



The Open  
University

# The Notebook

B2B Marketing

A guide to creating and curating content that challenges, inspires, and makes people think differently.



# Introducing the Notebook

The Open University (OU) is recognised worldwide for its academic excellence and its top-ranking business school. Lesser known is that the University also works extensively on a B2B basis with large corporates, SMEs and public sector organisations, to understand business challenges and provide outstanding learning and development (L&D) solutions.

To help strengthen and forge new relationships across industry, the University is changing the way it engages with the business community, to become a more active participant in conversations about the HR and L&D challenges of today and tomorrow.

From September 2016, the team responsible for the OU's B2B marketing is embarking on a progressive initiative, designed to help HR and L&D professionals tackle the big questions around talent, leadership and skills that will help unlock business potential and improve organisational performance.

At the heart of this initiative lies a rich programme of content designed to spark debate and challenge accepted wisdoms.

This Notebook is designed to help all those involved in creating, curating and sharing the content which lies at the heart of this community, by providing guidance on editorial positioning and tone of voice.

- It will help us to understand the difference between our corporate voice, and our editorial voice
- It will avoid ambiguity in our briefs when we're engaging new contributors and authors
- We'll take the style, tone and formats that work best for our audience and make sure we meet expectations

The Notebook isn't finished or fixed – it will evolve over time as we learn what best engages the HR/L&D community, what inspires new thinking and what ignites debate.

# What is content marketing?

Technology and social media have radically changed how people find, access, consume, evaluate and share information, and customers no longer respond to traditional advertising and communications activities in the way they used to.

To secure the attention of prospective customers, we've not only got to reach them in new ways and with new channels, but we've also got to deliver more value. Today, people expect to be informed, entertained, inspired and educated by the brands and businesses they listen to – they're looking for value, in return for their attention, their data and their permission.

This is what content marketing aims to achieve. It's about shifting from legacy ways of bombarding people with product and sales messages to sharing great stories, insight, ideas and thinking – and then connecting that to our products and services.

This doesn't stop us from engaging in direct selling, it's just another way to reach and engage with customers. Get it right, and we get their attention. Not only that, we build the OU's reputation as a thought leader on the issues that matter most to our customers, and we position ourselves as a credible business partner.

Content marketing is a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly-defined audience — and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action. ”

[Content Marketing Institute](#)

# Understanding our audience

Whilst the HR/L&D community share a common professional identity, we can't approach them as a single, homogenous group. Factors such as how generalised or specialised someone's role is, or their seniority within an organisation, will influence the issues that matter to them and the type of content they're likely to respond best to.

When we think about the HR/L&D community, and how we might design editorial content for them, we think of five distinct groups:

- **Senior HR and people leaders:** people in this group are in HR, people and change leadership roles. By virtue of their seniority, they'll have a broad strategic agenda and will be as involved in wider organisational priorities as they are in the direction of their HR function. They'll be most receptive to 'big issues', megatrends and future thinking. Whilst likely the most time-poor of all groups, they won't shy away from long-form content and will typically favour substance over style.
- **HR generalists:** these individuals won't face the wider strategic agenda that leaders do, but they will nonetheless be involved in a wide portfolio of HR responsibilities and issues, with learning and talent only being a part of their role.
- **Learning and development specialists:** people in this group will be the most focused on the skills, training and learning agenda of an organisation, typically charged with building and managing learning programmes and academies.
- **OD and talent strategists:** these individuals are typically involved in talent strategy, but in the context of wider organisational development priorities. They may not even report into the HR function. Their agenda might also include corporate strategy, organisation design, culture and change. Often likened to internal consultants, they may be deployed to specific functions or business initiatives such as restructures, M&A or new market entry.
- **Business partners:** professionals in this group may or may not have a formal HR background or training, and are typically embedded in or aligned to specific business functions, charged with support capability, talent and learning programmes with in-depth knowledge of the area they represent. They're naturally involved in skills and talent initiatives but may be approaching the subject from a different perspective due to their immersion within the business.

We think about which of these groups we're trying to reach when we plan our content, brief our creators, choose our medium and decide how best to share it.

# Think, feel, do

When we think about the purpose of creating content for the HR/L&D community, it helps to think about what we want our audience to Think, Feel and Do.



