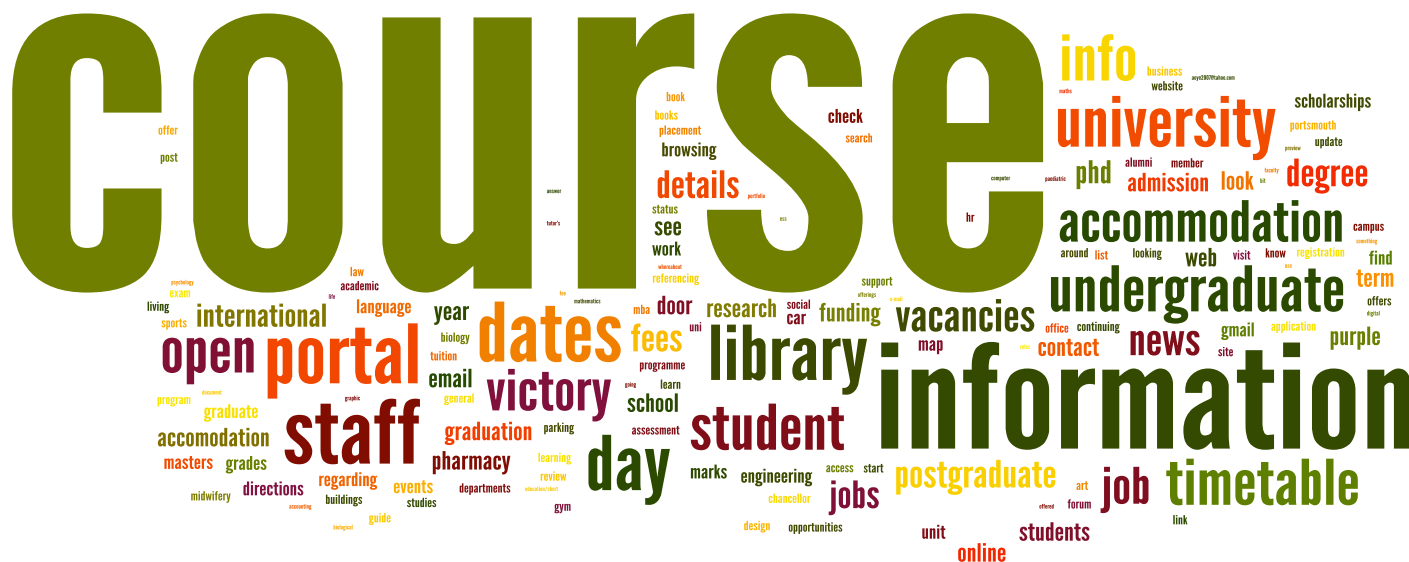




NewCity | David Poteet



This is a “word cloud” made from answers to a 2012 intercept survey in which 400 visitors to the University of Portsmouth (UK) website were asked, “What did you come to the website looking for today?”



First, if they're not already familiar with your institution, they're likely to start from a Google search based on the degree program and a region, like "top physics courses in the UK." If you're doing search optimization, they might click on your institution directly from the search results, but they're more likely to end up on a website that

ranks universities that offer that degree program (the same pattern shows up for many types of product and service searches).

If they find their way to your website from Google, it will almost always bring them directly to the degree program landing page, or to the academic department landing page.

Those people who already know about your institution may start from your home page. If they do, they don't meander through the site, stopping to read marketing messages or watching extraneous videos. They look for words like "Academics" or "Majors" ("Courses" in the UK) and follow that scent trail through the site until they find the degree program page they're seeking. Bear in mind that their first impression of your institution is being influenced by how painless this experience is. They won't notice it unless it's bad.

Whether someone starts from a Google search or from your home page, they don't pay much attention to any content until they find this degree program page. Once they find it, they start trying to answer their top questions from the degree program landing page.

These are the questions every degree program landing page should answer:

- ✓ What is the major/course in _____ like at this university?
- ✓ What sort of things will I learn in the first year?
- ✓ Does it sound interesting? Exciting? Challenging? Practical?
- ✓ Is there anything I recognize that seems familiar from what I've done in secondary school?
- ✓ What are the entry requirements? Can I get in?
- ✓ What do other students say about it?
- ✓ What are the lecturers like?
- ✓ What sort of student activities could I get involved in related to this major/course?
- ✓ How is it better than or distinct from similar majors/courses at other universities?
- ✓ What sort of career opportunities will I really have? What have graduates gone on to do? How will it do a better job preparing me for my career or connecting me to opportunities?

