This essay explores content, a word and concept now often associated with writing in fields including marketing, journalism, publishing, and technical communication. I present a definition of content appropriate to writing studies and explore a range of issues and practices that the content metaphor can bring to our professional, scholarly, and pedagogical attention.

To work with writing today means to work with writing as content. If, for example, you’ve composed in a content management system such as WordPress, you understand good writing practice to involve both crafting well-written posts and optimizing these posts as transportable, findable content, by applying categories, tags, and SEO (search engine optimization) metadata. If you teach in a writing studies program that graduates majors or master’s-level students, some of your alumni are likely getting jobs as content strategists, content managers, or content writers. Though their rhetorical education prepares them well for such work, they’re likely creating document types you never assigned, such as content audits and editorial calendars. And if you read one of the many periodicals that have been remade in the last decade from print publications to cross-platform repositories of content, you may have encountered within its “pages” a lament on the shift from writing to content. In one such piece, published in the New York Times, the essayist and illustrator
Tim Kreider seethes at the many “invitations” he has received to write online articles without pay, which Kreider links to a shift from writing understood as art to writing understood as content:

The first time I ever heard the word “content” used in its current context, I understood that all my artist friends and I—henceforth, “content providers”—were essentially extinct. This contemptuous coinage is predicated on the assumption that it’s the delivery system that matters, relegating what used to be called “art”—writing, music, film, photography, illustration—to the status of filler, stuff to stick between banner ads. (9)

Although content is both ubiquitous and contentious, writing studies writ large has said little directly on the subject. I argue in this essay that if our field takes seriously the claim implied in a number of professions, including marketing, journalism, publishing, and technical communication—that writing has become content—then we can open up propositions about digital-age writing for deeper inquiry, usher a wide set of very rhetorical content practices and professions into our sphere of concern, and confront a fast-moving phenomenon ripe for the sort of critical perspective that our field can provide.

In this essay, I first build a definition of content, one that respects the ground already laid by technical communication and the so-called content professions. I identify four characteristics of content: content is conditional, computable, networked, and commodified. New vocabulary benefits a field if it illuminates phenomena that current terms ignore or obscure; I argue that the word content highlights important aspects of composing in the digital age that existing and popular language—such as digital writing or multimodal—do not. After defining content through its key characteristics, I explore its dimensions as a metaphor, where metaphor is used to mean the bundles of associations that accompany a word. Content, I argue, is now a necessary metaphor to pair with our dominant field metaphor, writing. I then move to a discussion of the emerging content professions, exploring the fit between concepts in these professions and our field, including those sites within writ-
I end with a discussion of the critical perspective that writing studies might bring to content work.

I spoke above of the content metaphor, but there is also another key metaphor in this discussion: that of becoming. *When writing becomes content* is a phrase that can be read two ways. First, the phrase suggests growth, merging: the old thing, writing, is now also the new thing, content. The second implication is that of a change, a transformation: the old thing, writing, has now become a new thing, content. While, of course, the first sense is a more comfortable proposition for writing studies—and this is primarily how I address content—this essay asks readers to entertain both possibilities: the new opportunities and responsibilities that come with the addition of content into our professional purview, and also the values we must defend if content substitutes for writing in professional and other settings.

### What Is Content?

**Content in Technical Communication: A Specialized Definition**

Readers within one of writing studies’ specialty areas, technical communication, will note the ongoing discussion of content management in technical communication scholarship. This topic was marked as significant in 2008, when *Technical Communication Quarterly* published a special issue devoted to content management systems. In their introduction to this issue, guest editors George Pullman and Baotang Gu insist that

> the introduction of content management and content management systems [CMSs] promises a change of revolutionary nature in our conceptualization of the field of technical communication and what we teach. . . . CMSs are transforming text into data, and the discipline of technical communication will never be the same (3).

Not surprisingly, the contributors to *TCQ’s* special issue largely discuss this revolution as it relates to technical communicators, and even more specifically, to those technical communicators working in organizations that employ centralized content management systems and single-sourced workflows. In such environments, technical communicators practice what Charlotte Robidoux and others call “structured writing” or single sourcing, wherein authors write by contributing to a content database—a CMS—and combining chunks of content from this single source. This focus on content as encountered in a specific type
of technical writing environment, typically in enterprise-level companies, still to a large degree characterizes the discussion of content in technical communication today (see, for example, Andersen, “Rhetorical Work”).

