let users take action on content.

Chunks connect content details to screens

Authors will decide three issues relating to content chunks:

1. The right kinds of details to include in the content model that will be useful in many situations
2. What specific chunks to present to users in a given scenario
3. Where to present them, such as screen design components that will display the content

When authors adopt a structured content approach, they begin to think about content in a new way. Instead of creating inflexible articles that get displayed as a single web page, they create **chunks of content that can be displayed in multiple ways**.

The structure connects the writer to the screen where the writer's words show up. And importantly, the writer isn't only writing for a single screen, but, in fact, for many.

Writers should think about how they can use building blocks such as headlines or titles, descriptions, images, and key factual information.

Chunks of text can be of different sizes and play different roles. For example, they may be:

- Overlines (or “eyebrows”) that announce a theme
- Headlines or titles
- Subtitles
- Labels
- Captions

These elements can be rolled up into larger chunks. Labels, for example, can be associated with images or data. As different elements are combined, they convey changing levels of meaning, from plain and basic to multilayered and rich.

The chunks are expressed in the user interface. Chunks of content can be displayed within UI elements or containers, such as:

- Banners
- Cards
- Data tables
- Lists
- Sections (of an email newsletter, for example)

Chunks provide presentational flexibility

Our building blocks can be arranged in various ways. **Structuring content into chunks provides flexibility and options**. Instead of being tied to a single webpage, the chunks can be used in different channels and at different times. Authors can think about the context in which chunks of content appear. Information and messages can be used in many places and play different roles. How might readers encounter and use the content?

Earlier, we mentioned that structuring content allows users to preview a longer piece of content. But chunks of content have another benefit: they can be arranged to support goals. **Chunks allow authors to place the same message in multiple places**. Authors may want to:

- Repeat information on different screens, so people have repeated exposure to a message.
- Present information multiple times to allow different points of entry into information.
- Reorder the presentation of information to match the needs of different scenarios.

Certain chunks, such as tips and promotions, can be helpful in many places, though it can be hard to know precisely when a specific user will want to access this information. Authors can present information that readers might not know about but might be interested in.

Sometimes chunks of content get expressed as notifications or recommendations, but they are often displayed within a screen alongside other chunks.

When you find that certain messages can be used in many places, they should become chunks that are part of your content model.

Chunks encourage user actions

Authors will want to present the right mix of elements in a chunk of content so that the information is noticed and acted on. Users need to see what they need to know to accomplish what they want to do.

What might readers want to do after seeing a message or a chunk of information? They might:

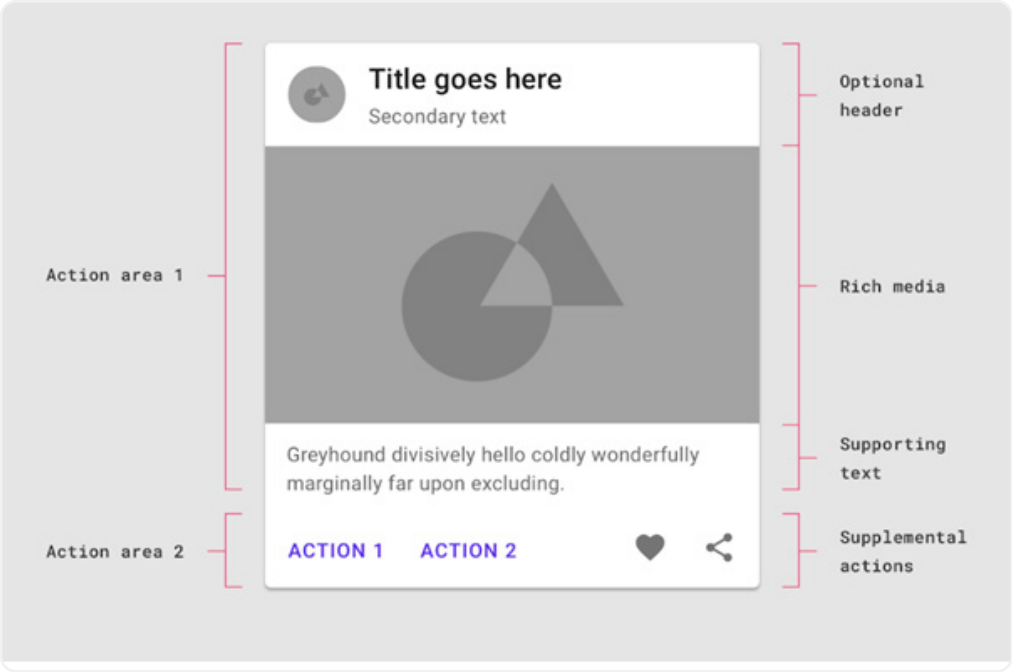
- Read more
- Scan to look for similar items
- Select or save for later
- Choose to add to a list
- Filter by criteria
- Rate or like
- Compare items
- Share with friends
- Confirm (a date or option)
- Order (a product)

Thinking about actions helps authors **focus on the reader's goals**. All content that's presented on a screen should have a purpose and a goal. Consider why you might present information to readers at different times. What actions would you like them to do? Then, working backwards, ask: What information is essential to present in order to encourage users to take that action? What values need to be displayed? Those elements should be present in the content model.

Planning for user interaction when structuring content

Structuring content breaks content into elements that can be connected to objects in the user interface, which could be an app or email.

Consider the most common contexts where customers will see your content. Often it will appear within a standard layout pattern that's part of a design system that your enterprise uses. The below image from Google's Material Design shows how a card presents information and associated actions. These UI elements can be connected to elements in the content model—the chunks of content to show. The design pattern suggests the kinds of elements to use. The author needs to plan chunks of content to fill in those areas.



