Content creation: State of the art 2024

Expert advice on creating content for marketing and communications — plus data on the tools that pros use

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Executive summary

In some ways, we are in a golden age of content creation. Organizations of all types have never been more aware of the need to communicate directly with their customers and markets. Since [Harvard Business Review](#) first proclaimed that the "content marketing revolution" was at hand a decade ago, the market has continued to surge. According to one estimate, the [digital content creation market was $27.1 billion](#) in 2023. Indeed.com currently lists over 1,000 content-related job openings within 35 miles of my location.

In other ways, content is in crisis. Generative AI is already changing the game. As the WSJ has reported, freelancers are seeing their [gig work disappear and their rates plummet](#). AI-generated content appears in [13% of search results](#), a percentage that steadily increased from early 2021 through 2023 and started going up sharply in March 2024.

Content creation is not easy. Those of us who write and edit text for business know the difficulties well, and they often come down to "working with other people." Client reviews and approvals, managing client expectations and relationships, sticking to goals/messaging, meeting deadlines, working with subject matter experts, and seemingly infinite rounds of editing are constant challenges.

I surveyed professional content creators earlier in 2024 to get a sense of how they're doing.

I was looking for perspectives on collaborative content creation — what we write about when we write with others — and what tools we use.

The survey, though small in size, with 38 respondents, tapped into a deep well of experience — over 600 years of combined work experience in journalism and content creation. The participants were a diverse group of professionals with decades of work history creating various types of content, including blog posts, bylines, press releases, social media copy, research reports, and more.

In the following pages, I share the insights and writing advice gleaned from their responses, in the respondents' own words.

Content professionals at a glance

- 81.6% create blog posts
- 63.2% create bylines (op-eds)
- 28.9% are still creating infographics
- 78.9% use Google Docs for content creation and editing
- 60.5% also use Microsoft Word
- 26.3% publish on WordPress
- 34.2% use Canva as a design tool
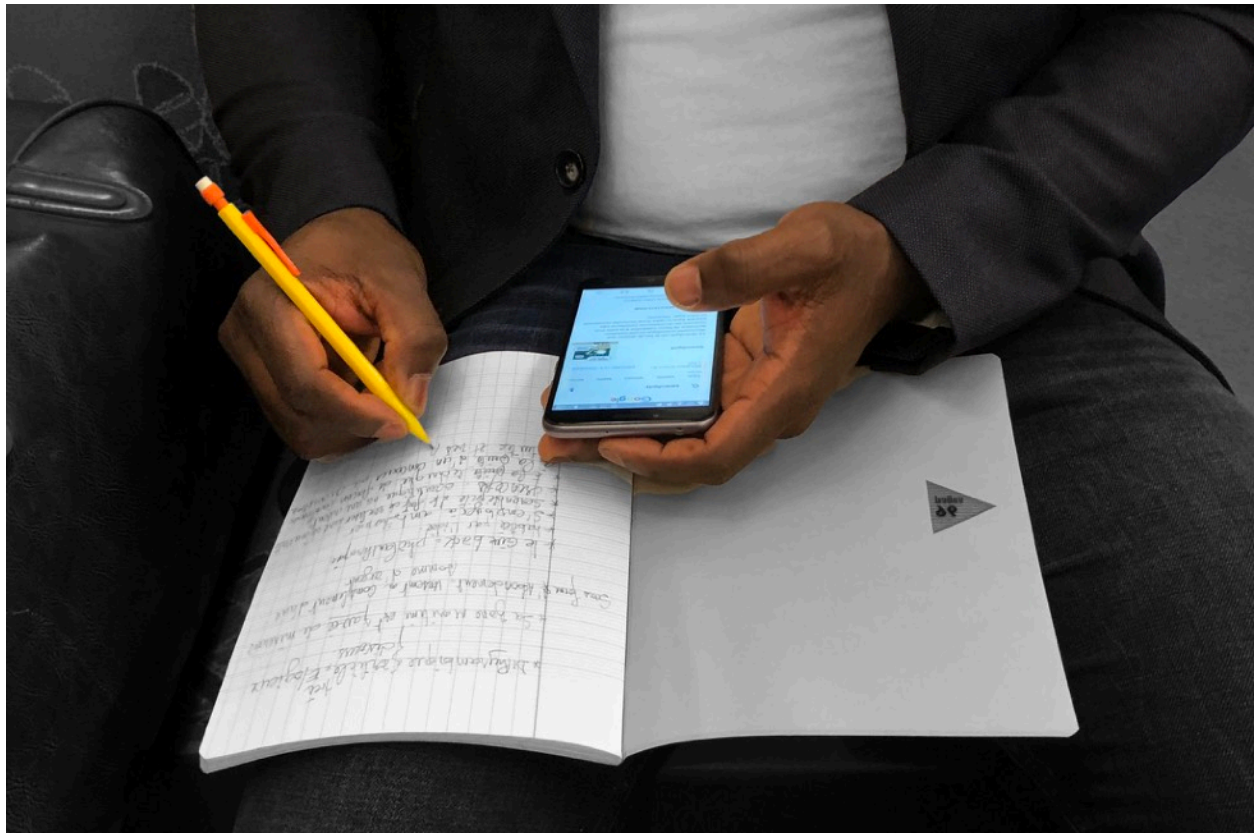
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Challenges of content creation

Collaborative writing comes with its own host of challenges and rewards. The responses from the content professionals I surveyed clustered around a few recurring challenges:

- difficulties managing clients

- dealing with multiple rounds of review and revision

- sticking to the message (and having a clear enough message in the first place)

- working effectively with your colleagues

- deadline pressures

- getting subject matter experts to cooperate

The last two are not unique to team-based writing: Deadlines and sourcing are familiar challenges for any writer.

But the first four can be summarized the same way Sartre described hell: "Other people." That's too cynical, though there is some truth to it. Learning to write collaboratively means, by definition, subordinating your ego to the group's needs and letting your self-expression take a back seat to the corporate, collective expression.

