



Engaging your online audience: practical tips

In my presentation, I discussed three ways of making sure your audience stays engaged with your site or product, based on my experiences in the field of education. Below, you'll find common problems and practical tips to solve those problems. This is a practical guide: it will be most effective when you keep your site or product close at hand so you can make immediate changes.

Lifting the curse of knowledge

The curse of knowledge is a cognitive bias that suggests it's difficult for experts to explain things to others. [The Wikipedia entry](#) does a good job of rounding up some key research into the bias. Remember those times a classmate seemed way better at explaining things than the teacher? That's most likely due to the curse of knowledge. The curse of knowledge is everywhere. It's very important to regularly assess whether you're suffering from it.

Problem: The more you know, the more difficult it is to create something that is clear and intuitive to your users

Tip #1: Do user research

Before you can solve any problems, you have to identify them first. Get users without any previous knowledge together in a room. Let them use your product or navigate your site. Find pain points and eliminate them. If getting people into a room is difficult for you, surveys can help as well. Ask people what parts of your product they found difficult to use.

Tip #2: Add scaffolding

Actively providing extra context and bridging the gap between you and your users is crucial. Scaffolding is a concept in the field of learning that entails all activities an instructor carries out to support students where they can't handle a task on

their own. That's exactly what you should do as well. Some things you may consider adding:

- Clickable question marks that clarify difficult terms;
- Internal links to articles that explain a concept you use in a more difficult article;
- Images that clarify what you're trying to say;
- Tutorial videos;
- Live chat or email support;
- Documentation / lessons / articles that your users can use to understand;
- Step-by-step plans / flowcharts / instructions
- An indication of the level of an article so users can make an informed choice to read or not to read an article.

Always try to make this scaffolding as little invasive as possible. You don't want to annoy more advanced users.

Tip #3: Create in a team and work peer review into the creation process

We all have our blind spots. What's clear to you might be unclear to anyone else. By creating your materials in a team and peer reviewing your content, you're more likely to identify problem areas. If you're self employed, reach out to others and review each other's products or sites. There are plenty of people struggling with similar issues; the least we can do is help each other out, right?

Tip #4: Audit your materials periodically

Often, it helps to look back on something you made at a later time. When you review something you wrote three months ago, you've already lost some of the context and perspective you wrote it with. Which, in this case, is a huge advantage!

When you audit your materials, make sure to consider:

- Your intended message: do the materials convey it effectively?
- The use of jargon
- Assumptions about previous knowledge users have available to them
- Scaffolding
- Readability

Minimizing cognitive load

When humans do things, they use a cognitive system called [working memory](#). This memory saves information in our brains for a few seconds to a few minutes. It allows us to make sense of what we're doing. Unfortunately, working memory is limited. It's easily overstimulated. If it is, people get frustrated or distracted. This leads to them clicking away or growing tired of your product. Managing working memory is key to keeping your audience engaged.

Problem: Working memory is limited and easy overstimulated.

Tip #5: Less is more

As creators, we like to get fancy. We want what we make to be cool and fun. Sometimes, this leads to fluff features or content. Carefully consider: does what I'm adding make the whole better? If it doesn't, remove it. Addition by subtraction is a very powerful tool for engagement.

Tip #6: Pay a lot of attention to readability

One of the most common problems on websites is readability. Most copy is much more difficult to read than it should be. Writing shorter sentences and using fewer difficult words can help your usability tremendously. Even if your audience is smart, easy-to-read copy is very working memory friendly. It simply costs less energy to read. This energy can then be spent on more important things. One way to improve readability is by ruthlessly editing your copy. Ideally, you should spend more time editing your text than writing it.

Tip #7: Break everything down into bite-size chunks

The working memory struggles with large blocks of information. The human mind needs focus, and it's up to you to create this focus. Don't write 30-word sentences or 20-sentence paragraphs. Don't crowd your menu with 20 categories. Don't stuff 20 options into one tab. It's overwhelming. Break your materials down into bite-size chunks that are easy to oversee, so your users can focus on what really matters.

Tip #8: Unlock your product or site-wide structure

It's very reassuring for users to be able to see the bigger picture. By clearly signposting the high-level structure of your site or product, users will know where they are and where they are able to go. This, again, saves valuable energy. You never want your user to feel lost or disoriented. You can use menus, breadcrumbs, categories and tags to add structure.

Creating a connection

To this point, I've mostly looked at the more technical aspects of online engagement: crafting your products to fit your users' cognitive needs. But one of the most powerful ways to engage your online audience is by creating that fuzzy feeling of comfort, familiarity and connection. Of course, the first requirement for this is a usable product or site. There are lots of extra things you can do, though, to help reinforce your relationship with your user.

Problem: most sites and product aren't unique or engaging enough to establish a true connection.

Tip #9: Invest in design and branding

It's tough to overstate the power of consistent design and branding. Our Yoast avatars are a great example. All over the WordPress community, our avatars are immediately recognized as they stand out from the crowd in e.g. lists of speakers at conferences. The same goes for the images we use in posts and presentations. Providing your users with a similarly positive experience over all the different places where they interact with you, helps you get recognized and valued.

Tip #10: Use the power of storytelling

Stories can be an incredibly powerful medium to making a connection with your audience. Most people remembers one or more teachers who were always able to get you on the edge of your seat with great stories which helped you remember what they were trying to explain. Stories and narrative are how people connect and communicate with each other. And storytelling isn't necessarily about writing a large piece of fiction. You can just as easily hide little nuggets of storytelling in your blog posts or product. Yoast CEO Marieke has written [a great series on storytelling](#) that you should definitely check out.

Tip #11: Use the power of images

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. This doesn't always fly, of course; I doubt I would have been better off drawing one and a half pictures than writing this text, especially with my drawing skills. Still, images are very powerful when it comes to conjuring up emotions and connecting on a basic level. The images our artist Erwin draws for our posts are among our most appreciated publications.

Tip #12: Become active in communities

Connecting with your audience doesn't only happen when they're actually using your site or product. Going 'into the wild' and meeting the people that use your products is a great way of engaging both your existing and your potential audience.

Tip #13: Invest in support

Even if you're awesome, try your hardest and create something wonderful, some things are going to go wrong. In those cases, you have to make sure people will be able to reach you, so you can help them and re-establish a feeling of trust. The students I was able to teach least in my classes were the ones I failed to connect with and stopped coming to me with questions. I always heavily invested in trying to reconnect with them, to varying degrees of success. A good relationship between the parties involved is one of the main ingredients of lasting success, whether it's in a classroom or online.

Conclusion

The thirteen tips listed are a collection of insights I gained through my experience as a teacher, product owner and online writer. There are lots and lots more things you can do to make sure your online audience stays engaged. But honestly, if you get all of this right, you're probably a fair number of steps ahead on almost everyone. Good luck!