Parts of a UI component (source: Google)

When content is considered together with user interaction, content planning becomes a two-way process. **Well-structured content gives designers options when thinking about how and when to present it**. And thinking about how content will be presented can also provide ideas on the elements that need to be distinct chunks in the content model.

Using structured content in lists

One of the best ways to help people get things done online is by providing lists of things to buy, tips to remember, or articles to read later. And structured content makes creating lists much easier.

"Lists are popular because the editors have organized the thinking for the reader. They tabulate information and are therefore shortcuts to understanding," notes designer Jan White. Because lists are ubiquitous, we often don't bother to think about the many ways we use them every day. Yet **lists support a range of activities**; authors should consider how they invite interaction and can encourage users to engage with content.

Another topic that we don't think much about is: Where do lists come from? People often talk about making a list—writing down items so they won't be forgotten. But online, lists are more like living things. They are designed for online interaction, and the contents of the list will often be changing. Users can access lists and manipulate them.

Even today, many online lists are individually curated—if the items in the list link to content elsewhere, that link may need to be manually entered. Clearly, such an approach doesn't scale and is hard to maintain.

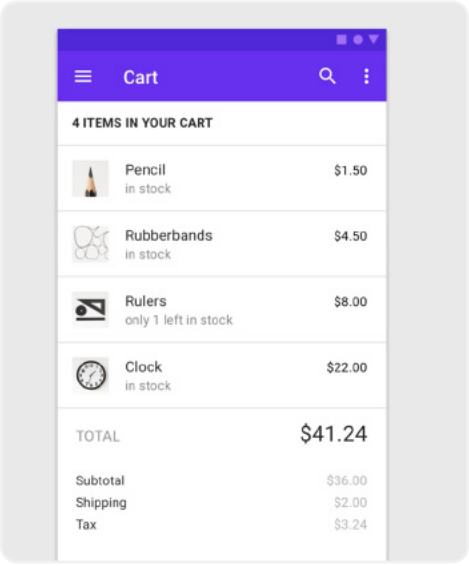
When content is structured by a content model, the task of creating lists is far easier—they can be generated from structured content. The items in a list can be populated by elements in the content model. For example, if the list is of titles of blog posts, those titles will be elements associated with the blog content type.

What's in a list?

A list is both a conceptual grouping of items as well as a presentational format. When planning online lists, authors decide what to include, taking into consideration how those elements will be displayed.

A list presents selected details relating to multiple content items, and the details for each item in the list can be simple or complex. Each item could be just one line of text. Or each item could have several lines of information and could even include an image. **Lists can be presented in diverse ways**. They are most often strips that are stacked vertically, but they can also be squares that are arrayed horizontally.

One of the most familiar lists is items in a shopping cart:



A shopping cart (source: Google)

A shopping cart is a dynamic list. Buyers can add and remove items from their cart. The items in your shopping cart almost always include a product name and a price, but they sometimes also include images, availability, and other details.

Why people use lists

People use online lists to support the tasks they have. These include:

- Getting reference information
- Making choices
- Following activities
- Doing activities

Reference lists often provide instructional information or advice. They are fixed rather than dynamic. Unlike the other kinds of lists, they will generally be manually created, reflecting editorial judgments. Examples of reference lists would be:

- Questions to ask your financial advisor
- Tips to avoid getting a cold
- Dos and don’ts of adopting a pet

As the last example shows, it is possible to create pairs of list items that contrast with one another.

Many online lists support users making choices. After scanning the list, the reader decides which item to choose based on the information they see. The goal of the list should be to **present the most important information** that people consider when making a choice to explore further. These could be lists of:

- Title of articles
- Photos of clothing and their prices
- Podcast programs and their ratings

Another use of lists is to help users follow an activity, especially the changes in popularity of things. Most of us have seen lists of the most popular movies in the past week. Such a list is an example of **a leaderboard**, a ranked list of items that changes over time. A leaderboard list can be applied to many situations involving fluid rankings, such as the cheapest airfares between two destinations. A leaderboard showing the highest-rated wines under $20 would involve two variables: the ratings of the wines within the category and the pricing. Any changes in prices of wines could change which ones are included in (or excluded from) the under $20 category.

With the widespread use of touchscreen devices, lists have become more interactive. Users will tap, swipe right or left, and pull on items in lists that now support various user activities. Users can:

- Create collections of items to review later.
- Create and work through a checklist of items.
- Drag items within a list to order priorities.

Planning lists

Lists are built from elements in the content model. To create lists that can be displayed in different ways and on different touchpoints, authors need to structure the elements of content to enable that to happen.

Users like lists because they help them get tasks done. Authors should identify the kinds of lists readers find useful, and structure their content so that these lists are easy to generate.

Structuring content into sequential parts

Timing is everything, the saying goes. It's important to present the right information at the right time to readers. By structuring content into parts, information becomes more flexible and better able to be presented at the best time.

