Writing Workshops from the Shipley Group Perspective

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For over two decades Shipley consultants have conducted writing workshops for corporate and governmental employees and their managers.

What do these managers and their employees expect to be taught in the name of writing improvement?

Some probably think that the sessions will be a good review of punctuation basics, with a little bit of sentence structure thrown in. Others hope for employees who can rapidly write an effective e-mail or memo. Still others ask our consultants to tailor a session to a key document—perhaps an internal audit report, the standard monthly report to corporate headquarters, or an Environmental Assessment...

A participant in a session years ago probably took the prize for the most unusual expectation. He commented to our consultant: "I don't think you can help me. My handwriting is terrible. No one can read my writing."

For the record, no Shipley session has ever addressed handwriting skills. And no such session is in the planning stages. After all, handwriting is a learned motor skill and one that would require weeks of practice exercises to produce measurable improvement.

Also for the record, we only occasionally teach basic punctuation or word choice (as in comma rules or *its* vs. *it's*). Instead, we usually refer participants to good reference books. Our experience suggests that professional adults rarely need a detailed review of basic punctuation and mechanics.

Whatever problems writers may be having with their documents, solutions usually involve issues much more important than whether all the commas are correct or whether the sentences are smoothly written.

Quality documents grow from a carefully chosen content, an effective page design, and a clear organization, not from minor corrections of spelling or punctuation.

The Shipley Group's view of writing is a practical one. It presumes that a writer has something worthwhile and necessary to communicate and that readers need to know whatever the writer is communicating.

This view of writing focuses on just how useful and user-friendly the written information is. The presumption is that quality grows from the overall design of the document, including the chosen content.

The Shipley Communication Model

Successful written communication must be as close to 100 percent clear as possible. This premise is the basis for all of Shipley Group's writing programs. This premise is the goal of Writing for Technical Specialists and Clear Writing for National Environmental Policy Act Specialists (specialized workshops especially for environmental writers)*. It is also the goal of our recently developed Right Writing workshop. Right Writing is for business and technical writers in private companies.

This Shipley communication model is as follows:

	Writers	Readers
At the Start	**1. Preview**	**2. Predict**
Follow-Up	**3. Review/ Revisit**	**4. Retrieve**

The four steps/stages are easily remembered by the formula PR^2. Or in an alternate version: P^2R^2. Whichever version you choose, the basic steps are the same as those in the above matrix.

Notice that these four steps are conceptually broad and general. Obviously good writing must conform to dozens, even hundreds of other rules. The rationale for PR^2 is that writers (and readers) can use the conceptual model to work through almost any communication problem. And capturing the model in a brief formula is a good way to encourage workshop participants to remember the model's essential principles.

The four steps are the key to effective written and oral communication. The steps also reflect the crucial links between what writers record and how readers interpret and remember the recorded information.

Preview (Step 1)

Writers should always preview or introduce their content. This principle follows the old adage from oral presentations: "Tell folks what you're gonna tell 'em." If you tell them what to expect, they can begin to read (or listen) with a conceptual framework in mind.

Two kinds of preview are possible.

The first is a preview of the main point or conclusion the writer intends to discuss (sometimes called the writer's thesis). For example, a business writer might open with a statement that she intends to show why hiring an outside accounting firm is a good business decision. Or, an environmental writer might open by recording that water quality impacts are high enough to be a concern under certain conditions.

The second kind of preview lists the reasons supporting the main point or conclusion. As in the preceding business example, the writer could list the four reasons why an outside accounting firm is desirable. And the environmental writer could list the conditions that lead to his conclusion about potential water quality impacts.

Documents, whether short or long, should have both kinds of previews. And if well done, previews mean that readers have no surprises after the opening or introductory section.

Good previews are really executive summaries of the information to follow.

Note that previews are desirable for whole documents, for subsections, and even for paragraphs. Writers should be consciously **writing from major points**, not leading up to major points.

Previews are important because they allow readers to predict what information follows the opening section or the opening paragraph.

Predict (Step 2)

Predicting the content in a document turns the communication focus from writers to readers. Readers should be able to survey the opening section of a document or of a subsection and then predict both what information will follow and how that information will be organized.