**Content in Writing Studies: All Digital Writing as Conditional, Computable, Networked, and Commodified**

While their focus is on text within a CMS, Pullman and Gu’s language about the nature of such text—that it is “text transformed into data”—is a useful place to begin isolating the key characteristics of content. Pullman and Gu elaborate as follows:

No longer can writers think in terms of texts or even publications. They have to start thinking in terms of asset management: the strict separation of form and content to allow for seamless repurposing of content, data mining, reduplication of effort control mechanisms, and writing in a collaborative environment with multiple authors and multiple purposes feeding off of and contributing to a conglomeration of assets that collectively make up a content archive. (3)

As Pullman and Gu describe, content exists as digital assets that are full of potential, characterized not by being finished or published, but rather by their availability for repurposing, mining, and other future uses. Content has a core *conditional* quality, fluidity in terms of what shape it may take and where it may travel, and indeterminacy in terms of who may use it, to what ends, and how various uses may come to be valued. Those who work professionally with content typically argue that content creators must attempt to control, in part, the shape their content may take—content should, through structure and semantics, be made “adaptable” (McGrane) or “intelligent” (Rockley and Cooper), so that it responds in known ways to existing platforms and protocols—however, content creators can ultimately exert only partial control over the places their content goes and the forms it takes.

The conditional quality of content is grounded foremost in content’s nature as digital data, which gives it what the new media theorist Lev Manovich describes as *computability*: content assets are fundamentally “numerical data accessible for the computer” (*Language* 25). Because numerical data is programmable and infinitely variable, digital media is always, as Manovich says, “subject to algorithmic manipulation” (27).1 When writing is content, then, we must imagine machine audiences, programmed to algorithmically manipulate any composed text—to mine, rank, process, match, reconfigure, and redistribute it—at many places in its rhetorical travels. To return to the
example of a post published from a web content management system such as WordPress, search engines will scan this post, and algorithms will rank it according to its structure and its SEO features. Elements of the post will be extracted and redisplayed in unknown contexts: the post’s title and first few lines may surface in search results or in recommendation engines; its images may reappear in other places on the Web. The piece will likely lose its original formatting when it is displayed on a mobile device or within a content aggregation interface. No matter how well a post is crafted as writing, it is unlikely to meet its rhetorical aims if it is not also prepared as computable content.

The conditional and computable status of content is inseparable from another of its core features, that content is networked, or hooked into networks of human and nonhuman actors. These networks are multiple—personal networks, work networks, the World Wide Web—and both discursive and material, and they define a default rhetorical space much different than the speaker-audience dyad of classical rhetoric that has infused writing studies. This paradigmatic speaker-audience rhetorical situation involves addressing an audience that the speaker may come to know, through tactics like audience analysis. Networks, on the other hand, are too vast, too dispersed, and too diverse to presume to know, especially in advance of a composing task: they favor adaptation over prediction. Content creators iteratively assess audience, using analytics tools such as Google Analytics, WordPress Site Stats, or Facebook Insights to understand which audiences are engaging with their content and how. Additionally, as a number of popular writers have argued, networks value surplus over scarcity and, more arguably, democratic participation over hierarchy: Clay Shirky’s *Cognitive Surplus* synthesizes both of these arguments. Networks tolerate and, in fact, seem to want more content, from more people, than did pre-digital publication venues.

Content, then, is conditional, computable, and networked. The final characteristic that I wish to include in its core definition is that content *will be commodified*. As “assets” connected to networked storage and distribution technologies that require investment, and as provisionally valued items moving through networks, content is visible to market evaluation in a way that is not necessarily the case with writing bound to paper. Johndan Johnson-Eilola is an eloquent voice on this subject; his work from the early 2000s, before the rise of social media or content, identifies a number of important “postmodern”
shifts that help clarify changes to the way writing is valued. Speaking in his 2004 chapter, “The Database and the Essay,” Eilola says,

Twenty years ago, short selections from longer texts were invisible to the capitalist network of large objects. But in a postmodern economy, objects are actually easier to deal with when they are fragmented into smaller bits, allowing them to be sold as commodities, reassembled and repurposed into new forms over and over again.

... Although we don’t realize it yet, that explosion was the start of a supernova, of breakdown and incessant movement and recombination, each slippage and recombinant now generating surplus value to be captured as profit. (204)

Johnson-Eilola describes how “breakdown and incessant movement and recombination” create many of what he calls “marketable chunks” (209)—for example, chapters extracted from a book for republication in a “permissions-paid” coursepack, or individual songs sold in isolation from the albums on which they originally appeared.

Such commodification always happens to texts in circulation, says John Trimbur, in “Composition and the Circulation of Writing.” Using Marx’s terms use value—value based on how well a thing meets human needs—and exchange value—value based on profit—Trimbur points to the often-contradictory relationship between the two forms of value that is realized when a text is in circulation. For example, in networked space, a video or a tweet is judged not on whether it communicates very useful information (its use value), but rather on the number of clicks and retweets it accumulates (its exchange value, rendered as ad revenue or brand reach). Trimbur’s larger point is one of critique: persistent patterns of valuation affect how capital is allocated and thus who controls the means of production, ultimately determining who can speak and on what terms. It is important to hold this commodification at the core of content’s definition, as it encourages healthy suspicion and critical examination; suspicion, for example, of powerful online platforms, such as Facebook or Google, or of unjust-seeming valuation practices, such as those described in the New York Times by Tim Kreider.

