Discipline

Content design

Decides what content a person needs and in what form (text, table, video or chart) based on what they need to do, not on what the organization wants to say.



In Spanish

Diseño de contenido

Origin

Builds on writing for the web (Morkes and Nielsen, 1997; Redish, 2007) and content strategy (Halvorson, 2008); Sarah Richards named the discipline at the UK Government Digital Service (2011), applied it when creating GOV.UK (2012), and brought it together in a book (2017)

What it deals with

Organizations publish what they want to tell, in their own language and arranged the way they are organized. People who arrive with a specific task, such as renewing a permit, read little, scan, and give up if they can’t find the answer; content design starts from that task and decides what needs to be said, where, and how.

Principles

The reader's need comes first

Before writing, define what the person needs to do; for example, "I want to know if I can take paternity leave," not "we want to explain the new law."

The important part goes at the top

The answer comes first and the details after: on a vaccination page, first who can get vaccinated and how to book an appointment; the history of the program, at the end.

Plain language

Words the person uses and understands the first time: "get a refund" instead of "request the restitution of the amount paid."

Written for people who scan

Headings that say what's underneath, short paragraphs and lists, because almost nobody reads word by word: "Documents you need" works better than "General information."

The format that serves best

Not everything is text: to find out how much tax you'll pay, a calculator helps more than three paragraphs full of percentages.

Tested with people

Check whether readers find, understand, and use the information, and fix what fails; for example, by asking someone to complete a task using only the page.

Applications in design

✓ Use it like this

Before writing a page, note the reader's need in one sentence ("I want to..., so that...") and check at the end whether the page meets it.

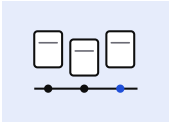
✗ Avoid

Publishing something only because someone inside asks for it, or copying the printed brochure onto the web: if nobody needs it, it gets in the way of what people are looking for.

Don't fall for it

Less content is usually better: every extra page is a page to maintain, and one that can go out of date.

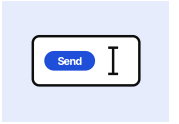
Especialidades



Specialty

Content strategy

Plans what content to create, how to publish it and who maintains it over time.



Specialty

UX writing

Writes the words of an interface: buttons, notices, errors, and forms.

Concepts



Concept

Plain language

Writing so that readers find, understand, and use the information the first time.



Concept

F-shaped reading pattern

On a screen of unformatted text, the eyes sweep the top, then a bit lower, and move down the left.

Methods and tools



Method

Content audit

Listing all the content that exists and assessing each piece to decide what stays.



Method

Pair writing

Someone who knows the subject and someone who knows how to write draft together, on the same screen.



Method

User stories

Describing each feature as a short need: who, what they want and why.



Method

Personas

Research-based characters that represent groups of users and their goals.



Method

Usability testing

Watching real people attempt tasks with the product to find out where they get stuck.

Connections

Related to

- Information architecture
- Accessible design
- Form design
- Information design
- UX design

Authors and works

1997	**John Morkes and Jakob Nielsen**	Showed that most people scan web pages and that concise, scannable, objective text is much easier to use.
2007	**Janice (Ginny) Redish**	In Letting Go of the Words, explained how to write web content that works: fewer words, useful headings, lists, tables, and clear links.
2008	**Kristina Halvorson**	Defined content strategy as planning for the creation, publication, and governance of useful, usable content.
2011, 2017	**Sarah Richards**	As head of content design at the UK Government Digital Service, she coined the discipline's name, created the content strategy for GOV.UK, and later brought the method together in the book Content Design.
2023	**International Organization for Standardization**	The ISO 24495-1 standard sets four principles of plain language: content should be relevant, findable, understandable, and usable.

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