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Quality Assurance/Quality Control: Managing Project Documents

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As a recent participant in a Shipley training session stated, "Successful documents respond to political considerations, organizational constraints, personal writing traits, unclear management guidelines, and ever-changing public concerns." Given these sorts of constraints, it's amazing that many documents ever get finished! And extremely successful documents are a rarity.

Constraints like those in the opening sentence are why Shipley consultants view the writing process, especially work by teams of writers, as a complex, unruly process. Quality organizational documents demand efficient project management. Quality begins with the initial vision of the document and its content. The best writing style and grammatical correctness will not ensure quality if the design and purpose of the document are not clear to all contributors and agency or company managers.

To repeat, quality documents are the result of efficient project management techniques. Grammatical sentences and correct punctuation, while important, are not sufficient if the conceptual vision of the document is flawed.

Here are seven suggestions for creating quality documents and managing the accompanying team processes:

1. **Begin with a detailed and recorded vision of a projected document and its parallel team processes.**
2. **Develop your vision in collaboration with all contributors, their managers, and all review authorities.**
3. **Ask for managerial signoff on this initial vision.**
4. **Use recorded quality standards as you add information and text to the initial vision.**
5. **Develop detailed task assignments for all contributors who will provide text and new information for the evolving vision.**
6. **Conduct early and ongoing reviews of the evolving information and text.**
7. **Budget time and money to allow for late-stage reviews, including final editing and proofreading of the mature working draft as it nears publication.**

These seven suggestions apply equally well to National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documents and to non-NEPA documents. For example, I made many similar suggestions early this past spring working with petroleum engineers for a major Texas energy corporation. I also make these same suggestions working with NEPA practitioners.

I am cross referencing earlier Shipley Group newsletters in order to keep the text below a little more brief. These previous newsletters will help answer questions you may have about the seven suggestions in this article. An archive of Shipley Group newsletters is available at: http://www.shipleygroup.com/environmental/index.html?pg=news

1. **Begin with a detailed and recorded vision of a projected document and its parallel team processes.**

Productive experts in many disciplines attest to the value of an early and detailed initial vision. Ways to record a vision of a document include planning notes, an outline, cut-and-paste pages from prior documents, a traditional outline, or a visual storyboard. Sometimes all of these techniques will be helpful. No single conceptual path always leads to a successful document, so writers need to be flexible about possible planning strategies. What works with one project may not be the key to the next project.

Planning notes include, from a NEPA perspective, a scoping document (either internal or for external publication), a project initiation memo/letter, a formal statement of work (for contractors), and team minutes from planning meetings. Notice that all of these rely on recorded information. Any important topics or team agreements must be recorded. Our memories of topics discussed and agreements made are short and often faulty.

A copy of a Shipley Group outline for a project initiation memo appears at the end of this newsletter. Its content points summarize many of the major early planning topics a project team should address.

Cut-and-paste pages from an earlier document are often helpful, but sometimes deceptive. Writers sometimes rely on earlier text, which may not quite fit the needs of a new project. Or, writers may fail to change geographic details from a prior text to fit new geography.

The traditional outline has been and remains a valuable planning tool. Its major strength is that it helps writers organize and prioritize possible topics. A well-done outline usually records a mature and thoughtful picture of the topics to come. It is usually the product of much thought and time. A NEPA team might take several meetings in refining its outline of a complex EA or EIS. Shipley Group consultants recommend an outline, especially in

situations where the outline evolves and is recorded in a full storyboard, as discussed in the next paragraph.

Storyboards are the most effective tools for allowing a project team to visualize the final document, as recorded in hard copy or a web site. *A caution*: Introduce storyboards gradually to your planning process. Many professional adults have not had experience working with storyboards, so they will find visualizations unfamiliar and even time consuming. For such folks, remind them of the adage: Pay now or pay later. They should use time now planning a document in order to save more time later.

Storyboards allow multiple contributors, plus essential managers, to sketch their view of the scope and details in a projected document. Such visualizations are the chief difference between a storyboard and the traditional outline. Storyboards routinely record the placement and the tentative appearance of graphics. Outlines rarely do more than list a projected graphic; later decisions set the size type of the graphic and where it comes in a sequence of pages.

Note: Storyboards are also called document prototypes or mockups. The exact term is unimportant as long as the final chosen process encourages writers to visual their projected information, both its extent and its spatial/visual features.

Storyboards have become a standard topic in Shipley writing workshops. The reason, as stated above, is that they allow team contributors to work rapidly and efficiently on complex documents.