Here, then, is a proposed definition of content for writing studies: content is writing—or composed texts—that are assembled within and pushed out to networks, where human and machine audiences will assess them, assign value to them, consume them, appropriate and repurpose them, extract from them, and push them into other networks. Said differently, as a set of characteristics, content is conditional, computable, networked, and it is—or will be—commodified.
The Writing Metaphor and the Content Metaphor
Metaphors and Their Bundles

I suggest now that we look closely at both writing and content as metaphors. I take my lead from Anne Wysocki and Johndan Johnson-Eilola’s memorable essay, “Blinded by the Letter: Why Are We Using Literacy as a Metaphor for Everything Else?” In this 1999 essay, the authors took a step back from the urgent discussions of the day—this was a time when it was obvious that computers would change reading and writing, but unclear how this change would look—to highlight some problems with using the “literacy” metaphor to describe writers’ aptitude with digital technologies. Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola suggest that the word literacy, as in “technological literacy” or “multiliteracies,” is a metaphor in the sense that it comes with two “bundles”: the first is a set of notions about “what literacy is and does” (350)—that it is a neutral skill that, once acquired, ushers a person to a better life—and the second is a bundle of associations with the primary material object of literacy, the book. The book, say Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola, circumscribes “our sense of self, our memories, our possibilities, the specific linear forms of analysis we use, our attitude towards knowledge, our belief in the authority of certain kinds of knowledge, our sense of the world” (359). We cannot, then, append the word computer or digital to the word literacy without some problematic associations. Ultimately, the authors say, these bundles foreclose other possibilities—new ways of learning, new notions of self, and new understandings of power—that newer writing technologies may make room for.

Like literacy, writing is a metaphor. When, in our teaching and scholarship, we think and talk about digital writing, or multimodal writing, or “writing in the 21st century” (Yancey); when we offer courses such as Writing for the Web, Writing in Electronic Environments (Dyehouse, Pennell, and Shamoon), or Multimedia Writing; and even when we describe ourselves as writing teachers and our work as teaching writing, the word writing, used as a noun or a verb, is like literacy, not neutral. Writing is, of course, so essential to our field’s identity that it is difficult to see its attendant bundles. But they are many (see Figure 1).

With writing come materials: those we inscribe with and on, such as pens, paper, documents, and books; and the places in which writing happens—a study at home, desks in classrooms, in a library. Bodies, too, come with writing: the eyes and hands of human readers and writers. And also people: those who have read books to us in our childhood, who have marked up our papers, whose books we have read. With people, too, come social roles and relationships,
including roles such as author, editor, and publisher, and relationships such as famous author to fan, good writer to bad. Ultimately, Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola recommend that different terms can help us “[unpack] old bundles and [remake] new ones” (368). I suggest a similar process of unpacking around the word and metaphor of writing.

**Beyond Multimodality and the Designed Document**

While the materials of which digital writing is made and through which it circulates are different than those of print, the writing metaphor focuses at-
tention on one common possibility across print and digital media: the ability of the composer to design a text with authorial intention and publish it in venues that maintain its authored coherence. Multimodal writing, a concept that has guided much of the field’s engagement with the digital, for example, typically construes digital composition in this way—as what Jodie Nicotra, in her discussion of networked writing, calls “the act of producing a discrete textual object” (261). Although this textual object may represent an expanded range of modes (e.g., image, audio, video), most conceptions of multimodal writing leave intact the agentive composer, the largely knowable audience, and the acts of composing and “reading” (or watching, or listening) as the key sites of activity and meaning making. One of the greatest utilities of the content metaphor, I suggest, is that it moves us beyond a focus on the designed document and its digital equivalent, the text designed for screen display, and attendant concerns with modal affordances (i.e., what images do well, what words do well), concerns that have claimed an outsize proportion of our field’s attention in the early days of networked digital composition.