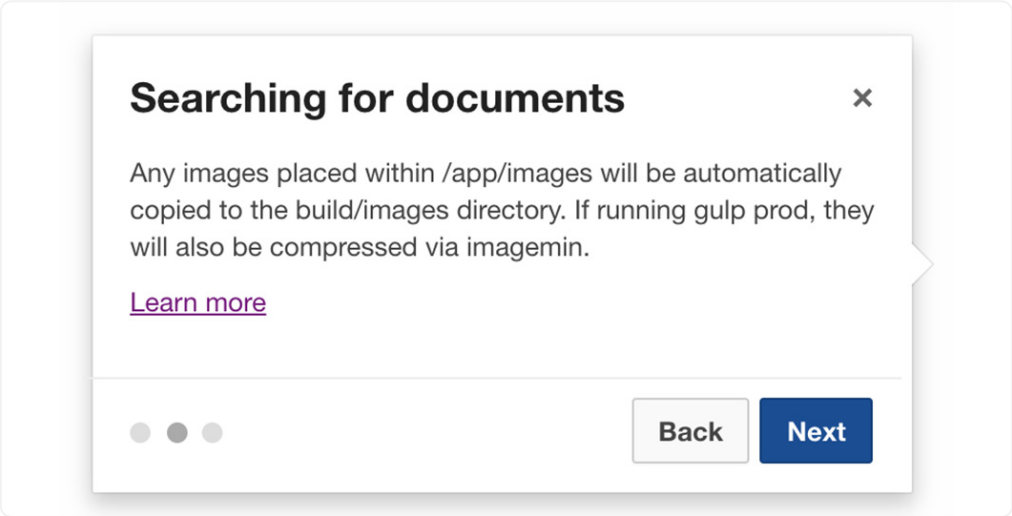
Breaking up information into smaller parts helps customers because:

1. They see information only when it's appropriate to see it.
2. They don't need to see any that won't be relevant to them.

Structuring makes content modular, allowing it to become separate from its presentation. Writers and editors can work with designers to present the content in alternate ways. They can change when and in what order the parts of the content are presented—the sequence of the parts becomes an important factor in the information's effectiveness.

Many kinds of content can be structured into parts that will break up the pace of the information into more manageable bits:

- How-to instructions relating to offline activities such as getting information about an elective medical procedure, installing cabinets in a kitchen, or troubleshooting a broken lawnmower
- Online tasks and processes such as enrollment in an investment program that rely on explanations about choices, considerations, and expected benefits
- Educational walkthroughs and tours
- Wizards that provide customized content based on user choices



Example of part of a product tour, showing different pathways (source: US Patent and Trademark Office)

Priorities: What does the reader need to see?

Breaking content into parts helps both authors and readers prioritize the importance of different details. From the reader's perspective, details can vary in its importance. They may involve:

- Necessary information that everyone must view to understand or do something
- Contingent information, where someone views the content based on what they have previously done
- Optional information that may be of interest to only some people

The writer can decide what parts everyone needs and what parts will be of interest to specific people.

Readers may have different priorities and want their own path through the information. Because the content is modular, it can be approached in various ways.

Pathways: How customers move through content

As they plan their content, writers should take into account how customers need to access the information.

Readers need to know what to do first—or what they should know before even starting a task. They need to be able to navigate through the details with confidence.

When content is structured, readers don't need to see all the information immediately. Websites using a traditional web CMS, in contrast, often present all the information at once on a single page. But a long page of instructions is hard to read and will contain information that isn't relevant to a user's situation. They don't want to read the whole corporate policy manual or product troubleshooting guide to get their question answered.

Writers can structure the details within the content so that readers aren't overloaded with information. They'll also want to think about the various ways these details are connected to one another. They need to create a path through the information that's aligned with the direction the reader is inclined to take.

The path that readers want to take will be determined by:

1. Their situation—their individual needs and knowledge
2. Their choices as they read through content

When deciding the right level of detail and the connections between different parts, writers will want to consider what would be the most efficient path for readers. At the same time, what works for most people might not work for everyone, so other paths need to be available.

One technique to break up information to help users is called progressive disclosure. It simplifies processes by presenting the most critical information initially and subsequently showing details. It provides flexibility for different reader needs.

To plan pathways, you can think about how users encounter information as a storyboard. By turning the experience of using the content into a story, you will gain a sense of the reader's situation. Even though readers face common scenarios, it's also true they encounter slightly different twists in what they must deal with.

When modular, the content becomes easier to translate into a design that will be successful. The design, by connecting different screens of information, plays an important role in the sequencing of parts of the content.

Sequencing: Finding the optimal order

After structuring the content into parts, writers need to arrange these parts in a preferred sequence or order, which will influence how efficient the content is for customers.

The optimal order will balance three considerations:

1. What information customers are likely to need
2. What preferences they may have
3. Whether more complex parts are essential or optional

The connections between the parts should offer readers both direction and flexibility. The ordering of parts will:

- Minimize the time required to review relevant information.
- Enable choices about alternate pathways if readers will have different needs or interests.

With structured content, different configurations of the parts can be prototyped and tested with users. The design can be changed based on this feedback—without requiring the content to be rewritten.

In many cases, **it's best to give readers the most critical information early in a sequence** so that they will be able to deal with that immediately and move on. But in cases where readers are unfamiliar or cautious about a topic, it may be better to present the most approachable information at the beginning of a sequence so¨they don't feel they are making too big a commitment trying to understand unfamiliar material.

Planning sequences of information involves design choices concerning when and how much to present at any point. Decisions include:

- What order should items be shown in so that it is easiest to understand or most efficient?
- Should two items be combined when presenting them?
- Should users be encouraged to skip or defer an item and be allowed to follow up later?

The duration involved with using the content can vary. Customers may decide to review all parts in a single session, or they may decide to look at the parts at different times.

Complex activities take longer to read about than simple ones. Will content be consumed in a single online session or over more than one session? Users may first need to read certain content, then wait for feedback or obtain additional information from elsewhere before they can view more. Certain activities involve more than one stage and will be worked on at different times.

When customers read multi-part content, they may switch between channels, starting to read the content in one channel and finishing elsewhere. Structured content supports such cross-channel use of content. For example, the first part of the content might appear in an email, with a link to additional parts on a website.

Signposts: Helping readers track their progress

Readers don't need everything at once, but they will still want a sense of how far along they are with the materials. Because the information is broken into parts, it is possible to indicate which parts have been viewed already and which ones haven't been.

