

Review: The Key to Quality Documents

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How often do you ask your supervisor or a colleague to review a key report before you submit it? What about e-mails? Do important e-mails receive careful and timely internal review before you send them? Are such reviews your personal policy or the policy of your company or agency?

Such questions came to mind as I discussed documentation policies with engineers in a recent Shipley technical writing workshop. Their company has well-defined policies for its formal reports, but policies about e-mails and other less-formal documents are sketchy or missing. Workshop participants admitted that e-mails occasionally went outside the company when they shouldn't. Most of the time the only reviewer of an e-mail was its writer!

I suspect most companies and agencies have sketchy or missing policies about the need for review of documents.

What about key National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) reports? Who routinely reviews your impact analyses for accurate and credible conclusions? How carefully do you or your colleagues conduct criteria-driven reviews before you judge a report ready for publishing in an EIS or EA?

The following recommendations are general enough to apply to any company or agency. They are also generic enough to apply both to NEPA documents and to important documents with other purposes. I discuss each of these recommendations in the following article.

Recommendations

- 1. Establish formal review policies for all documents going outside the company or agency, including e-mails.**
- 2. Be sure that reviewers include the assigned company/agency representative.**
- 3. Allot time in your documentation schedule for careful reviews and the inevitable revisions.**

4. Appoint a person to keep a running list of company/agency consistency edits.

5. Remember, as you write, that each document, no matter how short or informal, may eventually become public, thus reflecting on you and your company/agency.

Document reviews are not a new concept. In the eighteenth century, Ben Franklin recommended that writers set newly drafted letters aside for at least a day. He then recommended that the writer review them, correct them as necessary, and only then send them. Franklin was probably thinking about letters where the writer wrote comments in anger or haste.

Franklin was wise enough to know that one-day's routine ideas may need reworking a day later. He was also likely thinking that a day's cooling off would allow writers to catch their own errors in phrasing, spelling, or punctuation.

Up to a generation ago, companies relied on a secretary or administrative assistants to produce quality documents. Secretaries routinely typed, proofread, and reviewed the content of documents. They were expected to ask a document's writer if something in the document didn't look right. Secretaries functioned as a universal and efficient quality assurance procedure.

Today, quality assurance depends on a single writer and the writer's computer. Organizations, both governmental and private, have phased out most secretaries. Today's writers routinely send e-mails directly to individuals outside their company. More often than not, no one except the writer has even read the e-mail, much less reviewed it for accurate content. At most, the writer may have spell-checked the document.

In today's busy computer-driven world, reviews are a desirable but often ignored contribution to the quality of documents.

1. Establish formal review policies for all documents going outside the company or agency, including e-mails.

A formal review policy (preferably written) would mandate reviews for all documents covered, identify the reviewers, and list revision responsibilities for the writer. For example, which review comments are binding and which are merely useful editorial changes?

Multiple reviews are desirable for complex, legally important documents. In the NEPA context, reports prepared for an EIS or EA would surely be complex enough (and legally sensitive) to fall under a review policy.

First-level reviews of NEPA reports begin with content issues. Are conclusions in the report credible and clear? Does the content of the report meet legal minimums? For example, Shipley Group has a published list of 21 criteria dealing with content issues. Does the content of the NEPA report adequately address all 21 criteria?

(As an interesting example of a first-level review policy, the Forest Service in 2004 issued guidance that decision makers be responsible for ongoing and repeated reviews of NEPA analyses. That guidance clearly indicated that decision makers should guarantee the validity of the analysis process. The last item in the Forest Service checklist mandates that the decision maker check and then approve all impact projections.)

Without clear criteria, reviews are not focused on major questions and priorities. So, all first-level (content) reviews should be keyed to clear quality criteria for the particular documents in question. As in the preceding Forest Service example, written approvals from the decision maker for each step in the analysis process become part of the legal record.

Second-level reviews of NEPA documents move into revision of sentences and phrases. Some potential revisions have content implications, but many such changes are matters of personal preference. A supervisor or manager might, for instance, prefer the word “thus” instead of “therefore.” No legal importance attaches to such a preference. Supervisors should focus comments on legal content issues, not mere variations in wording.

A third level of review is final proofreading for errors in spelling, punctuation, or mechanics (such as abbreviations or units of measurement). This level of review is a late-stage effort, but it is an important one because readers will be distracted by such errors, and multiple errors of this sort reflect badly on the writers (and on their agency or company). See recommendation 5 below.

Three levels of review would be unnecessary for short documents, such as e-mails, but even a simple e-mail might fall under a review policy. Such e-mails would be ones going to outside readers and ones recording official agency or company answers to outside questions about policy.