## THINK

- ...differently about the future of skills, learning and talent
- ...of the OU as a potential learning and development partner
- ...about the implications of what they're reading and watching for their role, their team and their organisation



## FEEL

- ...a sense of activism
- ...inspired to act on what they see and hear
- ...glad to have followed the OU or subscribed
- ...pleasantly surprised by what they've received, and who it came from



## DO

- ...like and share our content across social media
- ...discuss what they've seen with other HR/L&D professionals
- ...comment and participate – whether they agree or disagree
- ...get in touch with someone from the OU to talk more about skills, learning and talent
- ...come back to the OU's channels regularly, confident that there'll be something compelling waiting for them

# Editorial positioning

In a world that's constantly changing, we believe that only those organisations that place L&D at the heart of their business strategy are the ones that will adapt and thrive.



In the face of this uncertainty, ongoing disruption and emerging opportunities, we cut through the noise and ask the right questions, not the fashionable ones.

We cast the net far and wide to bring together the people, ideas and stories that will inspire, challenge convention and spark meaningful debate on the issues that matter most to the HR/L&D community – not just today, but those coming over the horizon.

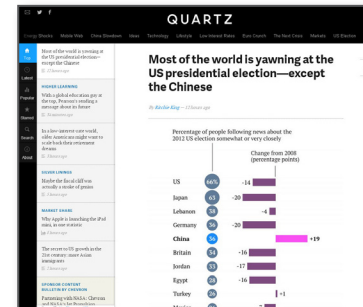
Original thinking, challenging ideas and diverse contributions. Unexpected questions, thoughtful storytelling and a down-to-earth editorial approach.

All designed to help the HR/L&D community make a difference to their organisation's performance.

Or, to put it into context of today's content landscape, imagine a hybrid of Harvard Business Review, Quartz and Fast Company... and you've got the editorial foundation of the OU's B2B communications.



World-class storytelling, unique perspectives and original thinking drawn from a wide range of experts all around the world. Smart, informative, authoritative but accessible.



A truly mobile - and digital- first, challenger content engine with community interaction at its heart. Modern, curious and surprising.



A smart, thought-provoking and informative publication. Down-to-earth, human, conversational and creative storytelling, delivered for a mobile-first world.

# Tone of voice guidelines

How we use words reveals the true personality of the OU – and what we think of our audience. Get it right and we build familiarity, loyalty and trust. Get it wrong and we risk them switching off.

With different people writing and sharing content for the OU, it's essential that we demonstrate one voice – one that's consistent, and one that's coherent. So when people read our communications and our editorial content they feel confident that we're living up to the expectations we set.

Our editorial tone of voice is defined by these balanced principles:



**ORIGINAL**



**CHALLENGING**



**DOWN-TO-EARTH**



**BALANCED**

On their own, these words can mean different things to different people, so this Notebook explains each in more detail.

# Original



When we create content, we strive to bring something new to the table.

That doesn't mean we always have to try to come up with a new concept or idea, it means that what we say is original to the OU, not just repeating what's already been said on a subject.

We look at things differently. We explore ideas and issues from intelligent, interesting and alternative angles. We bring fresh perspectives to emerging issues as well as enduring themes, but we're careful not to run away with ourselves.

We don't weigh in on a topic without having something meaningful to say, something that adds to the debate rather than puts us in chorus with those competing for the attention of our audience.

## BEING ORIGINAL MEANS WE ARE...

**Inventive** (we're creative in how we approach a subject)

**Intelligent** (we add value with our views and ideas)

**Exploratory** (we're quite quizzical... we probe and reconsider before finding our editorial line)

**Intriguing** (we catch your attention and make people think)

**Inquisitive** (we look through the eyes of different people and contexts to understand something)

**Different** (we stand out and aim to slightly surprise)

## WE DON'T MEAN...

Making things up for the sake of it

We look at things differently but we're not quirky.

# Challenging



We challenge assumptions and accepted thinking. We're not afraid to ask 'why?' and we're not afraid of opposing opinions, in fact we encourage them.

We take issues that are important to the HR/L&D community and we ask the right questions to help stimulate debate. We don't take anything for granted, and we encourage our audience to think differently, or just think again.

We value questions like 'why?', 'why not?', 'is there not a better way?', and anything which begins 'but what if...?'

We look to provoke thought, but we're not provocative for the sake of it.

## BEING CHALLENGING MEANS WE ARE...

**Curious** (we seek out opportunities to shape and enhance thinking)

**Considered** (we think before we speak or write)

**Experimental** (we like change and keep trying new ways of looking at an issue)

**Constructively disruptive** (we question the status quo, but our questions always have a purpose)

## WE DON'T MEAN...

Being controversial for the sake of it

We spark discussion ” and debate but we're not argumentative.