For more details about storyboards, see "A NEPA Storyboard Example" (Shipley Newsletter 61, November 2008).

2. **Develop your vision in collaboration with all contributors, their managers, and all review authorities.**

This suggestion emphasizes that all key contributors should be involved as early as possible in the planning of a projected document. So, whenever possible, managers should attend a storyboard meeting and review the contributors' decisions.

Notice that the suggestion also includes "review authorities." These would include an agency's legal counsels or a company's senior vice president. For crucial documents, ones with legal purposes, such crucial reviews are a necessity.

Unfortunately, early storyboard reviews from managers are difficult to schedule. Managers may even be reluctant to attend an early storyboard meeting because they want to "allow the team to be creative." The practical reality is that managers could and

should be involved in early storyboard creation, especially when managers are able to set the scope and technical details necessary for an adequate technical document.

Legal counsels are often based in another state or across the country. The same is often true of the senior vice president. Thus, teams have to use special techniques, such as a video conferencing arrangement, when they want to involve such distant review contributors. The reality is that such early senior level reviews are invaluable in guiding a team of contributors to avoid unnecessary dead ends and other time consuming and costly adjustments to their final document.

3. **Ask for managerial signoff on this initial vision.**

Managerial signatures are an important signal that management buys into the team's initial planning decisions. A major delay for projects occurs when a manager changes his or her mind. Often such reversals in management direction occur with the manager stating that early approvals did not include this or that initiative. A signature helps keep management honest!

For similar reasons, the Shipley outline for a project initiation memo suggests that the team leader and all major team contributors also sign off on the initial vision and its major decisions. Months later, major contributors are unlikely to remember the exact details about commitments to do certain things in specific ways. So, team members also need to be kept honest!

4. **Use recorded quality standards as you add information and text to the initial vision.**

Many writers and reviewers work without clear written standards.

I am reminded of a senior NEPA project manager who created a NEPA statement of work with this requirement: "Technical contributors will write text following the best academic writing standards." The statement of work had no further guidance about writing standards. The project manager found that initial submissions from a well-qualified contractor were poor, inconsistent, and clearly unacceptable. The manager responded by preparing a 4- or 5-page list of writing standards, covering paragraph organization, sentence styles, and even minor consistencies in punctuation.

Without such listed standards, writers and late-stage reviewers will be making up their own standards. Often such standards are survivals of "rules" that writers recall from a high school English teacher or their main academic professor in college. Such remembered rules are both unpredictable and surely not common knowledge. Examples would be writing myths like these:

1. Never end a sentence with a preposition.
2. Never start a sentence with "because."
3. Use "impact" as a noun, not as a verb.

Shipley writing courses routinely address such erroneous rules and their origins. More importantly, participants in Shipley writing sessions are encouraged to use listed standards, such as the checklist of writing quality reprinted at the end of this newsletter. And as illustrated in the checklist, listed writing standards come from a published guide for writers: *Documentation Strategies for Environmental Writers* (a Shipley Group publication). Shipley routinely uses this published guide in its writing sessions.

All writers and reviewers should have such a checklist available on the first day of work on a project. They should also have an identified reference guide on technical and scientific writing standards. Participants in Shipley writing sessions usually discuss the pros and cons of other reference guides. Writers of high-quality professional documents need to follow the best and most current guides as to writing practices.

A Shipley assumption is that writing practices have changed and are still changing, so a writer's freshman composition textbook from 1980 is not an adequate guide for writing standards. And anyway, most freshman comp textbooks rarely focus on technical or scientific writing.

For more information on standards, see "Would You Take a Look at This?" (Shipley Newsletter 43, June 2005) and "School Myths and Good Business and Technical Writing" (Shipley Newsletter 41, April 2005).

5. **Develop detailed task assignments for all contributors who will provide text and new information for the evolving vision.**

Task assignments specify what text and graphics a contributor will provide. Such information should be clear enough (for example, page estimates, major headings and subheadings, impact indicators, and consistent project terminology) that submitted text and graphics require only minor editing and almost no revision. A detailed storyboard is one way for a team to develop a detailed description of what the team expects from each contributor.

If properly prepared, information from a technical specialist should require little more than the copy and paste function as it is for inserted into an Environmental Assessment or an Environmental Impact Statement.