" Herding cats is basically the biggest thing

"Herding cats is basically the biggest thing," said one respondent, a longtime writer who is now a senior writer at a midsize for-profit company. Other respondents attested to "late reviewers who should have been early reviewers," difficulties with "executive team clearance, especially and

including legal review," and "SMEs (subject matter experts) signing off on content."

One consultant with years of experience in content work for agencies summarized the client-management problem in two pithy words: "Moving goalposts." They went on to describe a typical situation: Clients and writers agree on a creative brief and get started. After a couple of drafts, the client asks for another 500 words about a new idea — only to drop it in the next round of editing. "I've seen this happen seven times on one piece before it got scrapped," this person added.

In my work, the key was learning to cultivate a Zenlike equanimity about my work. Long before I took up the actual practice of Zen, I embraced this attitude of no-self in my work. I would put my heart into the work, doing the best possible job I could, without any expectation about the outcome. Then I would deliver it to my colleagues, to my editor, or the client, and let it go. It was no longer mine; it was now out among other people, and I had to trust that they would do their best, too.

The Zen of doing the best possible work I can and then letting it go has helped me immensely in my career. It's often the first piece of advice I give to writers struggling to work with other people.

Why we keep doing it

The rewards of collaborative content creation are great. One longtime content leader talked about the sheer joy of seeing groups of people regularly exceed their own self-imposed limitations, highlighting this moment of payoff: "Seeing people who are not writers enjoy the fruits of their labor and achieve something they never thought they could!" They added that they were especially gratified by "helping people be the best version of themselves in speeches, on-camera, etc."

Personal growth from working on challenging problems is also a significant reward. Respondents cited "Learning how to get better every day," "working with brilliant people," and "learning new modes of thinking" as reasons that they enjoy this work.

Collaborative work also pays off in terms of the quality of the end product. "Having more brains on a topic can create some really amazing stuff," wrote a former agency content person. The end product is often much stronger," wrote a content marketing lead at a small for-profit business.

> **"It's like playing Castlevania; the margins for error are slim to begin with, and they only get tougher as you progress**

One longtime writer who is now a PR and content leader at a midsize company shared an extended video-game metaphor to describe the payoffs of content creation in a collaborative, business context:

"Each stumbling block is an opportunity to fix a process and get better the next time. It's like playing Castlevania; the margins for error are slim to begin with, and they only get tougher as you progress. But by the time you reach the final boss, you have developed memory reflexes to see a problem coming, pivot, and succeed."

Advice from the pros

I also asked these seasoned content pros for the advice they'd like to pass along to other writers. Below, I'm sharing some of their gems of wisdom.

Ask for help

"Ask for help from your writing colleagues," said one respondent, a former editorial lead for a PR agency. They pointed out that writing is typically a solitary activity, and it tends to attract people who don't like to ask for help, either because they're self-reliant or don't want to bother others. If you're working with a team, you need to get over that reluctance.

"When you have a great team around you, invite those brains into the conversation," this respondent added. And they recommended being as specific as possible about what you're asking for. In other words, don't just ask for feedback. Ask: "How does this paragraph read to you, and what might you change to make it make more sense?"

Another respondent, a content director at a midsize company, echoed the need to be specific in your requests for help. "Be clear on what you're asking for to get good comments (e.g. technical accuracy, attributed quotations, when comments are needed, purpose of content)."

That said, even when you ask for it, criticism can hurt. Working on content collaboratively means learning ways to deal with critiques and move on from them. "Embrace well-meaning constructive criticism and grow a very thick skin for critiques that don't make sense or come from non-writers/creatives," said one expert, a copywriter manager at a very large North American enterprise.

Preparation is everything

For teams, planning makes an enormous difference to the smooth operation of a writing project.

"Have a plan! Content outlines and creative briefs are absolutely essential," one respondent, the head of content at a midsize for-profit company, told me.

"It's important to control the process," another expert said; this person is a longtime writer and content pro, now a VP of marketing. In the early stages of a project, you want to encourage more participants and lots of collaboration, which helps with ideation, outlining, review, and buy-in on the direction and goals of the project. "Later, when buy-in and alignment have happened, you need to send some of the cooks out of the kitchen." And, they added, you need to do this "tactfully, without squelching opinion or ownership. It's an art and science."

" Have a plan! Content outlines and creative briefs are absolutely essential

Finally, preparation also includes taking the time to ensure that what you share with the team is as good as possible.

"Take time to self-edit," said one respondent, an editorial director for a PR agency. "Take a break and read the copy with fresh eyes, or read it aloud," they offered.

And show curiosity and engagement with your editor. This respondent also encouraged writers to "ask questions about the edits, especially if I'm making the same edits over and over." If you don't understand why an editor made a particular change, ask them: That's how you learn.

Embrace your personal writing process

"Just start," wrote a content marketing leader at a small company. "The fear and paralysis that many have around the blank page and blinking cursor can be a real barrier."

"Write some kind of shitty first draft—maybe by asking yourself what's the *dumbest* thing you could say on the topic," said one writer, who has years of experience in book production and editing. "It's much easier to improve on something, no matter how bad it is, than to start from scratch, so get the scratch part over with ASAP, while you're still fired up from getting the idea greenlit."

"If you're stuck, do something completely different for a bit (or better yet, take a walk and get fresh air) and come back to it. Make room for creative thinking," said a partner at a small PR agency that also does content work.

This respondent wasn't the only one to recommend taking a walk. A senior writer at a PR agency said:

"When you get stuck, move your body physically. Go for a walk, try working at a standing desk, or relocate your laptop to another room or location, like a coffee shop. Sometimes that's all it takes to get unstuck."

Advice on how to write better

Finally, these experts — with decades of writing and editing experience under their respective belts — had no shortage of advice on how to make your copy sing. I'll end this report with a collection of their best advice:

"Make it simpler. More direct, concise, and clear."