The materials and associations that come with writing also do not naturally lead to questions or critical frameworks appropriate to a computable, networked, and commodified digital writing environment, where, for example, bots perform much of the inventive work on Wikipedia (see van Dijck), search engine algorithms determine which of many articles on the same topic are valued as “best,” and web analytics and click-through rates help composers determine possible topics and audiences. The writing metaphor does not help us see how templates or modules in content management systems, designed to optimize certain automated actions (e.g., serving different content to different devices; aggregating posts into a news feed with uniform design features) circumscribe rhetorical possibilities (see Arola). Likewise, the important roles of software and platforms in the rhetorical process remain invisible (see Manovich, Software) through the metaphorical lens of writing. Finally, the writing metaphor does not particularly encourage us to envision alternative models of rhetorical space more germane to distributed networks, those that may augment or challenge the speaker-audience dyad, such as Thomas Rickert’s ambience or Jenny Edbauer’s rhetorical ecologies.

**Useful Oppositions**

Figure 2 summarizes some potential differences that holding both the writing and the content metaphor in mind helps us see, although like most binaries, these oppositions are most useful as a starting point. The first five oppositions in
the figure call attention to differences in the context of composition as defined by writing and content. Writing is a practice in which a craftsperson, working in a stable context in which good writing and good ideas are believed to be scarce, begins with an analysis of his or her human-scale audience; content work is a practice in which strategists and managers, working in a context characterized by vastness, velocity, and a surfeit of texts, engage in a recursive cycle of strategy, publication, and analytics to optimize content and maximize effect among a network-scale audience. The next four oppositions in Figure 2 address some of the familiar entities of writing versus those of content. Writers—people with bodies and needs and idiosyncratic selves—create solid, unified documents that reflect their idiosyncratic selves. Content exists as assets, standardized via structure and metadata so as to be adaptive to the machines that will assess, consume, and repurpose them.

Many of these oppositions work together: a writer might, for example, begin by assessing a particular human audience, while also keeping in mind that there is a coexisting network-scale audience. He or she might aspire to maintain an idiosyncratic voice, while also standardizing his or her text for machine readers with structure and markup. But other concepts from opposite sides of the dividing line are not so easily reconciled. Can models of composition premised on stable rhetorical situations be deployed in a climate of what Jim Ridolfo and Danielle Nicole DeVoss call “rhetorical velocity”? Might content, with its machines and its standardization, simply threaten the idiosyncratic and human work of writing? Who will value the work and attend to the needs of the craftsperson—and why—when there is an excess of content?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WRITING</th>
<th>CONTENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>craftsperson</td>
<td>strategist and manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stability</td>
<td>velocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>scarcity</td>
<td>excess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>audience analysis</td>
<td>analytics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>human-scale audience</td>
<td>network-scale audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bodies</td>
<td>machines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>idiosyncratic</td>
<td>standardized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>solid</td>
<td>adaptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>document</td>
<td>assets</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Some writing/content oppositions.
In a number of places in this essay, I use the phrase *digital writing* to denote the activity of writing with an awareness of writing-as-content. Given the oppositions in Figure 2, this language may seem problematic. However, my argument is not that the writing metaphor should be erased or superseded, but rather that we should acknowledge writing’s unavoidable status as content, keeping the two metaphors simultaneously in mind both in individual rhetorical acts and in our understandings of the field concerns of writing studies.

The real danger is in ignoring content: if content has indeed changed the rhetorical game, composers who ignore it risk failing in their rhetorical attempts, and a field that ignores it risks marginalization and missed opportunities for growth.

**The Content Professions and Writing Studies**

**The Status and Domain of Writers**

From the earliest days of content management systems, technical communication scholars recognized the dangers that content, in the form of centralized CMS technologies, could bring to both writers’ work and to their status (Amare; Andersen, “Rhetoric of Enterprise”; Clark; Clark and Andersen; Slattery; Whittemore). In the worst case, a CMS can make the act of writing akin to filling in forms—as Dave Clark describes it, “a change from writing entire documents to writing and tagging content modules and handing over presentation to a machine that automatically implements an organizational style guide” (57), and as Rebekka Andersen warns, employers might begin to assume that there are “technical solution[s] to the socio-technical and rhetorical challenges of empowerment, collaboration, quality, usability, and technology adoption” (“Rhetoric of Enterprise” 63). As writing has become content in journalism and literary publishing, many similar anxieties about the loss of professional status and devaluation of expertise are being voiced. However, what has manifested itself as alarm and uncertainty about writers’ work and status among technical communicators and journalists more insidiously risks being naturalized in the so-called content professions. For example, Rahel Anne Bailie and Noz Urbina, in their 2012 book, *Content Strategy: Connecting the Dots Between Business, Brand, and Benefits*, present a rather disempowered picture of writers:
Writers can’t be experts at everything related to content: Content development has become too complex to be left solely in the hands of writers, especially those writers who focus only on editorial issues and ignore the foundations that make it possible to implement a content strategy. Writers can’t be expected to be experts at information architecture, though they know how to create folder structures on shared drives. Similarly, we shouldn’t expect writers to be experts at content strategy, even though they know how to use a word processor. Writers cannot be expected to know enough about content standards and content modeling, reuse models, content for metadata, microformats, writing for syndication, writing for search engines, and componentization for content management systems to make informed decisions about how to pull all of the pieces together. (loc. 386)