# Down-to-earth

In the face of constant change, HR/L&D professionals need more than ever to ensure their organisation has the talent and capability to survive and thrive.

The means that the HR/L&D community want to make an impact on the success of their organisations, so our editorial content reflects that. The issues we explore are real, and we tackle them head-on.

We tackle head-on the pertinent issues of today, whilst also informing our audience about the major themes of the future – but we don't drift into blue-sky or abstract thinking that serves little purpose... we remain grounded.

This means that the issues and topics we talk about might be modest, but they will always excite. So we don't over-complicate. We don't over-exaggerate. And we don't glam anything up for the sake of it.

With such a broad audience, it's important that our content is relatable and that we're approachable in how we communicate.

That means having the confidence to use plain English because we know that complexity is explained best using simple language. And just because our words are simple, does not mean they are simplistic.

## BEING DOWN-TO-EARTH MEANS WE ARE...

**Real-world** (our words mean something)

**Actionable** (what we say can make a difference)

**Relevant** (we tackle the topics that matter most)

**Pragmatic** (we're realistic in our claims and ideas)

**Forward-thinking** (we keep one eye to the future)

**Human** (we're talking to real people)

## WE DON'T MEAN...

We lack ambition, enthusiasm or drive

We're grounded ”  
but we're  
not tedious.



# Balanced

The OU lives in the real world, and we support our clients in their real-world challenges.

That's why we're positioning ourselves as an active participant in the conversations we'd like to nurture with the HR/L&D community. We're not just here to report the news and we're not just a commentator on the sidelines.

That means taking a point-of-view. Forming a judgement. Having an opinion. Not sitting on the fence, and not producing 'vanilla' content without any substance because it won't get read and it won't get shared.

Taking a point-of-view, however, isn't the same as saying there is only one view. Forming a judgement doesn't mean being judgemental. And having an opinion doesn't mean being opinionated.

We aim to always add value in what we do, say and share, and we'll offer an opinion or perspective, but we're always careful not to lecture. This means we lead with the right questions, rather than presuming to tell people the answer.

We're also confident and positive in how we look at things. We don't overdramatise, we're not unnecessarily negative and we never scaremonger. We acknowledge difficult issues and challenges but from a position of finding a solution, not nurturing the problem.

## BEING BALANCED MEANS WE ARE...

**Pragmatic** (we know there are no silver bullets)

**Receptive** (we encourage others' opinions)

**Independent** (we don't take sides)

**Open** (we don't pre-judge ideas or opinions)

**Moderate** (we ask open, rather than leading, questions)

**Constructive** (we're realistic about challenges but we're here to help solve them)

## WE DON'T MEAN...

That we're indecisive

We offer a **”**  
perspective  
but we  
don't preach.