"Don't bury the lede! Use words with Anglo-Saxon roots as much as possible. Always keep in mind the Five W's and H [who, what, where, when, why, and how]. In marketing copy, lead with the claim. The supporting evidence should almost come after the claim."

"If you were not surprised at the end of what you wrote then you probably didn't learn anything you didn't know before you started writing. And if you were not surprised at the end then the reader will not be surprised either."

"The written narrative usually shouldn't follow the process of discovery. Rethink what findings are most important and what the audience will want to know, rather than simply leading them through your research process."

"Focus on the end customer's problems you are trying to solve. If you can think of a person who will find it valuable and keep them in mind as you write, your copy will not meander."

"Sit with your audience. This dictates so many of the decisions required to get good content into the world, be it a social post, article, press release, video, exhibition booth, or even a 3D-printed model. It's a razor that helps cut away the million extraneous things a brain tends to think about during the process of creation, including and especially collaboratively."
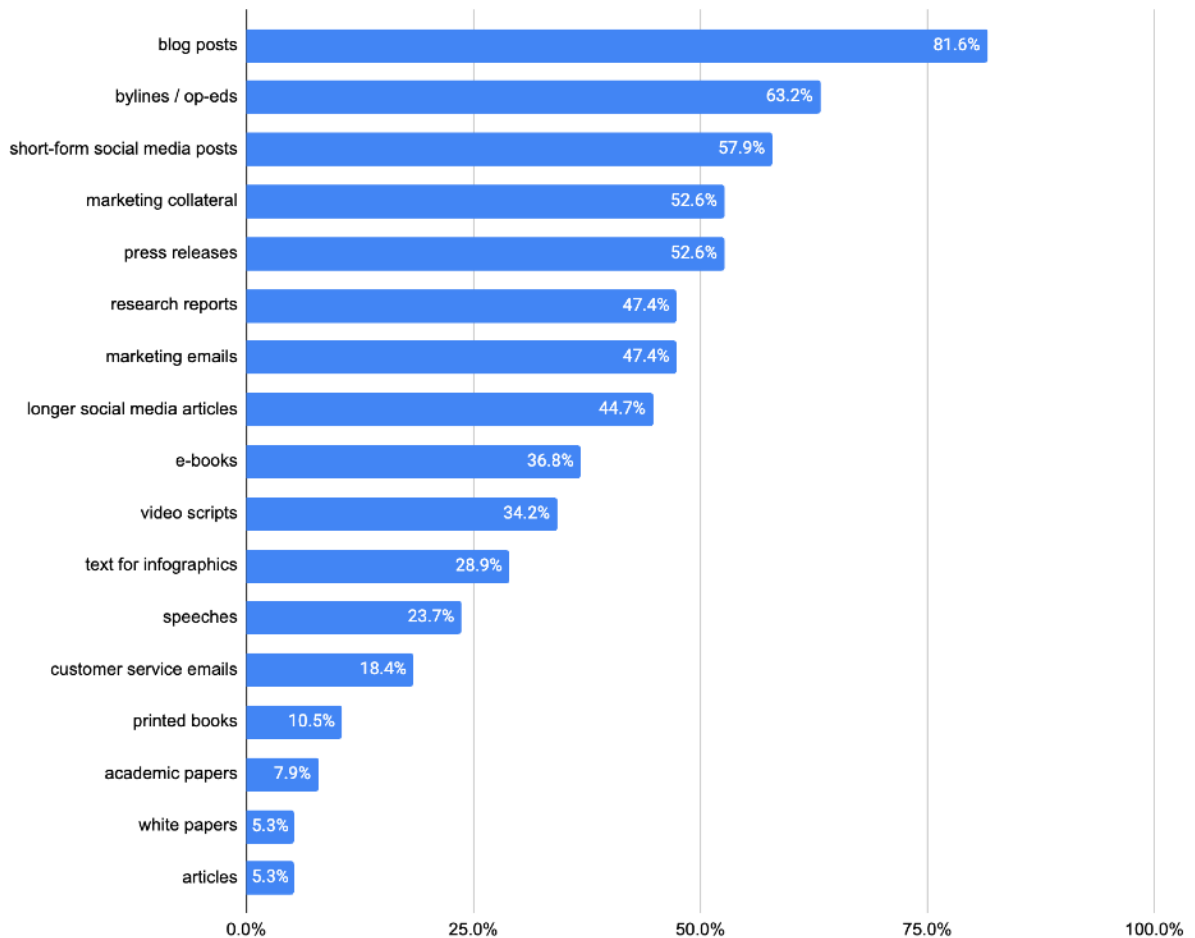
"Put the reader first!"

In the following pages, I examine the survey data and what it says about content creation.

Photo by Andraz Lazic

What content professionals create

Content type	Percentage
blog posts	81.6%
bylines / op-eds	63.2%
short-form social media posts	57.9%
marketing collateral	52.6%
press releases	52.6%
research reports	47.4%
marketing emails	47.4%
longer social media articles	44.7%
e-books	36.8%
video scripts	34.2%
text for infographics	28.9%
speeches	23.7%
customer service emails	18.4%
printed books	10.5%
academic papers	7.9%
white papers	5.3%
articles	5.3%

If blogging is dead, there's no sign of its demise among content creators. Over 80% of professional content creators are busy writing blog posts for our companies and clients. The form is far from defunct; it's just evolving.

It's not surprising that 80% of content creators write blog posts. Blogging remains one of the most accessible and cost-effective ways for companies to publish timely content, allowing brands to communicate directly with their customers and markets. Despite the widespread social media chatter about blogging's demise, it's clear that the form is far from extinct. The era of deeply personal blogs may be over (except for a few oddballs like me), but the medium continues to thrive.