Writers and designers can plan how to provide the user with signposts to trace their journey by indicating:

- Steps left in an activity
- Viewing completeness
- Status of an activity associated with the content

With multi-part content, readers can focus on one part at a time. They can choose when they are ready to see more.

Modular content for comparison

Readers want to compare and contrast information easily. They face information overload: seeing too many items that talk about similar things. If comparing things is too taxing, they may give up. Adopting a modular approach to content eliminates this friction.

Poorly structured content makes comparisons difficult. Readers need to jump between different pages of information and remember details they looked at previously. Some readers resort to opening up many tabs in their browser—though that's not an option if they are using a smartphone.

Consider what information readers will want to compare. By structuring the content, you'll be sure to provide the most important information that readers will be looking for.

How readers compare information

Readers consult content online to explore what options are available and figure out which one is best for them. Their exact goal can vary somewhat, depending on how deeply they need to delve into the information.

Reader's objective	Role of content
Understand the range of differences between alternatives	Point out areas of difference between the alternatives and areas where they are comparable
Contrast two things that seem alike but aren't	Show the degree of difference, often for only one or two aspects; point out the one key difference that makes a difference
Compare many alternatives according to specific criteria	Help readers focus on particular criteria and let them select items to compare according to that criteria
Make an informed choice between various options	Help readers find the best option based on multiple criteria, showing the best overall

If presented poorly, important details can get lost amidst all the other information. **The structuring of the content helps the reader focus on what's important.**

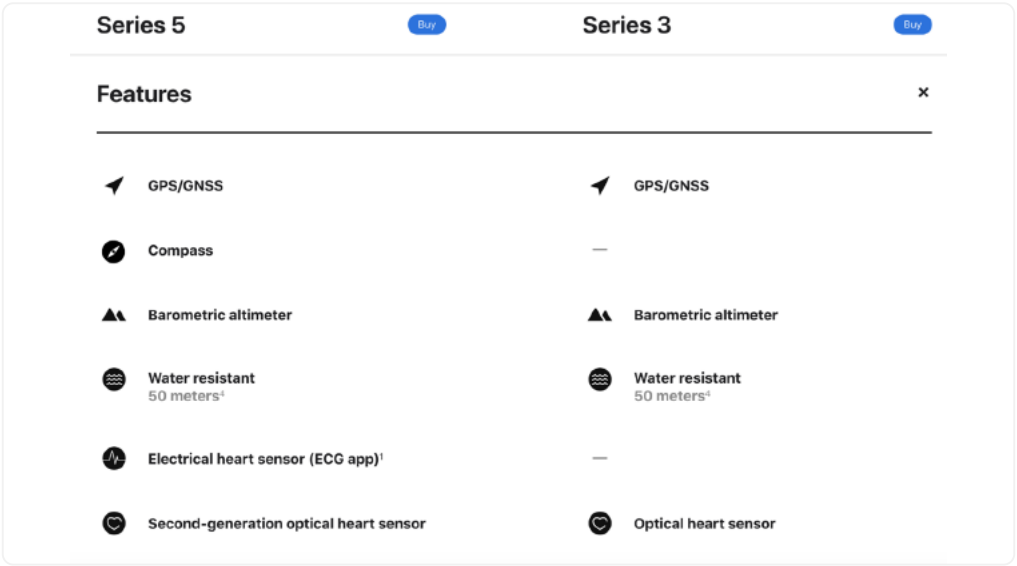
Applications of modular comparisons

Modular content items can be used to compare and contrast information about many kinds of topics. Each item that can be compared becomes an interchangeable module.

Two examples of comparisons that use modular content are:

1. Pricing tables showing prices and benefits of different options
2. Product pages showing features and specifications

Providing such comparisons is crucial to the success of businesses. UX writers look at how to tweak this content in such comparisons so that it is most effective. Side-by-side comparisons are often presented in tables. But unlike "data tables" containing endless rows of data, comparison tables show information about a few aspects relating to only a few items. It curates the most important information for readers to know.



Example of a product comparison for Apple watch models (source: Apple)

The information that's presented is diverse too: facts, figures, a bulleted list of statements, and sometimes graphics or video. Scores or ratings may also be included.

Comparisons can also be presented in parallel columns with headings separating the sections of text discussing aspects of the topic. If a narrative text approach is used, the length of each section should be roughly equal to allow readers to see the parallels. For example, a narrative comparison can be used for items that have sections discussing their respective advantages and disadvantages. It could also be used to compare the responsibilities of different job roles to see the differences between junior and senior levels.

How it's done

Comparisons are possible when two or more content items based on the same content type are placed together. The content type provides a consistent structure for the content. All items based on this structure will have the same elements, which allows items to be compared easily.

When structuring the content, you can include links to related content or show more detailed information on demand. For example, you can link other items, such as definitions of terms, if you'd like to provide more explanation.

If you want to provide a dynamic table where readers can select criteria and items, you'll want to work with a front-end developer to enable that functionality. They will be able to use the structured content models to fetch the details that readers request.

Leveraging structure to rank content items

Ranking content items in a list is an effective way to present your most relevant items to customers. Structured content makes that such ranking possible.

Previously, we talked about how the details of a few items can be compared. Now we will look at how to rank items according to a specific criterion. While both approaches let users prioritize content, they have a different emphasis.

Comparison	Ranking
Presenting a small set of items to allow several dimensions to be compared	Selecting a small set of items based on one dimension to help readers choose which one to look at in more detail

With a comparison, the reader may not need to look at more information. With a ranking, they use it to decide what items to look at in more detail. Comparisons present a full content item, while rankings preview a few details about an item but don't present the whole item.

Help users whittle down items

Ranking helps users when they face what seems like a bottomless list of content items. Because they can't look at them all, they need a shortlist they can scan and access easily. You can structure the content to support the ranking of content items.