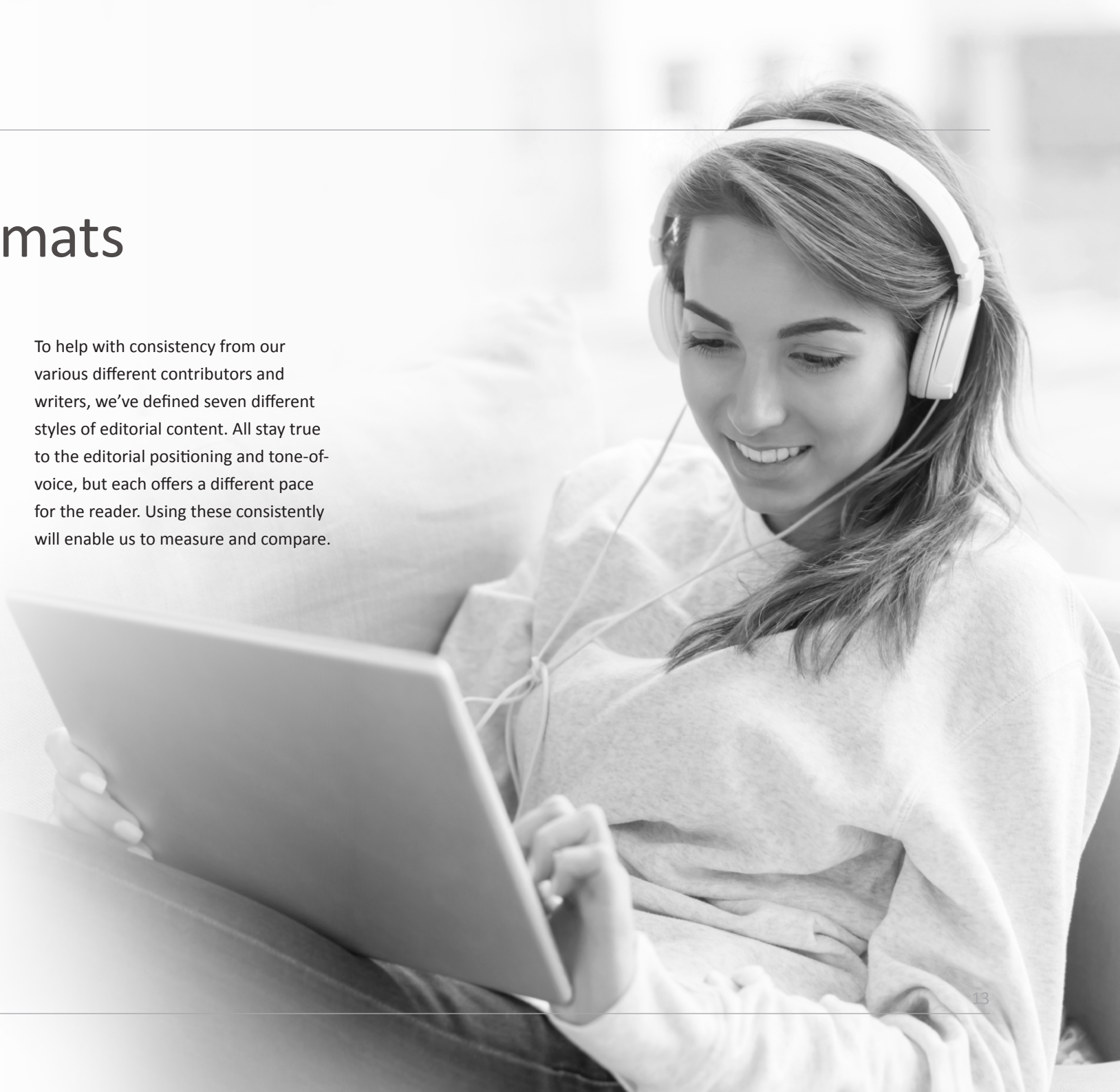
# Content formats

In today's always-on, multi-device world, we can't rely on one format or style of content alone. This doesn't mean the death of long-form editorial content – quite the opposite.

It means we want to give readers content in different styles, formats and lengths:

- To suit different topics (light-touch vs. complex)
- To suit different reading moods and occasions (commute into work vs. downtime)
- To recognise that different groups in our audience will engage with different types of content

To help with consistency from our various different contributors and writers, we've defined seven different styles of editorial content. All stay true to the editorial positioning and tone-of-voice, but each offers a different pace for the reader. Using these consistently will enable us to measure and compare.



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**Spotlight**

A short, focused editorial piece designed to draw attention to an issue or idea, but not to delve into detail. Useful for generating discussion, directing the audience to other assets or resources, or simply giving them bitesize perspectives to reinforce the OU's expertise without it drawing too much on their time.

**150-250 words / 3-5 minutes reading time**

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**Blog**

An easy and digestible length read that's great for storytelling, case studies and 'top tips'-style posts. Useful for showcasing influential guest writers, senior OU staff, and providing easy to digest, highly-practical posts.

**500-800 words / 5-8 minutes reading time**

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**OpEd**

A classic opinion-editorial, here we invite a subject-matter expert or thought leader to put forward a personal perspective on a subject to stimulate debate.

**1,000-1,500 words / 15-20 minutes reading time**

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**In-depth analysis**

A thorough exploration of a subject using a range of external sources. This could include interviewing thought leaders, drawing on primary research data, analysing secondary data sources or reviewing other editorial or media articles.

**2,000-2,500 words / 25-30 minutes reading time**

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**Infographic**

A visual data representation to help the audience quickly get their heads around a subject, with limited editorial commentary beyond signposting. The narrative/signposting through the infographic is designed to conclude with a question or to spark a reaction.

**1-2 minutes reading time**

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**Video interview**

A traditional talking-head video to help tell a story through the lens of one or more external contributors. Useful for drawing on the profile of influential industry leaders.

**1-2 OR 10-12 minutes viewing time**

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**Video story**

A short video to tell a story, typically combining one or more of B-roll footage, contextual footage, contextual imagery, animation, subtitles, visual signposting or audio narration.

**3-6 minutes viewing time**

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**If you need help or have any questions, please contact:**

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