For example, when I was running the editorial practice for a major tech PR firm, I led a blog program for a deeply technical database company. We identified areas where we could improve their search engine rankings by creating new blog posts or refreshing old ones. Over the course of nine months, we were able to generate a substantial increase in traffic to their website (a lift of around 20%) — and a good chunk of that traffic came directly from search terms where they were directly challenging competitors.

The power of bylines

In addition to blogs, 63% of content creators contribute to bylines or op-eds: Articles published in a news outlet with the byline of an outside contributor (such as a company executive). It's no secret that many of these articles are not written solely by the executives whose names they carry. Writing bylines on behalf of others is a major responsibility of PR and content professionals. This is even more the case now, as newsroom staffs have continued to shrink — which means news publications and magazines are more open than ever to content from outside contributors.

It's also clear that this is an extremely collaborative form of writing. The executive is usually deeply involved in creating the piece, from topic selection to providing structure and context to editing, revising, and final approval. Sometimes the executive writes everything, and the content pro's job is to edit and provide feedback. Usually, others from the exec's marketing and communications teams are involved as well, and all of their perspectives need to be incorporated.

It can take a lot of work and demand a lot of social-emotional sensitivity. Still, when the end product gets published in a notable mainstream publication (like *Fortune*, *Fast Company*, or *Quartz*) or a trade journal targeting a key audience, the results are incredible. It can raise awareness of the executive and the brand, and more importantly, it can also help establish the executive as a leader worth listening to. In the best of cases, bylines can even set the terms of a public discussion.

And, as I found when I was leading comms at a tech startup, sales teams absolutely love to use freshly published bylines in relationship-nurturing emails to their prospects.

What else do content creators produce? Short-form social media posts (58%), marketing collateral (53%), and press releases (53%). Nearly half of us (47%) produce research reports and marketing emails, and 44% produce longer social media content, such as LinkedIn articles or long posts.

One surprise from the bottom half of this chart: Almost 30% of us are still producing text for infographics. You might have thought the age of infographics ended a decade ago, but you'd be wrong: A lot of us are still out here, helping create these eminently shareable visual assets.

**" 63% of content creators contribute to bylines or op-eds**

Who we're working with and how it's going

Primarily professionals
18.4%

Primarily non-pros
13.2%

A mix of the two
68.4%
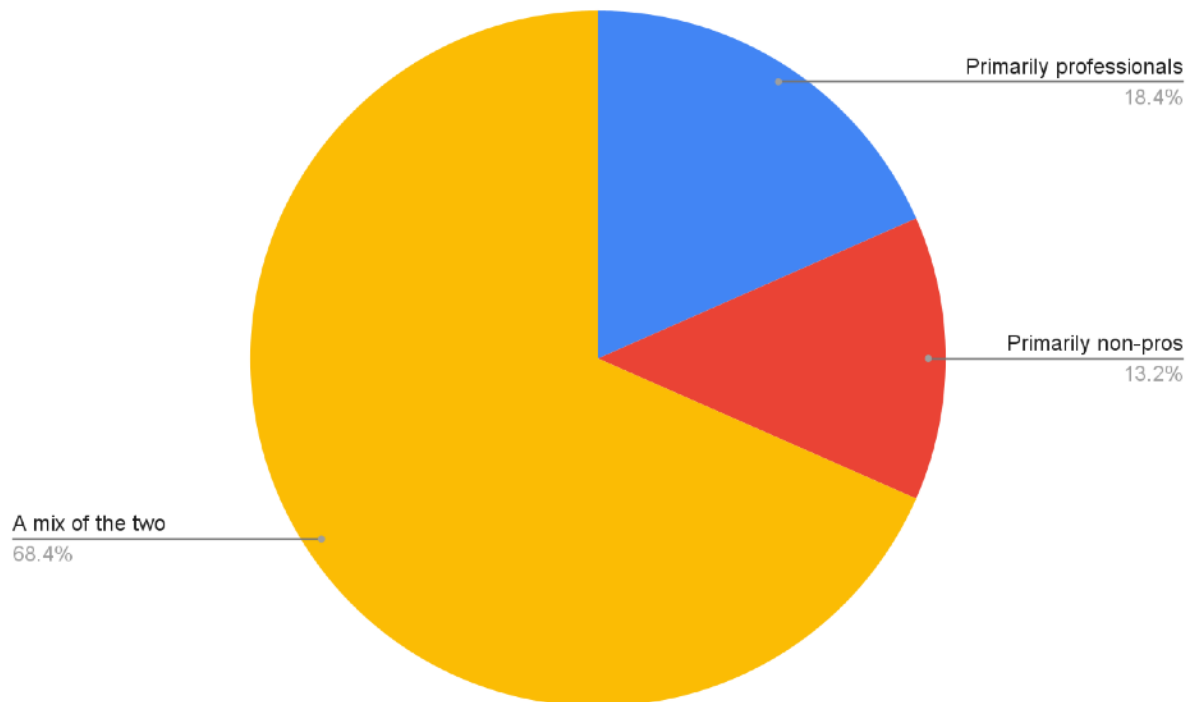
This survey focused on collaborative content creation, so I wanted to know who content pros are working with. The vast majority of content pros work with non-professional content creators, either exclusively (13%) or alongside other content pros (68%). Another 18% collaborate primarily with other professional content people.

That means 82% of us are working with non-professionals. We need to bring patience and good people skills to this work, because the people we're working with have not been trained in writing and editing the way we have.