If writers don’t know about the essential content work that Bailie and Urbina describe, including content strategy, information architecture, content standards, and writing for syndication and search engines, it is indeed possible to see how their work may come to be very narrowly defined: the writer’s role may, as Tim Kreider says, be that of a mere “content provider,” not the crafts-person, rhetorician, or knowledge worker imagined by writing studies. In this section, then, I make a twofold proposition. The first is that there is some urgency that writing teachers teach aspiring professional writers (certainly our minors, majors, and graduate students, and perhaps even the writers we teach in first-year and upper-division service courses) about writing-as-content and content-related professional practices. To read Bailie and Urbina differently, to avoid being written out of the work of writing, perhaps writers must indeed become experts at working with writing-as-content. The second proposition I make is that there are many affinities between how we in writing studies conceive of writing and rhetoric and how those in the content professions do: we already teach many content-related concepts and may easily come to teach others.

**Content Strategy: A Familiar, Rhetorical Approach to Digital Writing**

Before I move forward, first a bit of overview of the content professions. Collectively, the *content professions* do the work of strategizing, obtaining, organizing, storing, delivering, and analyzing the performance of digital assets and the texts composed from these assets for particular organizations. These organizations may be companies, small businesses, associations, or nonprofit or public sector organizations. One of the professional distinctions commonly made in industry- and practitioner-oriented publications is between two dominant categories of the content professions: content marketing and content strategy.
Content marketing, a reorientation of marketing in ways more appropriate to the multiple channels and two-way communication available on the Internet, is an approach to marketing an organization, product, service, or cause in which informational and creative content items are understood to be the key persuasive tools, as opposed to advertising copy that makes a direct sell. Ann Handley and C. C. Chapman, in one of the many evangelical arguments for a shift from advertising to content marketing, say, “done right, the content you create will position you not as a seller of stuff, but as a reliable source of information” (8). Content marketing is increasingly a tactic of organizations and businesses large and small; for example, camera stores create and post videos teaching the craft of photography, food companies offer recipe blogs, and nonprofit organizations host webinars on issues related to their mission. Content marketing has interesting vocational implications for writing studies, as it suggests that if we prepare students—likely majors and master’s-level students—to work in marketing/communications roles in organizations that take a content marketing approach, we best prepare them to conceive of and possibly even produce a wide range of genres across a wide range of media—such as blog posts, white papers, instructional videos, social media posts and conversations, and website content.

Content marketing, while it has clearly emerged from a climate of computable, networked, and commodified content, is ultimately a marketing strategy. As such, its implications for writing studies are limited. Content strategy, on the other hand, is a set of professional practices that has more direct and compelling implications for our field. The word strategy, if we shake off the business connotations, clearly has a rhetorical ring to it, and indeed, a close look at how insiders define content strategy shows that its associated practices connect in many ways to how we think about writing. We might say that conditional, computable, networked, commodified content has created an industry model of writing in professional settings that fits quite well with our field’s notions, although, importantly, industry calls this work content strategy and does not, as Abel and Bailie indicate, construe writers to be its natural experts.

The professional category of content strategy is relatively new (Abel and Bailie trace it to around 2009). The dimensions of its practice are best summarized in a graphic representation known as the “quad” (see Figure 3), first published on the content strategy blog Brain Traffic and later in Kristina Halvorson and Melissa Rach’s well-regarded content strategy book, Content Strategy for the Web. To briefly unpack the figure: if an organization is to work...
with content effectively, say Halvorson and Rach, they must formulate a core strategy, which “sets the long-term direction for all content-related initiatives” (96) at the organization or for a particular project, and must address all four quadrants of the quad: substance, which denotes attention to what messages the organization’s content should communicate, in what genres and media; structure, which involves developing content models and metadata schemes based on understanding the information architecture of content items and the spaces these items will fill and move through; workflow, which requires assessment of the tools, people, and practices necessary to create and maintain content within particular social settings; and finally, governance, which consists of developing policies and tools that ensure that content adheres to organizational strategy.

