Storyboards, Once Again

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I believe storyboards (also called prototypes or mockups) are a valuable writing tool, especially when teams of writers must collaborate. This belief is why I introduce storyboards in all of my Shipley writing workshops. This belief is also why I have mentioned storyboards in many of the earlier newsletter publications for this Shipley website.

I am returning, once again, to storyboards because of a recent event at the Shipley Group office. This event caused me to reconsider my assumptions about storyboards. (I list my assumptions toward the end of this article.)

A Shipley colleague recently wrote some text describing storyboards for a Shipley manual under development. The colleague has had several years of NEPA experience, both as a government employee and as a Shipley employee, and has been both a contributing writer and a team leader on NEPA projects.

I expected the colleague's text to have useful information about storyboards, and it did, except for one recommendation:

> "Prepare a detailed outline before beginning work on a storyboard."

This recommendation surprised me. It told me that this colleague's assumptions about the writing process were very different from mine. The colleague's storyboard would not look like the one I encourage NEPA writers to prepare.

(Here is a brief definition of storyboards: Storyboards are graphic sketches of the projected content--both text and graphics--that will appear on each page of a document. So, a 20-page document properly starts with 20 blank planning sheets, called storyboards. Early storyboards will contain notes, reminders, and sketches of graphics that the writers intend to prepare for each page of the planned report. An early storyboard has almost no actual text.)

Different techniques for using storyboards are possible, and my colleague's recommendation reminds me of this. Over 90 percent of participants in Shipley NEPA training sessions have never used storyboards. They all, however, learned to use outlines during their early writing training. This training was probably why my colleague recommended starting with an outline.

Yes, outlines are a possible starting point, but they don't force writers to visualize their text and associated graphics before they begin writing. The traditional outline does force writers to organize their ideas into a logical sequence.

A well-done storyboard provides a logical sequence, but it also forces writers to consider possible graphics before they write the text. Storyboards also force writers to estimate how much detail (text, actually) should appear under each projected subject. Estimating the level of detail means that the writer is saying that he or she can cover that point in half a page, in 3 pages, or in 20 pages. A writer's target length is the best way for the writer (and other NEPA team members) to visualize the scope of the content before beginning to write.

I am stressing that writing should come after the writer has a vision of the expected content. Similarly, I would prefer preparing an outline after I have done an early and provisional storyboard.

My goal as a writer is to write text and prepare graphics that need little revising and editing. I will have failed if I write 6 pages on a topic, and the NEPA team leader tells me that the EIS/EA only needs 2 pages. Yet, time and again, I meet NEPA team leaders who recount having to boil down a rambling 20-page technical report into 2 or 3 usable pages for the main text in an EIS or EA. (Incidentally, the writer of the 20-page version is never happy with the weakly boiled broth!)

A good storyboard will help writers avoid writing such rambling, unnecessary text. A related problem is that such poorly conceived, unfocused text rarely links to the other content in an EIS or EA. Storyboards encourage writers to link their content to related information in the EIS or EA. Such links are a legal benefit because they help provide the logical thread leading to conclusions about the context and intensity of impacts.

I urge writers to consider using the storyboard approach because it will create more efficient and more effective NEPA documents. Here, then, are **my main assumptions about storyboards**, especially in relation to complex NEPA documents:

1. Storyboards encourage/allow several NEPA contributors to collaborate as to what goes where in key sections of an EIS or EA. It also reminds writers that their sections link to other sections and subsections in the traditional NEPA chapter sequence.
2. Storyboards are spatial and visual rather than starting with blocks of text, no matter how well organized the individual topics.
3. An early storyboard may have major headings, but even the wording and the sequence of headings and subheadings will change as the storyboard gets filled in during later meetings.
4. Storyboards block out (called place holders) estimated space for each heading and subheading even if all the content points beneath a heading are not yet known.
5. Written comments on a storyboard include content/text reminders (especially key words or phrases for the writer to remember) and project management notes (reminders to call so-and-so for a missing graphic or key data).
6. Storyboards include provisional graphics and notes about what each graphic should show; even though data for the graphic may not yet exist and the exact features of the graphic are unknown (for now).
7. Writers should think about different organizational patterns and even untraditional ways to summarize and to link major content points.
8. Storyboards allow/encourage team collaboration on the whole EIS or EA, not just on one person's discussion of resource impacts.
9. A useful storyboard encourages/permits early and frequent team and colleague reviews of the evolving document.
10. Above all else, work on a storyboard should be creative and non-judgmental, even playful.

Storyboards have been and are preliminary visual sketches for one of the following:

- A final document with multiple topics and many pages
- A sequence of screens for a complex web site
- Art work for a cartoon sequence

- The arrangement of scenes in a movie or video
- An advertising campaign using coordinated messages from different media

Note that all of these products are fairly complex, with a logic and a syntax that allows them to communicate to readers or viewers. This complexity means that their creators need to plan the exact sequence of information so that the logic of the sequence is not lost during production. If carefully and thoroughly created, a good sequence of storyboards can help both writers and visual artists make their final message clear and the creative process as efficient as possible.

Storyboards have been around for decades as a planning tool for visual products, such as cartoons, videos, or an advertising campaign. Writers, with a few exceptions, have rarely used storyboards. Instead, the traditional assumption was that writers dealt with text and more text, and until the text existed, it was a waste of time to consider its appearance on the page. Often writers would say they didn't know how long a document was likely to be until they wrote it. The writing of text—that is words, phrases, and sentences—was the creative task, not planning how the words would appear on the page.

Here are **steps for the creation of a storyboard** for a document:

1. Lay out enough blank pages to cover the estimated length of the document.
2. Note on the pages any content givens, such as major chapter titles or other required headings.
3. Block out or hold space for any other legally mandated or expected topics.
4. Insert provisional headings and subheadings. Don't worry if you don't quite have the final version or the exact sequence of the headings.
5. Set aside space for graphics and sketch graphics if you know enough about what they will look like and what they will show. Be sure to leave space for all potential graphics.
6. Insert notes and reminders of all sorts. Such notes are not text, but are merely planning reminders or links to other parts of the document. (Example: "Link these WQ features to the impact indicators in Chapters 1 and 4.")
7. Resist the urge to write text until you have a clear vision of the final product and all its parts.
8. Then create text and graphics in chunks or sections, not sequentially. Insert finished pieces of text and graphics into your storyboard as you finish them.
9. Review the evolving storyboard sequence early and frequently. Such reviews, usually called walkthroughs, are a good quality assurance technique.
10. A mature, evolved storyboard is very close to a rough or working draft in document terms, but its development is very different from the conventional text-focused rough draft.

A final challenge. Analyze the techniques or the approach that helps you write quality text as rapidly and as effectively as possible. Then incorporate promising techniques into your personal writing approach. If you haven't had experience with storyboards, experiment with them. Start gradually, especially if you haven't had personal experience using them to plan