As they seek answers to these specific questions about the degree program, they're also forming an impression about these key choice factors:

- ✓ How would I fit in at this university?
- ✓ What's it like to be a student there?
- ✓ Is it in a town/city where I'd like to be?
- ✓ What makes this university special?

At the same time, most universities have some important ideas they want to get across to prospective students. Call them “key messages” or “brand promises” as you like (If your institution's messages include “academic excellence” or “friendly supportive environment” then we need to have a separate talk about real differentiation.) There's usually some part of the website controlled by the admissions or marketing office where these messages live, but too often they are not woven into the content of the degree program pages.

But if the user path I describe above is true for your institution, then students won't notice these messages until they reach and start to explore the degree program!

This is my first point, and it's true not just in higher education but everywhere. **If your audience or customer comes to you on a mission, with a key question – answer their question! Help them accomplish their first goal!** Make that experience delightful and intriguing. During or after meeting their first goal, they'll be open to ideas about your institution/company/product that make it the right choice for them.

Too many websites are like one of those free vacation offers where you have to listen to a two-hour sales pitch before you can enjoy your vacation, all the while feeling guilty that you have no plans to buy a timeshare condominium – except that on a website people can leave with a click and no guilt.

This is why you can't separate brand strategy from user experience and content strategy. A user's first impressions about your brand are heavily impacted by the experience they have pursuing their first goals on your website. They will always infer things about the institution itself from the experience of the website. Unless “out of date,” “disorganized” or “pretty much like everyone else” are brand attributes you want to communicate, it's time to focus on the content and experience users find when they reach their first big goal on your website.

If that's true, then what's the best way to communicate your key messages once they've reached their goal? The answer brings me to my second point, the idea of **“Show, Don't Tell.”**

Here's the definition of “Show Don't Tell” as given by Roy Williams in *The Wizard of Ads* (<http://www.rhw.com/youll-laugh-youll-cry/>).

“If you want the truth to prevail, you must cause people to realize the truth. This requires much more skill than is required to simply tell it... The truth we are told is truth we may not accept; the truth we have realized is the only truth we own.”

To do this, you give people sensory details and substantive facts that support the truth you want to communicate. Then let them come to their own conclusions. When they do, they'll realize them with far greater conviction.

Case study: University of Portsmouth

In the interest of *showing* you what I mean, I'll share a case study from the University of Portsmouth in the UK. We worked with Portsmouth to develop their overall digital strategy — how they should structure their website and focus their creative energy to help prospective students see why Portsmouth would be a great choice.

The University of Portsmouth is not Oxford or Cambridge, nor is it trying to be. It has some top-ranking programs like astrophysics, nursing and languages. All of its courses are solid, but it does a great job serving students at varying levels. In our research we learned:

- ➔ Students love the way they are challenged without it being a high-pressure, competitive environment.
- ➔ Students who are hardworking and motivated but maybe not the best test-takers can do well at Portsmouth.
- ➔ The teachers love to teach, and aren't just doing it so they can get back to their research.
- ➔ Students love going to a modern university in a fun city by the sea that's not too small or too big.

We dug up buried treasure too, like the fact that every course is required to have a component of real-world or simulated real-world experience. Portsmouth's Vice

Chancellor at the time, John Craven, said "Our students should graduate 'oven ready.'" One amazing example of this is the Forensics House, in which students from the criminal justice, criminology, forensics, and law programs take part in the investigation and prosecution of a simulated crime. This was hidden in some boring text under a tab on the Criminal Justice course page.

The university was also dealing with a perception still held by some that the city of Portsmouth is a "depressed formal naval town." This in no way describes the present city, but old perceptions die hard.

After our discovery process, we determined that these were the key messages we wanted to convey on the web-

site, which we believed would differentiate Portsmouth from its closest competitors and resonate with students:

- ➔ Portsmouth has the right course for me
- ➔ A place where I can succeed
- ➔ Real-life learning - ALL courses required to have work-related learning
- ➔ Excellent career help, with strong business connections



Portsmouth Criminology and Forensics students investigate a mock crime scene in the Forensics House.

- ➔ Students love Portsmouth, proven by rankings, student reviews, lots of social activities
- ➔ Teachers who love to teach and care about the success of their students
- ➔ Seaside location, lovely campus in the heart of a thriving city
- ➔ Atmosphere - friendly, supportive and open



Portsmouth Harbour with the historic dockyards on the left and Gunwharf Quays shopping centre to the right. The University of Portsmouth campus is just three blocks from the harbour.

Practicing “show, don't tell” meant that we had to find ways to demonstrate or prove these truths through stories (text, images, video) and substantive facts that would help audiences realize these truths without us droning on with the sort of vague marketing messages that don't convince anyone.