There are two basic approaches to ranking:

1. System-defined
2. User-defined

You can use a system-defined ranking to automate the ranking of items. It's an effective approach when many people have common goals, but the precise items that match those goals will change over time.

The logic that the system uses to rank items will vary according to the criteria used. In some cases, the system will evaluate an element in the content item to perform the ranking. In other cases, the system relies on data about the item from other sources, such as analytics.

The system will evaluate an input for each content item to rank and then display an output of ranked items, which will display one or more elements for each content item, such as a title. For example, to rank items according to which are newest, the system would compare these dates and then show the names of content items according to which are more recent.

When most users care about similar priorities, it makes sense for systems to rank the items. Common priorities include locating items that are:

- Newest (input: publication date)
- Highest rated (input: user ratings)
- Most popular (input: analytics data)
- Most similar to the current item (input: taxonomy classification)

Typically, the system displays the name or image of the items in a list. It may also display a detail, such as the number of stars in the case of the highest-rated items. You will want to decide what elements to display in your list of ranked items.

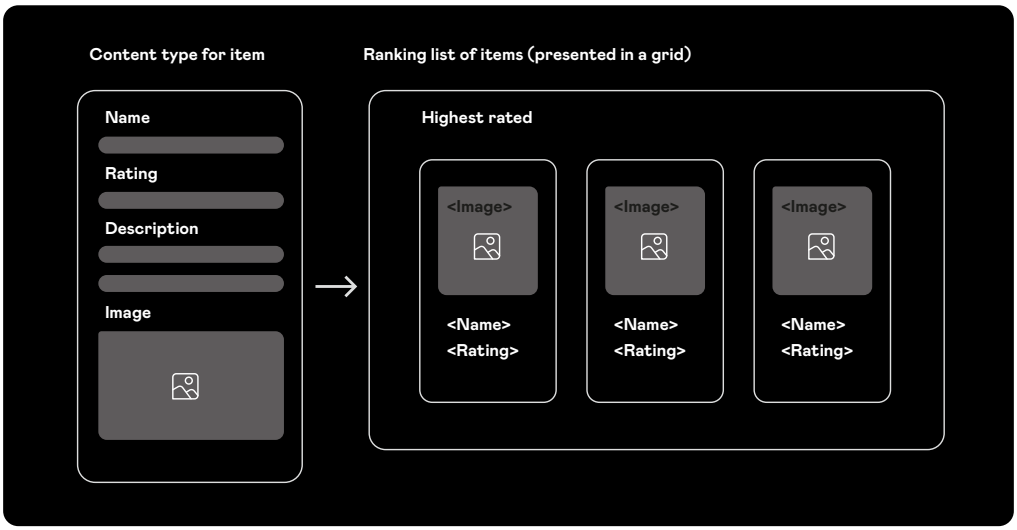


Diagram showing relationship between content type structure and ranked order list

You can offer user-defined rankings to account for differences in individual preferences. The user can specify their criteria to the system, instead of relying on defaults. It's a first step toward personalizing the content of interest.

Users commonly want to prioritize options according to:

- Budget
- Timing
- Proximity
- Features

When content is appropriately structured, users can rank items according to the criteria they care about, whether it is cost, convenience, or capability. For example, it is common for people to sort items by price or location.

In some cases, users may have multiple criteria, such as when they are looking for the cheapest option that is available now.

As with system ranking, you will want to decide what elements to show in the list of ranked items.

How it's done

When content items are based on the same content type, they share a common structure and can be compared easily.

The construction of a content type should reflect the prioritization goals and decision criteria that readers use to select content. If you are unsure what these are, you can prototype different options with sample content and present them to users to elicit their feedback. Readers can indicate what's valuable to them as they whittle down options and what they'd expect to see so they can choose items to view. Ask readers what they most want to see and least want to see. Those preferences are often the criteria that they use to rank content items.

The structure of the content should take into account input variables and outputs displayed relevant to ranking. Two important questions are:

1. Have you included in the content type elements that readers want to rank?
2. Have you included elements readers expect to see to support choices about items to view?

Generally, content elements are used to rank items, but sometimes ranking will use metadata or taxonomy terms about content items. The system can fetch items that match the value sought (for text) or fall within the range of the value sought (for numbers, prices, and dates).

Numeric values such as prices are easy to rank in ascending or descending order. Dates can be ordered in terms of before or after, or the number of days from the current date. Distances between different locations can be computed using such indicators as the user's current location and postal code in an address.

Certain kinds of text values can also be ranked. The easiest items to rank are those with where the values fall within a hierarchy or along a scale.

Ordinal values are text values ranked on a scale, for example:

- Excellent is higher than very good
- Beginner is lower than advanced

Taxonomy terms belong to a hierarchy, which provides another means of ranking.

- Items with the same taxonomy term (siblings) are closely related.
- Items that have terms that share the same parent are somewhat related.

Items that don't share a common parent aren't closely related.

The many ways to rank content

Ranking lists provide readers with a familiar way to access detailed information. We have covered common ranking approaches. The possibilities to rank items are extensive. Readers appreciate lists ranking what's "best": the best hospitals, the best places to invest, or the best athletes in a given sport. Such lists consider many elements to deliver a ranking. By describing different aspects, a content type's profile can rank content items in innovative ways so that readers can access the most interesting content.

Structured content for timelines

Timelines are a common way to present information in a chronology. They show events in the past or future, and content is often associated with these events. In this chapter, we'll explore how structured content can support timelines for many activities.

People check timelines for many tasks. We expect to see a timeline for a course we are taking. "Your timeline" is a familiar presence on Facebook, Google Maps, and other apps.

Elements of timelines

Unfortunately, timelines are often presented as clunky infographics that can't be resized or revised. It's far better to approach timelines as a special kind of list that can be configured in many ways and updated easily.

