

In this issue:

Architecting stories, becoming Constant Contact All Stars, superhero storytelling and more.

# asterisk



Insights and smart practices from your content team

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## THE WHOLE AND THE PARTS

### FOR MESSAGING THAT DELIVERS, THINK INFORMATION DESIGN

In today's mobile-first age, the ability to get your message across depends on good information design. Careful consideration of how content and design elements work together to tell a story can be the determining factor in delivering your messages clearly and memorably.

Information design has traditionally been the domain of graphic designers. It's a longstanding practice, but caught on as a formal discipline in the 1970s. Yet it applies as much to content architecture as it does to visual design and layout.

Here are some questions you can ask to ensure you're creating something that's structured smartly and for impact:

1. What **content elements** make up your 'system' (headings, sidebars, highlights, stats, quotes, etc.)?

2. How many **levels or layers** of information are you working with -- from the highest-order headings on down to the smallest bits and pieces?

3. Do your **headings** work as a set, telling an overall story, and are they individually meaningful?

4. Do your **core narrative blocks** have a clear focus?

5. How do your **other elements complement** those core blocks?

6. If you've included **graphics**, do they have **captions** that interpret them?

7. **Where are your key takeaways** located on the page? Are there too many? Too few?



Thinking about the parts and how they work together early on will help you avoid ending up with a content "pizza" in the end, a chaotic mix of elements that may contain the right information but not add up to a meaningful, memorable, coherent whole. It's about shaping the interplay between content elements so that all together they deliver the story you have to tell as effectively as possible.

For more on structure and framing and how they contribute to good information design, [request a copy](#) of our Story Book and we'll drop one in the mail to you.

## punc'd\*

### FROM PER CENTO TO PERCENT SIGN: THE EVOLUTION OF %



*PUNC'D tells the hidden stories of punctuation marks and how they make writing clearer and more powerful.*

OK, so the percent sign is most definitely *not* a punctuation mark. But percentages are by far the most pervasive mathematical expressions in writing, often used to back up statements or support an argument. That's justification enough to take a closer look at the percent sign in this edition of *asterisk\**.

So why *that* particular symbol for percentages?

The term itself comes from *per cento* ("for a hundred" in Italian). Back in the mid-fourteenth century, *per cento* was commonly abbreviated as "per 100", "p 100" or "p cento". The first inkling of a symbol dates back to the early fifteenth century, when "pc" appeared in an arithmetic text with the "c" contorted into a horizontal line. Over time the second letter morphed into something like a division symbol, "per" fell away and the fraction tilted into today's symbol.

Style guides typically recommend spelling out the word rather than using the symbol except in number-heavy documents -- though they're divided over whether that's one word, "percent", or two, "per cent". Not sure which to use? As is the case 100 percent of the time when it comes to style dilemmas in writing, pick one and stick to it!

## content matters\*

### CCSA PUTS THE SPOTLIGHT ON SENIORS' SUBSTANCE USE

Every two years, the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) publishes a new edition of its [Substance Use in Canada](#) research series. The latest, released this spring, looks at the growing issue of problematic substance use among older adults -- an often overlooked but growing population. Ascribe is proud to have provided [copyediting and proofreading](#) support for the full report, the fifth we've had the privilege to work on.



## A CINEMATIC UNIVERSE 10 YEARS IN THE MAKING

Content planning can take many forms. A blog program. A marketing campaign. A decade-long juggernaut movie franchise -- as the spring blockbuster, *Avengers: Infinity War*, goes to show.

Many movies have sequels that build on the plotlines of previous installments, but there's never been anything quite like the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). *Infinity War* culminates 10 years of storytelling that span a staggering 18(!) movies full of layers of narrative callbacks.

Was it all planned from the start? For the most part, yes. When Samuel L. Jackson appeared in the post-credits stinger of 2008's *Iron Man* and mentioned "The Avengers Initiative", it was clear Marvel intended to have its heroes coexist in one shared world. What could easily have concluded with the first *Avengers* movie has grown exponentially, seamlessly integrating an ever-growing roster of characters including Black Panther, Doctor Strange, Spider-Man and the Guardians of the Galaxy.

The "marvel" -- pun intended -- of the MCU is that its creative overseers have taken what LinkedIn might call a piece of "big rock" content, the main Avengers storyline, and spun it out across a vast campaign without ever losing grip on the brand. The writers of the various films managed to get all the heroes where they needed to be for *Infinity War* -- physically and psychologically -- without contradicting what's occurred in the other installments.



Now that's some super storytelling.

## shout-out\*

### THANKS FOR MAKING US ALLSTARS

We were proud to learn that *asterisk\** made the 2017 Constant Contact All Stars list, a recognition for high average open and click-through rates, low bounce rates and other engagement indicators. That puts us in the top 10% of Constant Contact users -- and tells us people appreciate the content we put together for each *asterisk\** issue. So thanks for your ongoing interest and support! We look forward to generating more articles to keep you clicking.

Is there a topic you'd like to see covered in *asterisk\**? Let us know! Email [dalemorris@ascribeinc.ca](mailto:dalemorris@ascribeinc.ca).

## practice point\*

### DECLUTTER SPELL CHECK WITH CUSTOM DICTIONARIES

Microsoft Word's spellcheck feature can be a lifesaver. But when you're working on a document full of specialized terminology that isn't part of Word's built-in dictionary, it can seem like *everything* gets a red squiggly underline, making it hard to tell actual spelling mistakes from terms Word doesn't know.

Fortunately, there's a simple solution: add the specialized terms to your custom Word dictionary.

Here's how:

1. Run a spell check
2. As each term comes up, make sure it's spelled correctly, and for any specialized words you want included in the dictionary, click ADD.

You can also do this by control/right clicking on red-underlined words and selecting Add to Dictionary. Whichever way you choose, once a correct term is added to the dictionary, Word will stop identifying it as a spelling error.



*This is where we look back at some of the big milestones in storytelling history. If you're interested in learning more about our take on stories, check out our [Story Book](#).*

### **2018**

Dozens of superheroes and villains from 18 movies come together in Marvel's *Avengers: Infinity War*, the comic book movie to end all comic book movies... at least until the sequel comes out next year.

### **1905**

*The Scarlet Pimpernel* by Baroness Orczy sets the template for Zorro, Batman and countless other crimefighting heroes and vigilantes: a wealthy fop leads a butt-kicking double life under a secret identity.

### **2100 BCE**

The world's first "superhero" debuts in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the ancient Sumerian tale (and oldest surviving work of literature) in which the eponymous king with superhuman strength battles gods and demons in search of the meaning of life.

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