Showing doesn't mean not using words — but it does mean using words that illustrate and prove.

After our initial work on Portsmouth's digital strategy, they hired ClearLeft (<http://clearleft.com>), a well-regarded UK interactive design firm in nearby Brighton, to design and build their website. We went through all of our research and recommendations with ClearLeft, and they led Portsmouth through the redesign process from that point forward.


ClearLeft saw that the audience research pointed to the course page as being the most important goal page on the website. They argued that the project should start with making these course pages excellent, and then work outward from there. Claire Brookes, Portsmouth's Head of Corporate Communications, said that at first they were reluctant because they knew the course pages would be the hardest part to tackle, requiring cooperation and negotiation with all of the academic departments. But in the end she said they realized this was the right priority, and they set to work.

After this win, ClearLeft took another bold move — using a card sort with prospective students to show Portsmouth that the way students would group their courses together didn't necessarily match up with the way they were organized into colleges and departments. The card sort suggested grouping together all of the courses that had to do with crime and law for example, even though “Criminal Justice” and “Law and Criminology” are in two different parts of the university.

FINISHED

Overview	Cards	Categories	Similarity Matrix	Standardization Grid	Dendrograms	PCA
The similarity matrix shows the percentage of participants who agree with each card pairing. You can view the number of times a pair of cards were grouped together by hovering your mouse over the pair's score cell in the matrix. Our algorithm attempts to cluster similar cards along the right edge of the matrix. Learn More						
Includes results from the 26 participants who submitted valid results.						
Contemporary Fine Art - BA						
96	Animation - BA					
96 96	Graphic Design - BA					
76 76 76	Art and Design - PhD					
73 73 73 88	Fine Art - Masters					
73 73 73 88 96	Design for Digital Media - Masters					
73 73 73 88 96 96	Graphic Design - Masters					
50 50 50 65 69 69 69	English - Masters					
50 50 50 69 65 65 65 88	English - PhD					
65 65 65 50 50 50 50 76 76	English Literature - BA					
65 65 65 50 50 50 50 73 73 92	English and Drama - BA					
73 73 73 57 53 53 53 73 69 88 88	Drama and Performance - BA					
30 30 30 34 34 34 34 57 57 61 53	School of English and Drama					
61 61 61 57 53 53 53 30 30 30 30 38 61	School of Art, Design and Media					
19 19 19 19 19 19 19 19 19 19 19 42 46	Faculties & departments list					
0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 3 0 0 0 0 7 7 34	Campus map					
0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 11 11 34 61	campus parking					
0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 3 3 7 26 34	Hall fees					
0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 7 15 30 76	Private housing					
0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 3 3 7 23 30 73 73	Living in halls					
3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 0 0 3 26 23 50 34 34	Fees and funding					
0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 3 3 11 34 30 57 38 34 88	Fee payment options					
3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 0 0 11 42 23 30 19 26 73 65	How to apply					
3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 0 0 15 46 23 26 15 23 65 57 80	Get a prospectus					
3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 0 0 11 46 23 23 15 23 46 38 57 69	Visit the university					
3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 0 0 15 34 15 15 7 15 34 26 50 53 65	Why choose University of Portsmouth?					
3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 0 0 19 34 23 11 3 11 34 26 46 50 53 80	Fact & figures about the university					
3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 0 0 11 26 23 11 3 11 34 26 46 50 76 84	University league table ranking					
3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 0 0 2 3 11 15 10 22 10 15 22 22 50 28 28	About the city of Portsmouth					

By doing these two things, the University of Portsmouth ensured that students starting from the home page or from Google would have an easy experience finding the course, and once they reached the course page, it would give them an excellent introduction not just to the course, but to Portsmouth as a whole.



University of
Portsmouth

Courses ^

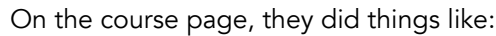
Why Portsmouth?

Application, Fees & Funding

Research

- > Accounting, Economics and Finance
- > Art and Design
- > Business and Management
- > Education, Childhood and Youth Studies
- > English and Journalism
- > Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences
- > History, Politics and Social Studies
- > Mathematics and Physics
- > Psychology
- > Architecture, Civil Engineering and Surveying
- > Biological Sciences
- > Computing and Creative Technologies
- > Engineering
- > Film, Media and Performing Arts
- > Health Sciences and Social Work
- > Law and Criminology
- > Modern Languages and Area Studies
- > Sports Science

> All Courses A-Z



- ✓ Give a summary of the sort of interesting things a student will learn in the course
- ✓ Explain in plain language what students with this degree go on to do for a career
- ✓ Show entry requirements in an easy to understand sidebar
- ✓ Outline the course content year by year
- ✓ Show the facilities and simulated learning environments for this course
- ✓ Embed video interviews with students talking about the course
- ✓ Showcase some of the teachers in the course
- ✓ Provide clear next steps, like inquiring or signing up for an open day visit.