Number of revisions

other answers
7.9%

n/a - continuous
18.4%

5-9
2.6%

3-4
15.8%

None
5.3%

1-2
50.0%
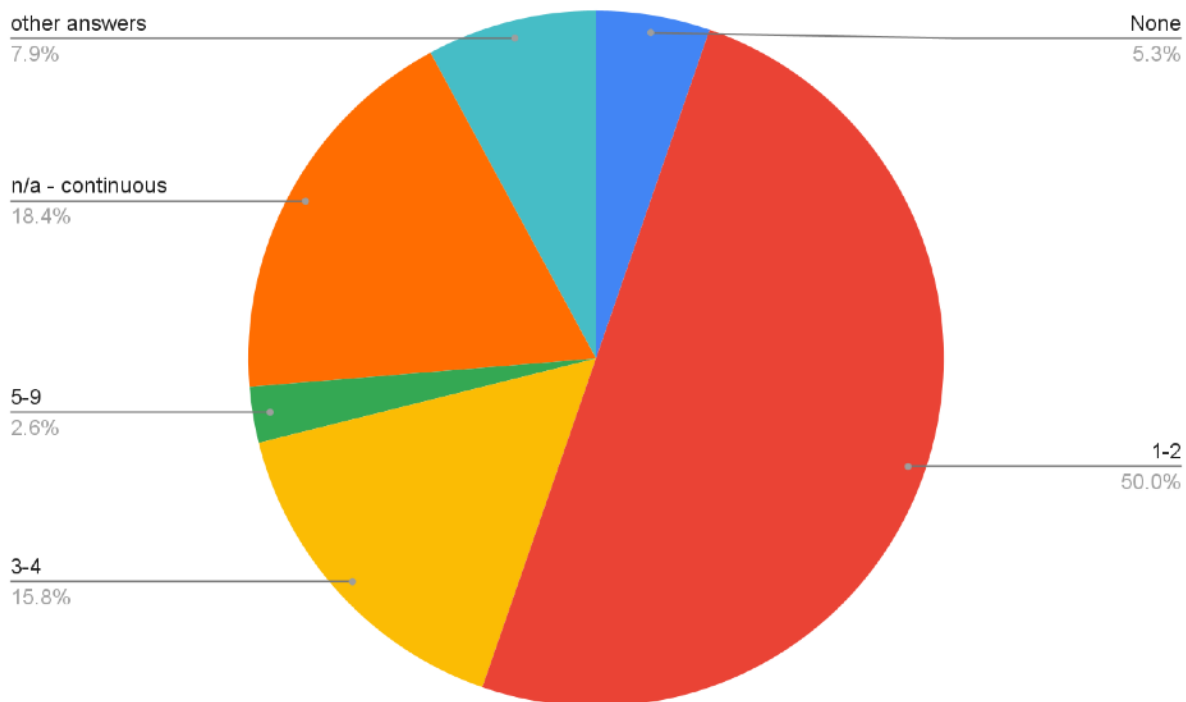
Multiple revisions are the name of the game. Only 5% of respondents reported that most of their content gets published with no revisions and only minor edits. Far more common is one or two rounds of revision, accounting for 50% of responses. However, 15.8% report that it takes 3-4 rounds of revision and 2.6% say that 5-9 rounds of revision are typical.

An interesting finding is that 18% of people report that it's impossible to count the number of edits because revision is continuous until the piece of content is approved. This kind of continuous editing is a feature of our cloud-based era, thanks to Google Docs, and personally, I'm grateful: Keeping track of multiple revisions is a pain.

Timeframe for projects

Other / varies
22.9%

2-6 months
2.9%

A month
17.1%

One day
2.9%

One week
25.7%
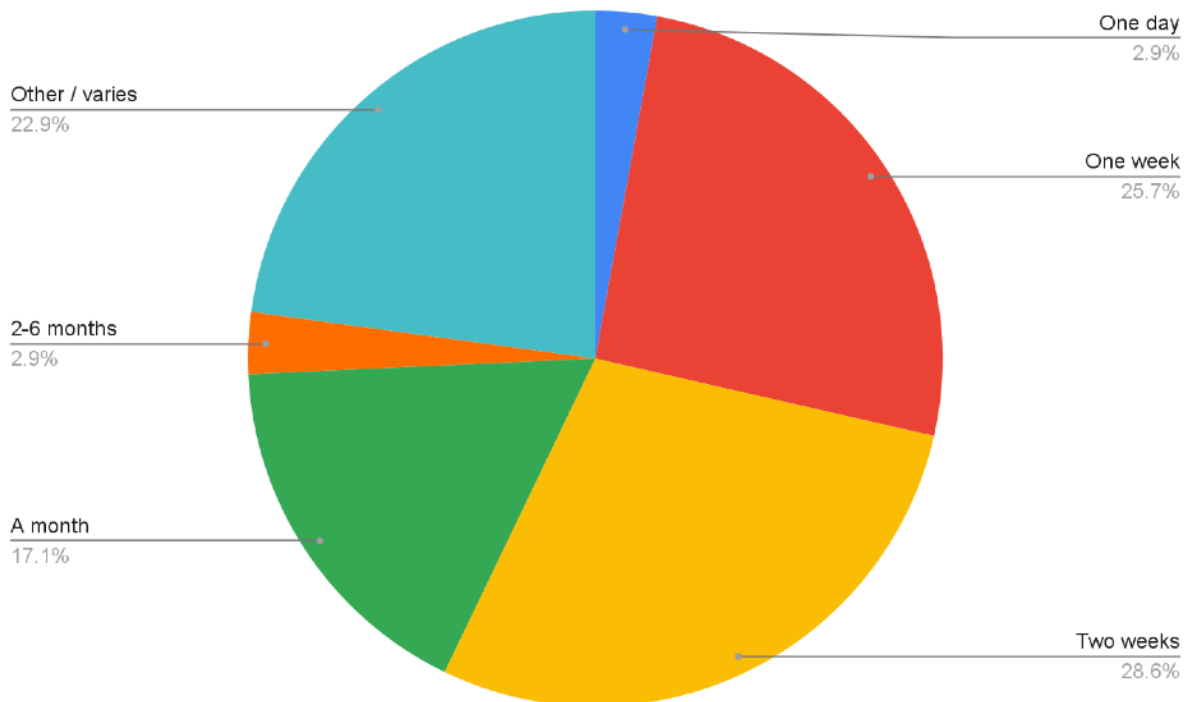
Two weeks
28.6%

More than half of respondents (54%) said it takes one or two weeks to produce a typical piece of content, counting from the initial "green light" to delivery of a publication-ready piece. Another 20% say it takes anywhere from a month to six months.