2. Be sure that reviewers include the assigned company/agency representative.

Reviewers potentially include both the writer’s peers (whose comments are valuable but not binding) and a company/agency representative.

This company/agency representative’s role is to guarantee that the writer’s content accurately represents the company’s or agency’s position on a content issue. Sometimes more than one such content review is desirable, especially if the content issue is very complex and sensitive.

For NEPA documents, members/peers from the interdisciplinary team for the project/proposed action should review each other’s conclusions. Such reviews should address consistency of information from one writer to the next. Team members, with their specialized information about the project area, are especially well qualified to review information from other team members. Such reviews should focus on initial conclusions and the analysis framework (indicators, analysis area, etc.) for each resource.

Finally, reviewers should include one or more careful proofreaders. These proofreaders should be using the list of editorial inconsistencies, as discussed below under recommendation 4.

3. Allot time in your documentation schedule for careful reviews and the inevitable revisions.

All reviews should start as early as possible in the analysis process and should be as efficient as

possible. Early reviews are important so that the writer does not finish a report that strays into content that is unsatisfactory from an agency or company point of view.

Human nature is such that a writer develops ownership of a fully developed draft. Some writers have been known to refuse to make changes, arguing that the information is their professional product, thus not subject to revision or change. Such a viewpoint overlooks the need for technical and scientific writers to produce clear, credible documents. Review by peers (and managers) is perhaps the only way for writers to produce such documents because a writer is usually a poor judge of his or her own draft materials.

NEPA teams should plan for and schedule such early reviews. Often, however, NEPA team leaders argue that they don't have time for early reviews. Without early and substantive reviews, however, the quality of the final EIS or EA is likely to suffer. And deferred reviews are likely not to occur. Many documents have been published with errors because the team writing the document ran out of time!

Reviews should also be efficient. Shipley Group consultants recommend oral review sessions for high-level content questions. Such reviews, especially if done early, allow all participants to share their views efficiently with the writer, preferably before the writer has prepared the complete document.

Written reviews are efficient later in the process. Major content decisions and details should be clearly in place before reviewers prepare written comments (often little more than corrections and minor annotations to a full rough draft).

4. Appoint a person to keep a running list of company/agency consistency edits.

Lead writers and editors for major documents learned long ago that they should keep a running list of their editorial decisions. They routinely begin this list on day one of a project. Any later is too late.

These lists record company/agency preferences, especially those dealing with the company's name or the company's products. Shipley Group, for instance, usually uses the word *Shipley* in second and

subsequent references. It does not commonly use *SG* or *S.G.*, both of which would be sensible ways to refer back to the company name. What is the correct choice? No answer is clearly right or wrong. The final choice is an editorial or documentation preference.

Editorial decisions also include decisions about spelling. Is the word *gauge* always spelled that way? What about *gage*? Dictionaries routinely list both spellings, but mark the second one as a variant. Some engineering firms seem to prefer *gage*. If the variant is preferred, then all company documents should reflect this preference.

The person recording such editorial consistencies should routinely circulate the list to all contributors to a document. If possible, all submitted draft text should be as consistent as possible with the list.

If contributing writers are unconcerned about such consistencies, then the writer-editor for a large document has to make all such corrections before the draft goes to publication. This is surely an inefficient time to try to catch all sorts of consistency problems.

5. Remember, as you write, that each document, no matter how short or informal, may eventually become public, thus reflecting on you and your company/agency.

Documents are increasingly public even when their original writer intended them to be only private.

Shipley consultants routinely remind participants in our NEPA workshops that internal drafts, their field notes, and other individual documents may well become part of the public record. Under the Freedom of Information Act many such internal documents are accessible when a member of the public requests them. Also, if a NEPA project goes to litigation, the courts rightly expect the agency to produce detailed project records, including all documents from individuals who worked on the project.

Computers are increasingly responsible for documents becoming public when they shouldn't. E-mails, as discussed earlier, are a good example because they are easy to send, sometimes to the wrong recipient. So writers might well delay sending

e-mails until they have time to take a second look at them, as Ben Franklin recommended.

Documents inevitably reflect good or ill on their writer and on the writer's organization. Sloppy, poorly organized information implies that the writer's head is similarly disorganized. So, as several of the preceding recommendations stated, take time to review documents, especially those going outside your company or agency. Don't assume that a document is too trivial to merit the extra care and time for a careful review.

Careful and timely review is the key to document quality.

Recommended Shipley Group Workshops:

Reviewing NEPA Documents/NEPA Writing Workshop

[March 13-17, 2006 – Las Vegas, NV](#)

Overview of the NEPA Process/Reviewing NEPA Documents

[June 27-30, 2006 – Denver, CO](#)

Right Writing for Environmental & Technical Specialists

[July 19-20, 2006 – San Diego, CA](#)