This model of streamlined and structured submissions is often an exception in team work on technical and scientific documents. NEPA team leaders frequently describe getting from a specialist a technical report/appendix that runs 20, 30, or more pages. Then the team leader has the job of pulling out perhaps 4 or 5 pages of relevant text and identifying the major conclusions. Of necessity, the team leader has to rewrite some of the original text to make it fit the overall document.

Such reworked text and graphics please no one. The original technical specialist will argue that the leader's rewritten text misses one or more important considerations. The team leader is frustrated because the rewriting task takes valuable time and adds to the project costs. Even worse, the more rewriting that occurs, the greater the chance for inconsistencies in the full legal record. For example comments in the rewritten text may not match the specialist's field notes. An inconsistency in the written record is gift to the plaintiff if a technical document gets challenged in court.

For more information about NEPA project management and task assignments, see "Prevention of NEPA Document Disasters" (Shipley Newsletter 52, August 2006) and "Who Rewrites Your Draft Text?" (Shipley Newsletter 47, December 2005).

6. **Conduct early and ongoing reviews of the evolving information and text.**

Reviews are the key to high quality documents. Even skilled writers view their drafts as less then a final product, and all writers are aware they are too close to their writing to be good reviewers.

So writers should always provide for early and ongoing reviews of the evolving text and graphics. Shipley recommends setting clear review levels as follows:

> **Level 1 Review:** Major content questions and problems, covering legal compliance information and any major errors in the overall focus and structure of the document.
>
> **Level 2 Review:** Logical content and the flow and style of paragraphs and individual sentences. Most Level 1 topics are set and reviewers don't comment on such topics unless a major problem has slipped through the Level 1 review.
>
> **Level 3 Review:** Late-stage editing for clarity and brevity and final proofreading.

The three levels are the most efficient way to handle a complex document, especially when writing takes weeks or months. NEPA teams, for example need to have the appropriate alternatives identified (and blessed by managers) early in the documentation process. So alternatives are a proper level 1 review task. Such tasks need to be finished before the team and all assigned reviewers turn to levels 2 and 3.

Detailed proofreading is a late-stage effort. During proofreading, the team is correcting minor wording problems, inconsistencies between text and graphics, and the inevitable misspellings. As I often have explained to Shipley clients, we will wait for a detailed proofreading step until after the client has approved the overall content and its approach. Then it is cost-effective to proofread the text and to clean up format problems with either the hard copy of the computer version.

Reviews can be either written or oral (in a face-to-face meeting between writers and reviewers). For efficiency, Shipley consultants using recommend oral review sessions when Level 1 topics are the subject. An oral review allows all writers and assigned reviewers to discuss, as appropriate, major changes to the document.

Level 2 reviews can be either oral or written. The team and individual writers need to decide which is the more efficient choice.

Level 3 reviews are most likely written. So in this case, reviewers send the writer(s) a list of errors, perhaps a spread sheet organized page by page. Optionally, reviewers can return a working copy of the draft text with corrections inserted in the margins or between the lines.

To repeat the earlier point, reviews need to begin early and to continue to the final days or hours before the document is final. Also, reviewers should include all contributors, essential managers, and other review authorities (such as legal counsels). *See suggestion 2 above.*

For more information about review processes, see "Review: The Key to Document Quality" (Shipley Newsletter 49, February 2006) and "Document Review: the Key to Quality (Shipley Newsletter 72, April 2010).

7. **Budget time and money to allow for late-stage reviews, including final editing and proofreading of the mature working draft as it nears publication.**

I made this suggestion a separate listed item because it often gets less attention than it merits. I can recall many team leaders telling me that the team did not have time for much final editing or routine proofreading. The result is a rough published version, with inconsistencies and a number of minor errors.

As I say in the stated suggestions, teams should budget time and money for late-stage work on a document. This suggestion parallels my frequent suggestion that organizations should identify key employees who are skilled reviewers and editors. These folks are often not identified, and if identified, not viewed as very important.

This organizational mentality goes back, I suspect, to the notion that secretaries were useful, but not really professional in the organizational sense. From my experience as a writer and editor, a skilled secretary, one who knows organizational information is more crucial to the final quality of a document than a senior manager who has neither language skills nor a good feel as to what the features of a high-quality document really are.

Hence, I suggest that early in any team process, the team and its manager identify one or more outside reviewers (ones external to the team members) to be responsible for routine grammatical editing and proofreading. These level 2 and level 3 reviewers should begin with mid-point level 2 reviews and continue until the document is final.

Additional References:

Project Initiation Memo Outline

Document Quality Checklist