Information associated with timelines is inherently structured. You can combine time-related information with other informational elements. Common elements are:

- A date
- An event description
- An image related to the event
- A comment on what's notable about the event

Other elements are possible:

- Who's involved, if including more than one person
- Where the event happened, if that's important
- Advice on what to do next, if the event requires action or follow-up

Timelines organize information according to when things happen. They are anchored around dates or time intervals.

We can specify time in various ways. Sometimes the precise date is important; other times, it is more about the sequence of events and knowing if activities have been completed. The time element can take different forms, depending on the purpose of the timeline.

Time element	Recommended use
Exact dates	- To show each item individually in exact order
Month or Year	- Can group several items together that fall within a range - Useful when exact dates aren't important
Time of day	- Useful for schedules, or chronologies with short durations
Time intervals, such as - Day 1, Day 2, ... - Week 1, Week 2, ...	- Useful for notional schedules such as a syllabus

Applications of timelines

Timelines express events. We can think about them in three parts:

- What happened (or will happen)?
- When did it happen (or will it happen)?
- What's the significance of this event?

Timelines are especially helpful when events involve:

- Dense activities where much happens in a short period.
- Drawn out activities that are hard to track otherwise.

Events can be either scheduled or generated by an activity. The nature of the event will often shape the goal of the timeline. Timelines of scheduled events are often used for planning and tracking timeliness. Timelines of activities that aren't pre-scheduled can involve notifications and commentary, focusing on how often something happened.

The content relating to the event can be either about the reader or about the organization publishing the content.

Past event about the reader	Future event about the reader
You did this Something you own or use had a change in status You need to know how a past event will influence you	You will need to do this You need to plan for action at a certain time
Past event about the publishing organization or other party	**Future event about the publishing organization or other party**
We did this We announced a change A threshold was crossed, or a milestone was reached	This will happen This is projected to happen

A good way to decide what belongs in a timeline is to think about the customer's "job to be done" (**JTBD**). This job will often be in the form of "As a (kind of person), I need to check the status of (an event that's in process) in order to (person's goal)." For example, "as a university student, I need to review what courses I have taken already in order to fulfill the requirements I need to graduate." We can see this job aligns with a timeline: showing what courses were taken and when, and what still need to be taken by a certain date.

The example illustrates how timelines can be used both to review past events as well as preview upcoming ones.

Timelines are especially relevant when they are about personal activities, presenting information about past purchases, finished books, upcoming trips, or future events. Some companies provide a timeline of their customer's interactions with them in the past.

Both consumer and enterprise apps provide timelines based on the activities and decisions people managed while using the app. Content can be added to activity timelines in apps to enrich the information presented. For example, the timeline in a financial management app could provide tips for customers besides a listing of their spending activities. As apps become more important to the management of tasks, timelines can offer advice or coaching content relating to these tasks.

Thanks to the ability of headless CMSs to seamlessly connect content with customer data, you can combine messages and informative guidance to accompany key events that customers experience using your product or service.

Review, check, and reflect

Think about occasions when readers might want to see events that happened in the past. While past events may not seem as interesting as future plans, readers can be interested in retrospective timelines for a range of reasons. They let users:

- Review past activities.
- Check if and when something happened in the past.
- Reflect on what they need to do in the future based on what's happened already.

Examples of things that audiences may want to review include:

- Their car's service history
- Memories of an extended trip
- Insurance claim processing activity
- Their learning achievements
- Major company announcements they need to know about
- Software updates or changelog
- Changes and key updates on employee policies

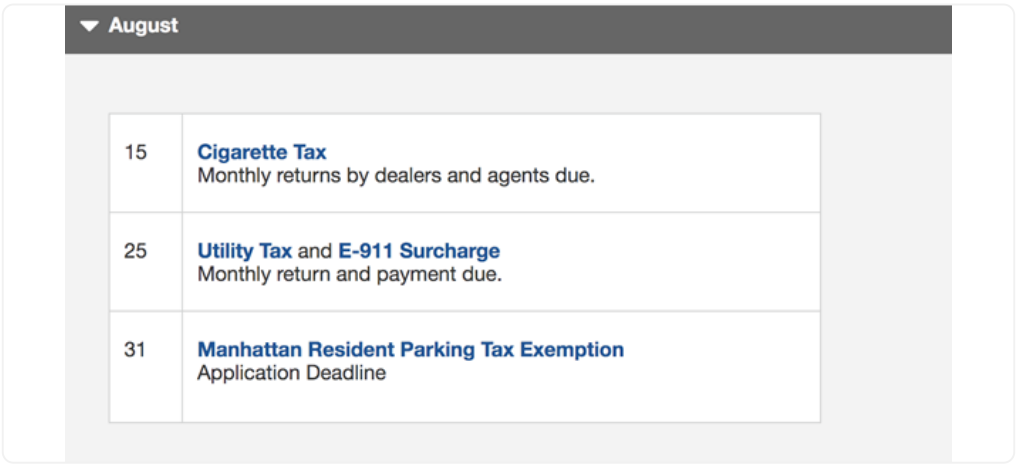
It's possible to generate timelines that are customized for the user by only including what's changed since the last time they did an activity. For example, if they must resubmit a legal authorization only occasionally, the publisher could provide a timeline of changes that have occurred since the last time the customer submitted an authorization. Past events can be important for making decisions in the future.

Plan and preview

When customers think about the future, certain questions frequently come up:

- What is coming up they need to prepare for?
- What should they expect?
- What details have changed since they last looked at this issue?

Dates are “triggers” that alert customers about what they need to do.