A reader's predictions are a crucial test of a document's readability. In a highly readable document, readers can score close to 100 percent in their predictions of the content to follow. Conversely, an unpredictable document is difficult to read, perhaps is even unreadable. This principle was the basis for an early readability test, which blanked out every tenth word (or optionally, every fifth word). The more readable the text, the easier readers could accurately guess the blanked out words.

This readability test reflects a reader's ability to impose a pattern or a framework on content. Without such a framework, content (as in the missing words) is fragmentary and even illogical.

Such content is difficult for readers to read and extremely hard for them to remember, even assuming that they can understand individual statements and isolated sentences. Poorly written passages are neither readable nor memorable, so their usefulness to readers is low.

Another simple readability test of a document is as follows. Cover all but the initial sentence (or the subject line in an e-mail). Ask potential readers what the next sentence will discuss. After they predict the content, uncover that sentence and check their predictions. Next ask readers what the third sentence will discuss. Again, verify the predictions. Continue uncovering sentences throughout the opening section or paragraph.

If predictions are not correct (or perhaps even impossible to make), the document is poorly written.

In a well-written document, readers should be able to make accurate predictions about what the whole document or section will discuss and how the information will be organized.

A well-planned documentation project necessarily includes prediction tests similar to those described above. Without such tests, writers will not know if their documents have been successful.

Review/Revisit (Step 3)

Reviewing returns the communication focus to writers. Writers should review and revisit both their major conclusions and their supporting reasons. Review is essentially a form of repetition, but repetition with additional supporting information.

A review of major conclusions and reasons repeats major points in the same order as they were given in the initial preview. This repetition provides details and specifics so that readers can understand key

points and the writer's rationale for these points. Good writers usually try to anticipate their readers' questions by providing details and examples that answer potential questions.

"No surprises!" is a good motto for writers to keep in mind. Readers should not be surprised by any of the information in this review of major points. This is another way of saying that the preview of major points (step 1 above) should have covered all major points.

Notice also that repetition is a documentation virtue. In our school years many of us learned that repetition was a writing no-no. The reverse is true in well-written, edited professional documents. Such professional documents have clearly designed, deliberate repetition.

Retrieve (Step 4)

Retrieving returns to a focus on readers. Most readers are likely to want to know selected things about a topic. They are unlikely to want to read a document line by line and page by page. Or, if they have read the document carefully, they want to retrieve key points rapidly.

So a well-written document is one that allows readers to retrieve information rapidly and accurately. Retrieval is a valuable test of the readability or usability of a document.

A simple test of retrieval success is to time one or several readers as they search back through a document for key points. The longer it takes them to find the requested information, the weaker the document. Notice, also, that if several readers are searching for the same point, they should all arrive at the same content points (thus meeting the Shipley Group goal of 100 percent clarity).

As with prediction (step 2 above), retrieval tests should be built into any documentation project. Without such tests, writers have no way of knowing if their written documents have been successful in meeting the Shipley goal of 100 percent clarity.

Quality Writing and the PR^2 Model

The PR^2 model is necessarily a high-level tool. It looks at what writers choose to record and how this recorded information is presented. And it also looks at how easily readers can find and interpret the recorded information.

Shipley writing workshops all begin with these high-level concepts, primarily because this is where document quality begins.

Our workshops also do cover, as appropriate, questions and problems dealing with paragraph structure and the flow of thought from sentence to sentence. Well-written paragraphs and sentences are necessary for a document to be excellent, but they are not sufficient.

Some documents, for example, are correct at the paragraph and sentence level, but they fail to cover the necessary information (from a reader's point of view). Or the overall organization is so muddled that readers fail to find major conclusions or to understand the rationale for these conclusions.

Quality writing, from the Shipley perspective, reflects the whole document. It begins with excellent and appropriate information that writers have logically arranged. It also requires that the each paragraph and each sentence be well written and clear.

Lastly, quality writing conforms to accepted patterns of correct mechanics, including punctuation and spelling.

Quality writing is 100 percent clear!

*Related Shipley Group Workshops:

Writing for Technical Specialists (WTS)
March 22-24, 2005 – Las Vegas, NV

Clear Writing for NEPA Specialists (ECW)
July 13-15, 2005 – Las Vegas, NV