Figure 3. The content strategy quad. Source: Halvorson and Rach, Content Strategy for the Web (29); copyright 2010 Brain Traffic.
None of these quadrants should seem unfamiliar or anathema to writing studies. The “content components” on the left side of the quad, those that involve making decisions about content’s substance and structure, are grounded in rhetorical judgment and compositional know-how. To make substance decisions about content requires the ability to assess a wide variety of media and genres and to determine their potential to convey an organization’s key messages and elicit desired reactions from key audiences. Content strategists often begin by creating or clarifying their organization’s “message architecture,” or “hierarchy of communication goals” (Bloomstein 20); they then assess what media forms might feasibly help them meet key communication goals, using an audit of existing content and related genres. Note that while content strategists begin their work with a notion of knowable audiences not unlike the problematic speaker-audience dyad I discussed earlier, they also operationalize a more iterative model of audience analysis using the concept of the content lifecycle. This concept describes an ongoing cycle of attention to content strategy, content creation, content distribution, and analysis of content’s performance. That is, a strategy is developed to guide content creation and distribution; once this content is distributed, its performance is analyzed using analytics tools, which either affirm or suggest revision of the initial content strategy, beginning the cycle anew.

Issues related to the other half of Halvorson and Rach’s content components, content’s structure—including how to structure content and develop and apply metadata schemes that enable content to flow through networks and be found—are important because of content’s conditional, computable, and networked characteristics. Although technical communicators have considered XML and structured content part of their purview, all content, as Sarah Wachter-Boettcher says, must increasingly be prepared to go “everywhere”—ready “to travel—across devices, sites, and channels” (13). Wachter-Boettcher’s sentiment echoes recent discussions in writing studies about composing in networked space, including James E. Porter’s identification of circulation as a key delivery concern, wherein a writer composes with attention to “the technological and rhetorical procedures for helping [a] document cycle in digital space” (214), and Ridolfo and DeVoss’s notion of “composing for strategic re-composition” in a climate of “rhetorical velocity.” Understanding how content travels and how to optimize it for successful rhetorical effect(s) in these travels is a key reason to attend to structure.

If the “content components” of the quad primarily situate content work as rhetorically informed composition, mindful of the conditional, computable,
and networked nature of content, the “people components”—the right side of Halvorson and Rach’s quad—add that content creation and maintenance are also social and material practices tied to specific local settings and must be mindful of the technological and human possibilities and constraints in particular settings. In a workplace, sustainable practices and processes must be established and enforced, with known roles and responsibilities, to ensure that a content strategy stays on task. The social and material nature of writing that writing studies has carefully described—from systematic studies of how genres and tools mediate work activity to concepts that identify obstacles to functional workflow, such as the “infrastructures” that Danielle N. DeVoss, Ellen Cushman, and Jeffrey T. Grabill say affect possibilities for digital composing in classrooms—shows that our field shares with the content professions an understanding of writing as a fundamentally social and material practice.

Where to Teach Content in Writing Studies Programs

The overlaps between industry practice and how we talk about and teach writing in writing studies suggest that a productive exchange could exist between industry and academia. Furthermore, the overlaps suggest that content and content practices are likely already being taught in our courses, though perhaps not named as such. To begin thinking about what it means to teach writing-as-content, we might ask: in what courses do we already or might we address writing as content, either from the perspective of the content metaphor outlined in Figure 2 or from the practices described by the content professions?

My department, for example, has reimagined our Writing for the Web course from its prior focus on designing and editing a website—a “writing” approach, with little attention to conditional, computable, networked, or commodified content—to a new focus on the substance and structure-related concerns of content. Students now write on platforms, such as WordPress and Twitter, and discuss issues such as how to repurpose content across platforms and how to write effectively for both human and nonhuman readers. Other courses already on the books seem viable sites for integrating topics related to writing-as-content. For example, editing courses can address content governance techniques, such as developing organizational style guides, style sheets, and CMS templates (see Albers, who suggested as much in 2000). Introductory professional writing courses might ask students to repurpose content across
multiple platforms, turning a long report, for example, into an infographic for distribution in social media channels and a series of blog posts. Where possible, students can write on platforms that offer built-in analytics tools, and can discuss strategies for translating writing with “use value” to content with “exchange value” on the Internet.

The conditional, computable, networked, and commodified nature of writing-as-content can, however, be obscured by some ways of teaching digital writing. In my university’s first-year writing program, for example, all students are required to create an online portfolio of their writing using Digication, an easy-to-use online publishing platform adopted by many schools and universities. While the platform does encourage students to produce texts in multiple modes, it obscures, even inhibits, a range of practices that will better prepare their writing-as-content to circulate in online networks. As of this writing, Digication does not allow composers to use styles to structure their content; they cannot apply metadata or SEO-optimization techniques; and they cannot assign alt tags to their images, which is both a standard accessibility practice and a way to ensure that images will retain important information, even if future composers extract these images from their original texts and contexts. Digication is premised on the writing, not the content metaphor: while it can help us teach page design and multimodality in the context of a largely known audience, it does not help us teach much at all about creating content. While I have suggested that multimodality, in so much as it focuses on strategic composition with new modes for largely knowable audiences, has distracted our field from considering writing-as-content, David M. Sheridan, Jim Ridolfo, and Anthony J. Michel, in *The Available Means of Persuasion: Mapping a Theory and Pedagogy of Multimodal Public Rhetoric*, offer a compelling model for how concerns related to content—such as writing for unknown audiences in networks and composing for recomposition in a climate of rhetorical velocity—can be brought to the forefront in a multimodal writing class. Their work suggests that it is perhaps even possible to integrate approaches to writing-as-content in first-year writing courses.