Example of a timeline for taxes, from New York City

Timelines provide customers with a preview of the future. They can support:

- Tasks to be done
- Projects to accomplish
- Situations to manage
- Scheduled events to experience
- Windows of opportunity when the timing is optimal for specific activities

All these activities can involve multiple events.

Tasks often involve submitting information online, such as the application process to a school or university. Such tasks involve several steps that may have different dates for when different subtasks need to be done. This is especially true if multiple parties are involved in the task. For example, individuals may need to prepare for the submission of their tax return by tracking dates for receiving the information they need as well as dates for submitting information.

Projects are similar to tasks, but broader in scope and may take longer to do. Personal and group projects are often driven by timelines involving key milestones, such as:

- Deadlines requiring action
- Decisions or announcements that must be awaited because they influence future actions
- Mandatory activities that are necessary to complete the project

An example of a project where timelines can be helpful is a professional certification process. These many involve schedules and windows of time in which certain activities must be done.

Situations-to-manage are scenarios where the customer needs to decide how to respond to events projected to happen in the future. The situation may involve precise dates for a change affecting the customer, or an uncertain timeframe. The emphasis is on taking action before it is too late. Common situations to manage include:

- Product changes, such as the end of life (EOL) for a product that requires the migration of data
- Legal changes, such as new tax laws that influence investment allocations

By providing a schedule of expected changes in a timeline, customers can manage the situation appropriately.

Scheduled events can involve many activities and people. They commonly occur over more than one day—sometimes over weeks or even months. People engage with them either as a participant or as an observer. These events are structured around a program. They may have openings, closings, and sometimes climaxes where an outcome is decided. Timelines can preview when activities that are part of series will happen, for example, a sporting match such as the World Cup.

Some timelines are built around windows of opportunity: the best time to do something. For example, a trip is planned for a specific period. A timeline can indicate events happening in the location while you are there, especially unique ones that you couldn't see another time. The timeline of possibilities can be converted into a personal timeline of plans once decisions have been reached.

Timelines are dynamic

Any content topic that's associated with several dates is a potential candidate to present as a timeline. As time passes, the boundary between what has passed and what is upcoming will change. With structured content, timelines can indicate which events have occurred already and which ones haven't. They can show different levels of detail, depending on the context.

Time is dynamic; timelines should be too.

How content models bring focus to details

Structured content lets readers focus on the details that are most important to them at different times. When they first encounter content, readers will prioritize certain kinds of details over others. By leveraging individual content elements, writers can deliver the highest priority details on the first contact.

Positioning the right details

In many situations, you can't show every detail at once. So, what details should you show? You need to narrow it down by selecting the most helpful information and choosing how to display it.

You can use your content model to rein in potential information overload, by pulling out the precise details you decide are most appropriate to show.

By thinking about content structurally, editors and designers can coordinate what needs to be said with how it will be presented.

Your content model can support your screen designs so you can emphasize information in a way that provides the ideal user experience. You can connect specific elements in your content model with modules in your screen designs. You achieve editorial and presentational flexibility.

Using a content model, you can switch between three kinds of "views":

1. Preview – revealing what's the content going to be like
2. Overview – stating what information the content talks about
3. Viewfinder – getting to the exact content that's on target

Structuring content allows for the presentation of different levels of detail. When information is presented, it is shown as a hierarchy. Earlier, we explored how this works for lists and timelines. This ability to move between levels of detail exists in other common user experience patterns.

Editors have three options concerning what parts to show, based on what is likely to attract the reader's interest in different situations. They can present:

1. Evocative highlights from the content
2. Headline information about the topic
3. Decision-critical data relating to the customer's need

Previews: Showcasing evocative highlights

Sometimes you want to give readers a taste of the content before they view it. Provoke interest. Help people discover what they might be interested in. They can get the impression of what to expect before viewing it in full—it's about creating a sampling or a tasting menu: a sneak preview.

Some common elements used in previews include:

- Teasers such as quotes or subheadings
- Image thumbnails
- Video trailers

Previews are useful when the reader is not sure what they might be interested in among similar items.

Previews can be presented in various ways. Certain layouts excel at providing readers with the ability to glance over items and discover ones they might be interested in. Some common layouts that do this are tiles arrayed in a grid and image-centric galleries.

Overviews: Bringing the spotlight to headline information

Readers often want the content they scan to get to the point—fast. When that's the case, you'll want to present the headline information before getting into the details.

Journalists and other writers have long known the value of "front-loading" the most important details first so that readers can get the gist of what the content is about before reading it all. These techniques are known as the inverted pyramid style of writing or the "bottom line up front" method.

Designers also recognize the benefits of this approach. As designer Anneka Bjorkeson notes: "*Exposing every detail on a static page will quickly create clutter. Instead, give the user enough material to understand the premise and provide further details upon request.*"

Overviews pull in those content elements that readers most need to know, which helps readers find the most relevant content at a glance.

The important elements in overviews include:

- Headings
- Sub-headings
- Descriptive or narrative summaries
- Price or expense data
- Trendlines such as the direction or size of change over time
- Usage or performance metrics
- Status of item described

Authors should present these kinds of elements when readers need to understand the range of information available before choosing. Scanning the headline information, they can then quickly establish the importance of an item and whether items are similar or dissimilar.

When presented with an overview of the content, readers can decide to dig into the details if they want.