One of the next most important goals students have after deciding whether the degree program sounds good is to see what the campus and accommodations are like. They want to see PICTURES OF RESIDENCE HALL ROOMS. Like most universities,

these were hard to find or unavailable on the Portsmouth site. ClearLeft proposed making their accommodations page look more like an estate agent's website where you'd look for a flat (apartment). On the page shown here, they present a simple list with photos of exterior, bedroom, common room and toilet, along with cost and whether it includes catered meals or not.

Students have responded very well to this approach, and Portsmouth has continued to reach its enrollment targets in an increasingly competitive UK higher ed landscape.

We recently ran a comparative usability test that included the Portsmouth website alongside four other UK institutions. We asked students to explore each

website to see if they thought it would be a good fit for them. Without prompting, 90% of them immediately looked for the course in which they were interested as the first way to answer this question. After visiting all four university websites, Portsmouth was the "best fit" choice for the majority of participants. It was also perceived as most innovative and most welcoming.





Our test participants described the university of Portsmouth in these terms after a visit:

- ➔ "Good-ranking university"
- ➔ "The website grabs my attention...lots of interesting things I can go to"
- ➔ "Nice bold pictures, it's easy to navigate. I like the colors and layout"
- ➔ "It's easy to find the courses. The course page is like a page out of someone's notebook...has everything you need."

Shared bathroom, and kitchen and dining facilities:

Bateson Hall
GUILDHALL HALLS

281 city centre rooms in self-contained single-sex flats accommodating 5 to 6 students





£82 p/w

SELF-CATERED

£3,042 per 37-week session

Bateson Hall Large Rooms
GUILDHALL HALLS

287 city centre rooms in self-contained single-sex flats accommodating 5 to 6 students





£91 p/w

SELF-CATERED

£3,390 per 37-week session

Trust Hall
LANGSTONE STUDENT VILLAGE

62 rooms in self-contained flats accommodating 8 students overlooking the harbour. Additional self-contained flats near the harbour for 4 to 6 students, close to Trust Hall.

£81 p/w





SELF-CATERED

£2,999 per 37-week session

Shared bathroom, 2 meals a day:

Burrell House
REES/BURRELL

132 rooms close to the seafront. Arranged corridor style, all meals taken in Rees Hall

£101 p/w





CATERED

£3,767 per 37-week session

Ensuite rooms, 2 meals a day:

Rees Hall
REES/BURRELL

267 en suite rooms close to the seafront. Arranged corridor style with 2 communal TV lounges.

£126 p/w

CATERED

£4,676 per 37-week session

Claire Brookes and I gave a presentation at CASE Europe in 2013 on brand differentiation in higher ed. To illustrate this effect, we had everyone pair up with a partner to conduct a test that you can easily reproduce with your own website.

Each pair was given one of these two personas and given the task of looking for the desired degree program on one of four university websites we assigned.

Tara <ul style="list-style-type: none"> discovered love for physics with excellent teacher in secondary school, A-levels confirmed this interest starting final year of 6th form college trying to decide whether to stay in the UK or study abroad plays piano, would like to continue interest in music while at university 	Marcus <ul style="list-style-type: none"> good student, not a “conventional” thinker has produced videos for his school would like to do something with media, film or communications — not exactly sure yet taking a media studies course at A-level wants a uni course that’s flexible, can tailor to his particular interests
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We tested with two universities from the US and two from the UK.

As the partners moved through a website, they had to explain to each other what they noticed or were thinking on a page, and they had to agree before they could click on anything. This sort of “paired usability test,” while not entirely realistic, is a great way to elicit what’s going on inside someone’s head as they pursue a goal.

After about 10 minutes, we asked people to answer these questions for each of the four universities:

- ➔ How would you describe this university?
- ➔ What would you tell your friend about this course/major?
- ➔ What do you think this university is known for? What sets them apart?
- ➔ With a thumb up, down or somewhere in between, would you apply now or keep looking?

Admittedly, this was a room full of higher education professionals, not 17-year-olds, but the results were striking. One might expect higher ed communications professionals to seek out some key messages (after all, we help write them), but they behaved pretty much like the 17-year-olds we observe.