We might also consider creating courses that share language with the content professions, both to better signal to employers that our students are prepared to do content work, and to offer students opportunities to engage directly with content as a concept and set of practices. Michigan State University requires a Content Management for Professional Writers course for its MA in digital rhetoric and professional writing students, which William Hart-Davidson has very thoughtfully described in “Content Management: Beyond
Single-Sourcing.” Hart-Davidson describes the aims of the course as to “help these majors acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and leadership qualities associated with managing content assets in an organizational setting” (128). The chapter is a good starting place for those who wish to better understand content management in professional settings, as it clarifies key practices and goals of content management, reproduces an interview with a practicing communicator in a content management role, and synthesizes its ideas in a useful chart that breaks down tasks, roles, and deliverables of content management (136). However, few writing studies programs, at this point in time, offer courses with “content” in their course title.

Note that determining how, where, and under what name to put content in the curriculum may test distinctions between technical and professional writing and, more generally, distinctions between core and specialist knowledge. Additionally, it’s unclear what language to use to denote content-related courses. I recently offered a graduate-level course called Multimedia Content Strategy, in which students worked with local nonprofit organizations to assess a particular organization’s existing video and photography content and practices and to then articulate a strategy for obtaining, organizing, storing, and delivering such content in the future. This course was successful at attracting students in a topics shell—it was cross-listed under Topics in Technical and Professional Writing and Topics in New Media Studies—but it has raised some questions for our graduate faculty going forward, about whether to develop topics courses that investigate content strategy within the boundaries of a particular media type (e.g., “multimedia content strategy,” “social media content strategy”), or whether to develop a required, foundational content strategy course for our Professional and Technical Writing concentration, or whether to update courses already on the books to include approaches to writing-as-content. And while content is currently a good word to denote the characteristics and professional practices that I have described in these pages, given the cachet that the word has with many potential employers, it’s not entirely clear that the word will have staying power (witness hypertext, interactivity, and the many other “new media” words with a distinct shelf life). As is to be expected, integrating a new metaphor and its associated practices into our curricula may not be particularly straightforward.

**Conclusion: What’s at the Core?**

Throughout this essay, I have discussed reasons to embrace content and reasons to remain skeptical of it. Content, as I’ve suggested, is a simple word with
rich metaphoric connotations that can help us more fully see what it means to write in the digital age. The content professions offer a compellingly familiar understanding of the social and material dimensions of writing and are an intriguing career path for our students. But other aspects of content are troublesome. I’m sympathetic to the arguments of literary writers such as Tim Kreider, and I wonder how writing-as-a-craft will weather the commodification of writing-as-content. I’m disappointed that some of my best students have gone on to content creation jobs where they are expected to be hooked into their employer’s social media channels nearly 24-7, so that they might “keep the conversation going,” or respond quickly if something untoward is posted to Twitter. This does not seem like a pleasant or sustainable way to make a living. Finally, I’m skeptical of the rhetoric of organizational efficiency, profit, and ROI (return on investment) often used in the content professions to argue for why to develop a content strategy or invest in a content management system. This rhetoric will surely be off-putting to many of us who see the writing we teach as distinct from the aims of marketing and profit making. Returning again to Figure 2, writing is connected to many things we value, and perhaps even love: books, authors, pens on paper, memories. Not so content.

In particular, the fears of professional writers—that writing as an activity and as a product is being devalued in the climate of ubiquitous and fast-moving content—are a consequence that is worth taking seriously. The enthusiasm of widely read technology writers such as Clay Shirky risks normalizing this devaluation with innocent, even desirable-sounding words, like participation or contribution. The endgame for aspiring writers may be that writing is not a feasible profession, that writing becomes something one does for free, which has obvious implications about who can write (and implications for enrollments in writing studies programs). I note that industry texts for content strategists are often perceptive about these dangers—for example, Sara Wachter-Boettcher notes that attribution, copyright, and compensation are key issues that arise when content moves through networks. However such texts, which have a primary aim to codify professional practice, cannot be expected to do much more than point to these bigger problems.