The remaining quarter provided various ad hoc answers, reporting that it varies greatly and that there is no "typical" timeframe.

Overall, the survey findings demonstrate the enduring relevance of blogging and bylines, underscoring their continued importance in content creation. What's more, the collaborative aspect of content creation is clearly evident. For most of us, multiple rounds of revisions over weeks or even months are to be expected, underscoring a commitment to quality as well as a need to work with many different stakeholders. For those of us in the content business, collaboration is the name of the game.

Tools of the trade
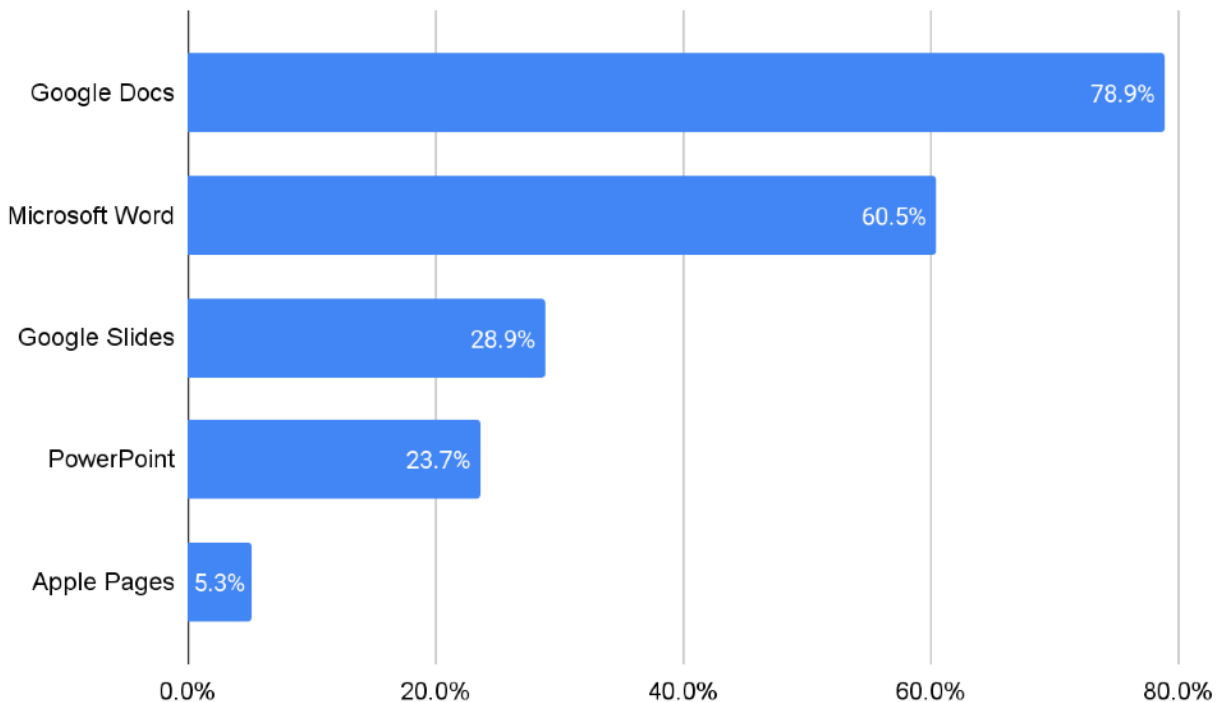
It's no surprise that Google Docs is the runaway favorite tool for writing and editing, used by 79% of all content pros. It's free, widely available, easy to use, and supports simultaneous real-time editing in the cloud.

That last point might seem like no big deal at this point, but it's significant. In the previous section, we saw that about 18% of respondents indicated that they don't have a way to count the number of revisions because revising is an ongoing, interactive process with their collaborators.

Google Docs is optimized for this kind of continuous, collaborative writing. With documents residing in the cloud, edits and comments from other collaborators appear on your screen in real time, enabling a truly seamless collaboration experience few other word processors have been able to match.

Most content creators (61%) also use Microsoft Word. Even for writers and editors who would prefer to spend their working days in Google Docs, Word is often unavoidable, because it's the tool used by many clients, partners, or other outside collaborators.

The overlap is significant: 41% of content pros are using both Microsoft Word and Google Docs.

Word is a fine editing tool and it has arguably stronger features than Google Docs for doing design and layout. Microsoft has also added support for real-time collaboration through a web-based version of Word. Unfortunately, my experience with Word's Web version is that it's clunkier to use than Google Docs. For example, comments are harder to find and resolve.

With Microsoft Word, collaborators can also download files and edit them in the more powerful desktop version of the software. While it's possible for those edits to appear in real time on collaborators' screens, this only works if every collaborator is fully onboard with the Microsoft Office ecosystem. The result is that, with Word, you're almost certainly going to wind up saving files locally and emailing them to your collaborators. This then means that the team has to keep track of different versions.

A few professionals do their content creation in Google Slides (29%) or Microsoft PowerPoint (24%). Only 5.3% (two respondents) use Apple Pages.

Other writing and editing tools mentioned by respondents include Canva, WordPress, Papyrus Author, and Scrivener.