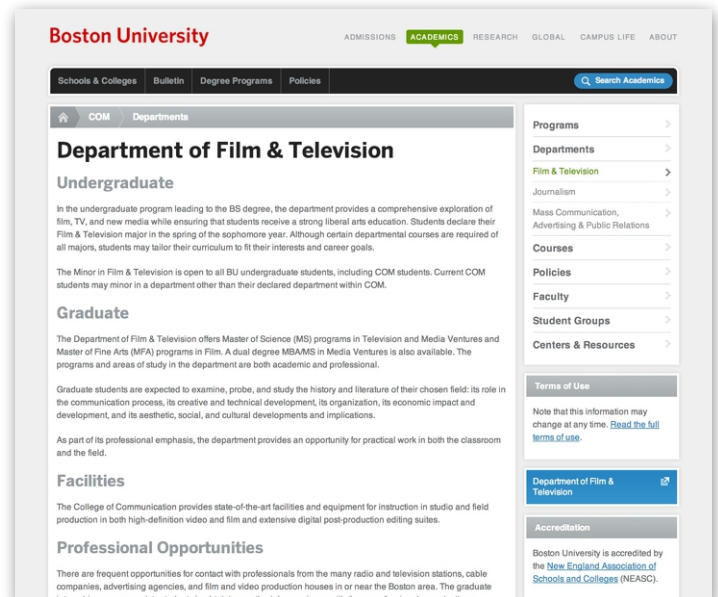
Bear in mind that these were all top universities we selected for the test. Claire and I had already reviewed the key messages of each institution prior to the workshop, so that we could see how much of them were echoed by our participants after the test. The answer was very little, perhaps 10% at best. We were more likely to hear words like “confusing,” “standard” or “uninspiring.” Only one of the four universities managed a clear win on the thumb meter.

Four strategic blunders showed up repeatedly in these tests:

- 1. Just using the catalog/prospectus description.** In some cases the major or course page they found was just a regurgitation of the description from the course catalog or prospectus. This copy is often written for accrediting organizations, not real human students. It can be interchanged between different universities with no noticeable difference.
- 2. Duplicate degree program pages.** In other cases there were actually two different versions of the major/course page — one in the academic department's website and one in an admissions area of the site. Boston University has an amazing Film and Television micro-site (<http://www.bu.edu/com/academics/film-tv/>) that does a great job of conveying the experience of this program. Unfortunately, most of our pairs that tested the site ended up on the other version here: <http://www.bu.edu/academics/com/departments/film-television/>. They left unimpressed.



The version the department wants you to see.



The version most of our participants found.

If you have two versions of your major/course pages, Google will almost always send people to the one in the academic department's site, not the admissions version. Look at your analytics and this will be pretty obvious.

3. Using proof points that aren't actually that impressive or substantial. These can undermine a beautiful site design quickly. For instance:

- A quote from a student about how they loved the program, but there's no detail or context to the quote, and only one student quote is available.
- News about a research finding, award or other thing that happened many years ago, with nothing more recent.

- A vague list of jobs you might get with this degree, but no actual examples from graduates

4. Not connecting the degree program to all the other great content elsewhere on the site that proves the quality of this program. This blunder wasn't obvious to our test participants since they didn't know what they were missing, but we knew that in many cases there were great news articles, projects, events and personal profiles that would have made a much stronger case for the program and the university.

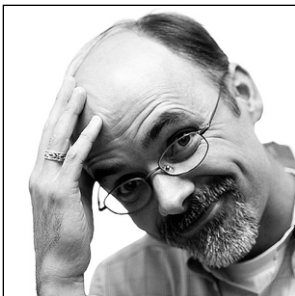
Prove it for yourself.

I encourage anyone to try this test on your own website. It's easy to reproduce and the research question is simple: Do or don't visitors to your website come away...

1. having met their goals?
2. believing the truths you want them to know about you?
3. inclined to choose you?

After you try it, consider focusing on the top goal content on your website and using that as the place you begin to prove what you promise. Then make that goal content easy to find, no matter where someone starts!

In higher ed, if you want to be smart about attracting prospective students, that first goal is the degree program. Start there. Make it great. Trust me, nothing else (except maybe your home page) is more important.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Poteet is the founder and president of NewCity, an interactive design agency with particular expertise in education, science and culture. An alumnus of Virginia Tech, David has been involved with the web since its earliest days, creating the first website for Radford University in 1994 while working as a designer there. David left to start NewCity in 1995.

David teaches regular workshops on user experience and web content including "Beyond Blah Blah: Creating Great Content for the Web." David has led strategy and user experience for clients including the Grand Teton Association, the American Battle Monuments Commission, the University of Portsmouth, and the University of Leicester.

Please contact us if you are interested in having David speak at your event or teach a workshop for your team. <http://www.insidenewcity.com/contact>