I conclude with a proposition for how we might move from wary suspicion of content to productive intervention. Like many in writing studies, I consider my discipline’s core aims to be humanistic and not always unproblematically aligned with the aims of the PR, advertising, marketing, and communications.
professionals who are now leading the development of the content professions. Rhetoric is grounded in the aims of civic participation, education, and individual and social development, and it is these humanistic aims—not in selling products or pleasing customer-users—that guide our field’s work. From this position, I suggest that writing studies might think critically and creatively about what’s at the core of content work.

Halvorson and Rach offer a starting place, with “core strategy” occupying the center of their quad. Content strategy, say Halvorson and Rach, “defines how an organization (or project) will use content to achieve its objectives and meet its user needs” (96). Core strategy “sets the long-term direction for all of your content related-initiatives—ensuring all activities, big or small, are working toward the same magnificent future” (96). A core strategy, say the authors, may take a few pages to explain, but it can typically be synthesized as a single, memorable sentence, the “core strategy statement.” The authors present one example, for a hypothetical company, whose core strategy statement is to “Curate an entertaining, online reference guide that helps stressed-out law students become successful practicing attorneys” (101). While this is a viably practical core strategy, it might also be said to lack values that should be at “the core” of any writing initiative. What teachers and scholars in writing studies can do, as a productive way of intervening in content work, is articulate ways to include our field’s core values—such as social justice, civic participation, access, accessibility, ethics, and sustainability—in the core of content work. Said another way, the “magnificent future,” if we allow ourselves to believe in such a thing, is surely not one of higher sales, better ROI, or more customer satisfaction; it’s one where people feel agency, where fulfilling and just work is done, where big social problems are tackled.

How might teaching and researching content help to get us there? As Hart-Davidson et al. have done, we might partner with organizations to pursue content initiatives that forefront such values as access, participation, and sustainability. The Hart-Davidson and McCarthy teams worked on CMS implementation and website development projects, respectively, with a university library and national professional organization and with an administrative office, where needs and ends were articulated not in terms of sales numbers or ROI. Like the Multimedia Content Strategy service-learning course that I offered, such projects force consideration of content in a way that helps imagine its implications when content’s audience is not positioned as a time-strapped consumer, wanting to make a wise purchasing decision or being courted for brand loyalty. We might also describe ways to assess a strategy’s performance,
not by tracking numbers of hits and clicks, but rather by assessing worker and user experience through qualitative and ethnographic research. There is ample precedent for such work in technical and professional communication. And we might critically interrogate some of the taken-for-granted concepts in content work, those concepts so naturalized that they are not available for critique by practitioners. Nicole Porter’s critique of the totalizing and difference-flattening tendencies of centralized branding efforts, through a case analysis of the rebranding of the Blue Mountains in Australia, is a compelling example of such work.

As a single word, a metaphor, and a set of related practices, content offers a memorable way to keep some of the most important aspects of digital writing at the forefront of our teaching and research. Ultimately, the risks of ignoring writing-as-content or, likewise, dismissing it, are that we may miss an important opportunity to expand the conceptual, research, and pedagogical purview of writing studies in ways that are appropriate to the digital age.

Notes

1. While computability has been called by different names by other theorists of digital and new media—Janet Murray refers to the “procedural” nature of the digital medium, and Tony Feldman speaks of digital information as “manipulable”—the computable nature of digital media by virtue of its binary structure is typically defined as the most fundamental characteristic of such media.

2. See also Chris Anderson’s The Long Tail for a description of new patterns of circulation and valuation in networked space. For an entertaining and enlightening perspective on networks’ hunger for more content and the effects of ubiquitous content on journalism, see Alexis Madrigal’s “A Day in the Life of a Digital Editor.”

3. On a more critical note, content marketing also raises some compelling critical questions about authority and citation, as so-called branded content begins to fill spaces where we expect to find vetted and authoritative voices. The New York Times, for example, has created a self-described “custom content studio in the Advertising Department,” the T Brand Studio, that creates newsy-looking content that appears among their editorial content, even if this advertising content is (for now) clearly marked as “paid content.”

4. For details on key genres used in the content strategy process, see chapter 4 of Kissane’s Elements of Content Strategy and the “Core Deliverables” section of Abel and Bailie’s Language of Content Strategy.
5. The term content management, while still popular in technical communication, is not often used in the content professions, with the notable exceptions of Ann Rockley and Charles Cooper’s Managing Enterprise Content: A Unified Content Strategy and JoAnn T. Hackos’s Content Management for Dynamic Web Delivery. Both of these books were written early in the content professions’ development (Rockley and Cooper’s book is now in a second edition), before the phrase content management became so closely associated with a specific technology, the content management system. In industry publications, content management practices tend to be addressed under the professional category of content strategy.

6. Two examples of courses with “content” in their titles are Michigan State’s Content Management for Professional Writers and Virginia Tech’s Developing Online Content.


Works Cited


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