"41% of content pros are using both Microsoft Word and Google Docs

Project management tools
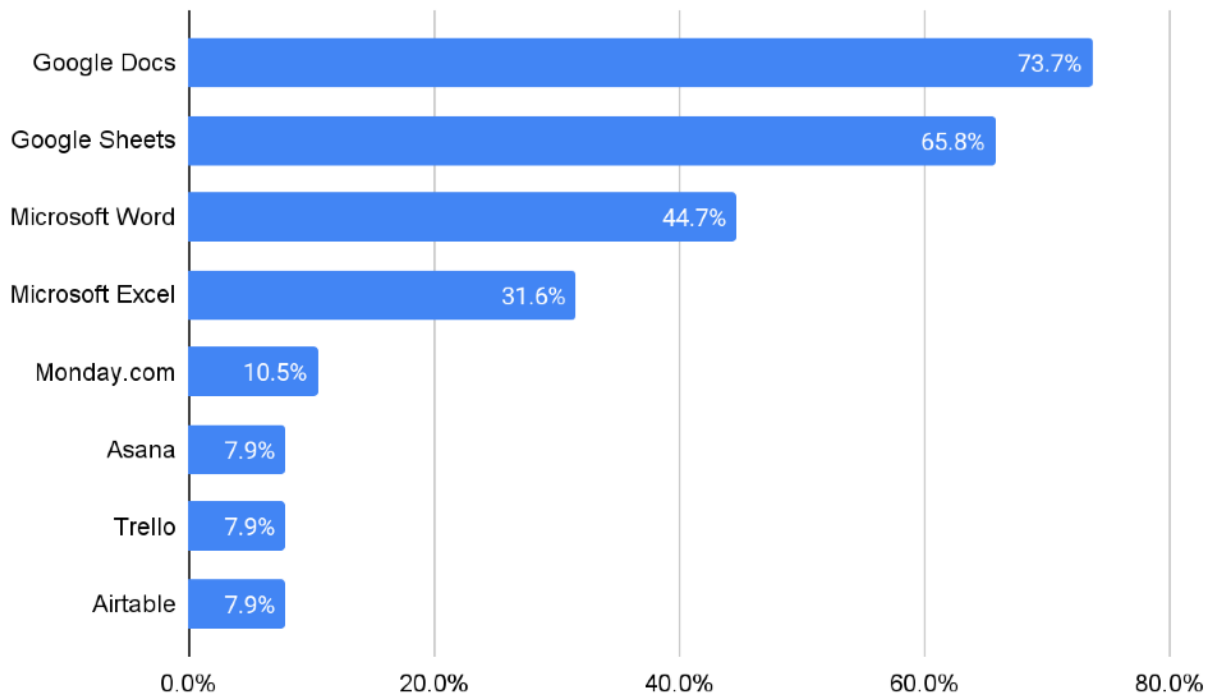
Collaborative writing goes beyond the mere creation of content: You also need some kind of project management tool to keep track of assignments, deadlines, approvals, and so forth.

In other words, you need an editorial calendar.

So what's the best platform for creating and managing an editorial calendar?

The most popular project management tools for content projects are Google Docs (used by 74% of content pros) and Google Sheets (used by 66%).

In my experience, the same things that recommend Google Docs for collaborative writing are exactly why it and Google Sheets are ideal for editorial project management. They are cloud-based tools, so there's no need to worry about version tracking. They're ubiquitous — almost everyone can access them. And they support real-time updates, so as soon as someone makes a change, everyone else on the project can see that reflected on their own screens.

The real-time nature of Google Sheets is why I came back to it again and again during my tenure as an editor at *WIRED* and *VentureBeat*. Although we experimented with different editorial calendar management tools (and at *VentureBeat*, we even built a custom database-driven tool), we could never match Google Sheets for its combination of flexibility, ease of use, and real-time updates.

Personally, I feel that Google Sheets is a better choice for editorial calendars than Google Docs, because it handles sorting and filtering, and its grid structure can help enforce some consistency about entering needed data.

Still, a good number of content pros use Microsoft Word (45%) and Excel (32%) for content project management. Godspeed to them.

Tools that are specifically designed for project management score fairly low on this list: Monday.com (used by 11% of content pros), followed by Asana, Trello, and Airtable (8% each).

I've built editorial calendars using Trello and Airtable, and also one using Jira. While they are good choices for some situations, such tools generally require a work environment that has a commitment to project management and the technical resources to support the customization you'll need. Most content pros are not database pros, and with Airtable and Jira in particular, you'll need some database expertise to make the most of them.