The goal of this approach is to provide the reader with a summary that can be supplemented with detailed content by tapping or clicking the summary. This form of interaction is used in many UI components:

- UI cards
- Dashboards such as customer self-service portals
- Expansion panels (also called accordions or collapsible panels)
- Details-on-demand tooltips and balloons
- Annotations within maps

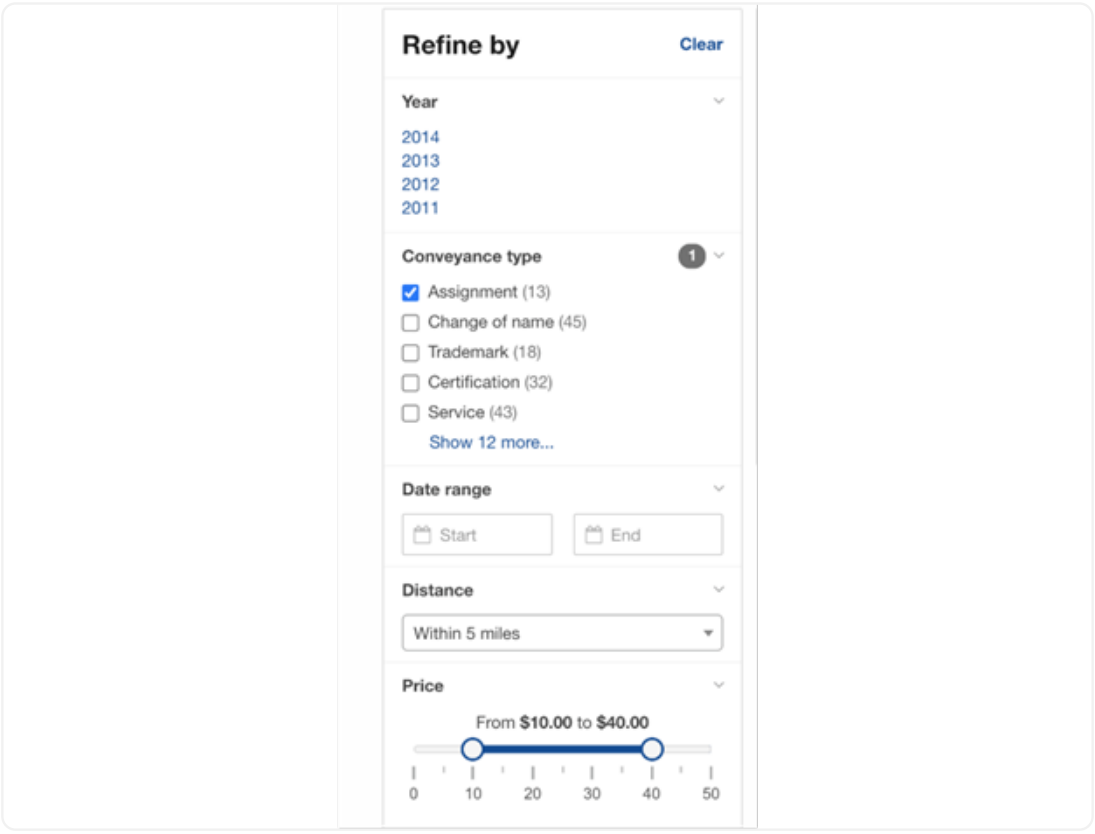
Viewfinders: Providing access to decision-critical data

A different scenario is when customers want to see all the details, but only about select items. To do that, they first focus on one or two critical details that are essential for the other details to be relevant.

Because customers are interested only in items that match their criteria, publishers should let customers select the variables or parameters that the customer most cares about. Customers may think: “Only show me locations near me,” or “Only show me items from a specific source.”

This approach is a good option when a specific detail is a major decision criterion for customers.

Within user interfaces, a couple of common techniques support this approach. First, a screen widget can allow users to specify a specific criterion. A locator widget that provides detailed information based on a postal code is an example. Filters are another common technique. Users can specify a value they care about, such as a topic, date, or another descriptive term. In both these techniques, the elements will be controlled values that are used repeatedly.



Examples of filters (source: US Patent office)

Inviting a closer look

In summary, structured content allows the details shown to be tailored to the customer's journey. Writers and designers map out how customers will encounter the content, so they can plan what information customers need to see initially in order to become interested in taking a closer look at the full content.

Conclusion

Content models provide options to organizations that publish content online — if they are planned appropriately. They **can make content more effective**: more up to date, more precise, more personally relevant, and more enjoyable. And consequently, content models have the power to make your content more valuable to your organization. They can help you contain or reduce content production and delivery costs and realize more revenues.

A well-designed content model offers numerous advantages. But the capabilities they offer are invisible to many—only a few people appreciate the strategic benefits they can deliver. **You now have a competitive edge by understanding their power**.

This Playbook has presented a broad range of editorial and user experience situations where having a robust content model gives greater control and can make content more effective. Taking advantage of these opportunities is up to you.

Even though content models are versatile, good ones share some common qualities:

- They support the expression of details, whether facts, messages, or combinations of these elements.
- They allow these elements to be changed, shown in different contexts, and used where they can be most helpful.
- They let content pivot: to change according to the situation.

And importantly, a flexible and well-planned content model offers something else: the ability to manage change at scale. They are the foundation of enterprise's content operations. Make sure you have a good one.

About Kontent.ai

Kontent.ai's mission is to help the world's leading organizations achieve an unparalleled return on their content. In the industry's first AI-powered CMS, content teams plan, create, and optimize content and deliver it to any channel—quickly, securely, and flexibly. Kontent.ai is designed to support organizations with exacting governance requirements, often in highly regulated industries and with complex content value chains.

Tight permissions control all operations; enterprise-grade security and privacy keep content safe. With a demonstrated ROI of 320%, Kontent.ai customers, including PPG, Elanco, Zurich Insurance, Cadbury, and Oxford University, benefit from a measurable step change in how their teams operate, increasing content velocity, mitigating risk, and maximizing yield. Kontent.ai is a Microsoft partner, MACH Alliance member, and recognized vendor by Gartner and Forrester. Learn more at: kontent.ai.

Want to see Kontent.ai in action?

Schedule a Demo

KONTENT.AI®