Over the past 20 years or so, I’ve worked on many projects that required an understanding of metadata, taxonomy and other structural ideas to support the business goals for a particular project. In information architecture, these ideas and structures are the obvious solution to making complex systems and knowledge accessible to the person who needs them.

In this column a couple of years ago (“The Curse of Metadata,” Bulletin, October 2015), I mentioned how I’d struggled at first to understand the idea of metadata that now feels like water to me. It’s funny, because I don’t remember many moments of learning in my lifetime. But I remember very clearly my geometry class in high school, and I remember learning about metadata. The feeling was exactly the same: Many days of fog and struggle, followed by the absolute epiphany that cemented my understanding for good.

If you work with digital systems today, you don’t have time for the many days of fog and struggle when it comes to metadata. So I’m excited about a book published this winter that will help many digital professionals shortcut that work: Metadata Basics for Web Content: The Unification of Structured Data and Content, by Michael C. Andrews (Amazon Digital Services, 2017).

Like many of us who’ve been around this business a while, I learned almost everything I know by doing it. (For instance, I started my master’s in information science when I was well into my career, and my initial motivation was to have a visible certification of the knowledge I’d gained over years of work.) Trial and error and books from other practitioners have been my informal classroom for years. And through that work and that informal learning, I’ve noticed that our own industry silos can leave gaps in our understanding.

That’s a part of Michael Andrews’ motivation to create this book, as it turns out. “I don’t think I am writing about something that’s exotic, but it tends to straddle many areas, so no one person feels they own the issue,” Andrews says. Metadata started out as a fully technical discipline, the purview of data administrators and was perhaps used by programmers as well. But as our digital capabilities have opened structural complexity to more kinds of work, it turns out that information architects, content strategists and user experience professionals often need that understanding as well.

Metadata Basics fully delivers on its promise and then some – it goes beyond the basics that I’ve seen covered elsewhere for sure. I particularly love that Andrews takes the time early on to define the terms he’s using; he notes that we still have significant disagreement or confusion in

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the industry about the exact meaning of many terms. I’ve taken the charitable view for a long time that our terminology confusion is but a sign of a growing industry, but Andrews is wise to lay out his position there. He also quickly demonstrates how metadata in the web era has far surpassed its original uses of categorizing and organizing—and so our discussions grow more complex.

Andrews’ book does a lovely job of moving from the basics to a more technical understanding, and it gives you lots of jumping-off points if your work requires a real technical perspective. One of my favorite things about his work is that it does dive into the technical. So many otherwise valuable works on metadata aimed at the information architecture or content strategy community are cursory at best in their explanations of the technical side of metadata work. But to be effective, we have to be fluent in the technical as well as the conceptual. *Metadata Basics* puts you in that game.

Another bonus: Andrews doesn’t just tell you about encoding standards; he compares them and suggests when one is more valuable or useful than another. He explains relationships and actual use cases. He connects the dots between business goals and technical realities in a very concrete way.

If you’re doing information architecture in 2017, Michael Andrews’ *Metadata Basics for Web Content* is a great reference to help you turn your structural concepts into working applications.