Trello is simpler, and its [kanban board](#) approach is well suited to an environment where many pieces of content go through a predictable series of stages (from ideation to publication), and where they don't have strict deadlines. But Trello can be counterintuitive for some organizations, and it doesn't easily allow filtering or sorting by various date fields, so I don't necessarily recommend it unless there's a pre-existing cultural commitment to kanban boards or there's a strong Trello champion.
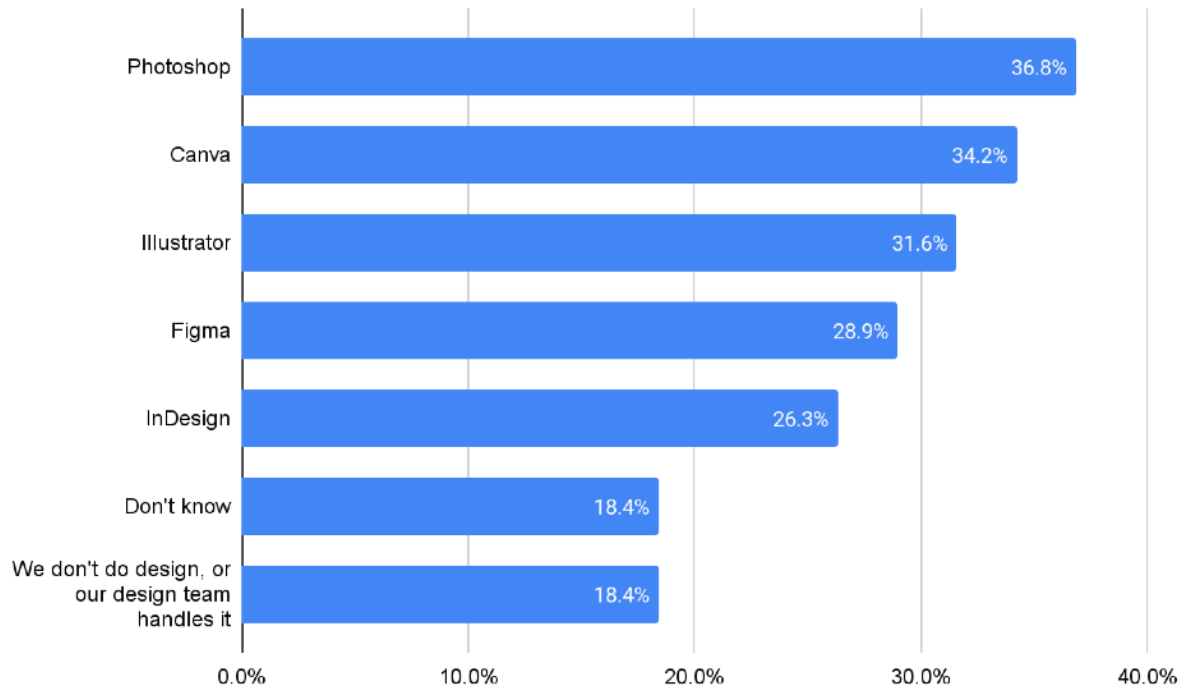
CMS and design tools
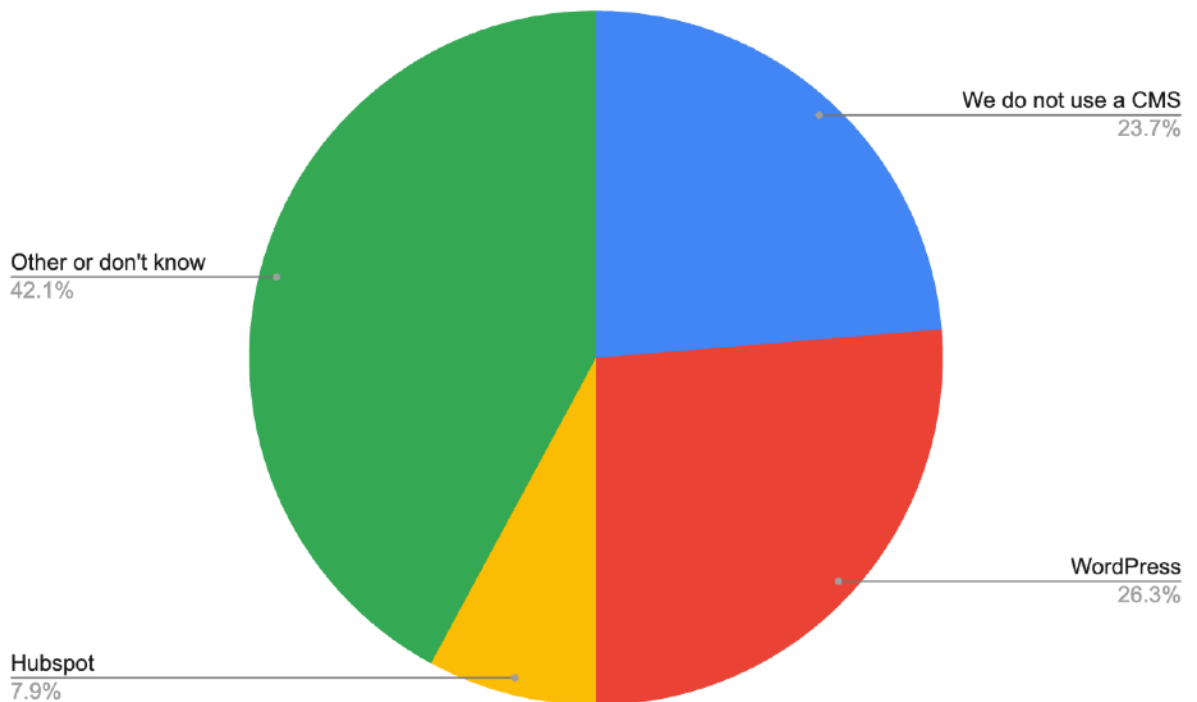
I also asked content pros if they used a content management system, or CMS — which today typically means a platform for publishing content to the web, although it sometimes also encompasses the management and curation of content behind the scenes too.

More than a quarter, 26%, reported using WordPress. This is not surprising: [WordPress powers over 43% of the web](#), accounting for some 474 million websites.

Just 8% of respondents use Hubspot, the CMS favored by marketing organizations. Almost a quarter said that they don't use a CMS, and 42% either didn't know what CMS their organization used, or used some other system mentioned by only one respondent. Those other CMSes include Drupal, Contentful, Notion, and Sitecore.

Design tools

As for design tools, the answers were predictably dominated by Adobe tools: Photoshop (used by 37%), Illustrator (32%), Figma (29%), and InDesign (26%).

The surprise response was Canva, with 34% of content pros saying they use this simple, web-based design tool. I use it too, and I appreciate the ease with which it lets me put together basic images for sharing on social media or simple one-page documents for presentation.

Author's note

I ran this survey because I wanted to know more about how my colleagues worked, what tools they were using, and how they felt about their work. I've been pleasantly surprised by their responses and the generosity with which they shared their advice.

To all my survey respondents: Thank you!

My upcoming book on collaborative content creation will include many of their insights, along with specific, actionable advice on how to create content when working as part of a team. It will also outline a powerful, multi-step process that I have developed to help teams write and edit more easily and productively.

If you'd like to know more about that work and get notified when the book is available, please subscribe to my newsletter, *Storylines*:

https://dylan.tweney.com/newsletter/

About the author

Dylan Tweney is a writer, editor, communications strategist, and story coach with a deep background in technology journalism (including leadership roles at *WIRED* and *VentureBeat*) and a track record of discovering and crafting stories for people and brands.

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