The Shipley Group
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Feature Article
May 2011

Becoming a Better Writer!

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Writing is a complex, unruly, but rewarding skill. This premise guides Shipley Group writing programs. So I was intrigued when a blog recently posted "73 Ways to Become a Better Writer." The 73 suggestions turned out to be good ones. A few are old chestnuts, most are useful, and several are surprising. If you are interested in improving your personal writing skills, go to www.copyblogger.com/better-writer/. That web address lists the 73 suggestions and also has links to a number of useful sites of interest to individual writers.

The first of the 73 suggestions is this one: "Become a blogger." I agree. The writer who submitted this suggestion surely believed that regular daily writing was the best way to learn to be better. Many published writers talk about assigning a specific hour or two every day for writing. And they never let other tasks steal from the writing time! An additional advantage of blog writing is that a blogger gets immediate feedback, often only minutes after posting a comment. Rich feedback is very valuable for any writer and is mentioned in a number of the 73 suggestions.

The following newsletter addresses questions most writers have about the writing of documents or the creation of a website. In several places, I refer to the 73 suggestions. But be sure to visit the copyblogger site if you want to experience all of their suggestions.

The following list of my writing suggestions are the basis for Shipley's workshops on technical and business writing. Several of them echo ones from the 73 copyblogger's suggestions. One major difference is that Shipley consultants deal with documents or websites that are team-written products. Shipley's clients routinely assign teams of writers to a single document. In such cases, these writers are more concerned with team planning and team reviews than with the writing of text.

Many of the copyblogger's suggestions, instead, focus on the intellectual challenge of translating an individual's ideas into clear and effective text. Note the copyblogger's emphasis on a writer's text, not the format and design of the final published document. A major Shipley assumption is that a quality document or website begins with the overall design and layout of the information. Writing--the physical act of generating the language--comes somewhat later as writers fill in gaps in the visual design.

Here are Shipley Group suggestions for creating high-quality documents efficiently:

1. **Record a detailed vision of the desired document or website.**
2. **Be sure that all relevant colleagues and managers contribute to the detailed vision.**
3. **Identify quality standards to support the detailed vision.**

4. **Make written task assignments, both for writers and for reviewers, and develop an achievable schedule.**
5. **Encourage all contributors to review the evolving document or website using a usability approach.**
6. **Provide positive feedback to all contributors so that the writing process is a learning process.**
7. **Identify ways for you and your organization to make good documentation habits the rule rather than the exception.**

I discuss each of these seven suggestions below. Whenever possible, I reference other newsletters from the Shipley Group website, which contains an archived file of earlier newsletters. Here is the Shipley web address: http://www.shipleygroup.com/environmental/index.html?pg=news .

1. Record a detailed vision of the desired document or website.

Craftsmen of all kinds understand the value of a detailed vision. Time spent on a vision saves days or weeks later correcting mistakes.

A writer's vision is composed of all sorts of information. In some instances, an initial vision appears in an email assigning a writing task. Sometimes, a face-to-face meeting occurs between the writer and a manager. Or, a writer initiates a written task assignment without managerial guidance. Whatever the writing task, Shipley Group experience suggests that the vision be recorded in writing or in a visual artifact, as in a rough document paste-up or an actual storyboard, as described below.

In the copyblogger's 73 tips several of the individual suggestions mentioned outlining as a key step prior to writing. An outline is simply the most well-known tool for recording a vision of a projected document or website. Ironically, most skillful adult writers know how to do an outline, but most actual writing tasks never get planned with an outline. Instead, even as students learned to do years ago, if an outline is required, write the text first and then prepare the outline. This reverse process guarantees that the document and the outline agree.

Besides outlines, writers sometimes use prior versions of similar documents. Or, a writer takes time to describe to a colleague (or manager) what she hopes to write and how she will set up the information. All of these techniques are valuable, especially if the projected document is complex (that is, running to a number of pages or screens and requiring choices as to what information to include and where to place key information). No single approach works for every writer or every document.

A Storyboard Process for Writing Tasks Great and Small

Shipley writing workshops routinely introduce storyboards as the most important way for a writer (and especially a team of writers) to record a vision of a document or website. Storyboards are often called prototypes or mockups. Their name is not as important as their role in capturing an early spatial vision of a projected document or website. Here are the steps for simple storyboard:

1. Make a page or screen estimate for the final document or website.
2. Count out enough blank sheets to equal the estimate. Optionally, line out projected blank squares on a flipchart or a whiteboard. A computer file with numbered screens also will suffice for beginning the storyboard.
3. Convene a small team of writers, colleagues with important information, and managers.
4. Ask the team to record known information on the blank sheets. Contributors can usually assign major content points and potential graphics to different blank pages.
5. Contributors should also begin to list anticipated headings and subheadings. They should leave pages blank as placeholders if they are uncertain about the content of these pages.
6. When the team's creative suggestions seem to slow, stop the process and ask the contributors to verbally summarize what the document is beginning to look like.
7. If the contributors' well of ideas is dry, adjourn for another day.

No actual writing has yet begun. After all, the vision is still in the planning stage. Also, remember that a useful storyboard is messy. If it is not messy and unfinished, members of the writing team will not venture to move content points or to scribble their own personal reminders on the storyboard.

As appropriate, convene the team several more times. Their goal should be an evolving storyboard that spatially captures what information goes where, what graphics are important, and how content topics link with other topics in the storyboard. So, still no writing has begun!

Actual writing does begin as the storyboard begins to be 80- or 90-percent filled in. Writers assigned to certain pages or sections can and should begin to draft possible text. Such text can then be printed and inserted into the evolving storyboard. When enough text exists, the evolving storyboard has become a rough draft!

Writing to fit into a storyboard means that writers are working on chunks of information or short sections of text. Psychologically, this fragmented approach to the writing task helps writers to write because each short section is a minor hurdle, not the whole complex document. Writer's block is a rare problem when a complex writing task is split into short and easy steps!

The preceding summary of a storyboard process is, from a Shipley perspective, the most powerful way for a team of writers and their managers to record a working vision of a required document. Documents that profit from an early storyboard include technical/scientific reports, corporate business plans, investigative reports (from fact-finding panels), proposals for additional business

opportunities, environmental documents (such as ones done for compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act), and new drug applications (for a Food and Drug Administration license). Notice that all of the preceding documents are team prepared, and all require extensive managerial input.

But the storyboard process described would also work for a single writer working on a short document. For some years I had a whiteboard next to my computer. I often found it helpful to sketch a 2- or 3-page storyboard before turning to my computer to write 2 or 3 pages of a short report or routine email. My personal preference was to prepare a visually accurate storyboard rather than investing time in a more formal outline.

As the preceding storyboard process shows, writers should set target lengths even before text is written. Several of the copyblogger's suggestions mention target lengths and deadlines. Such disciplined writing is helpful and is important if a team of writers are collaborating on a document or website. I always like to start a writing assignment with an estimated number of pages in mind. But such estimates are always subject to changes as I write text and prepare graphics.

Shipley newsletter 61 (November 2008) has sheets from a sample storyboard.

2. Be sure that all relevant colleagues and managers contribute to the detailed vision.

Shipley's business and governmental agency clients rarely prepare a document that comes from a single individual. Often a colleague provides important additional information. And one or more managers usually review a document before it becomes final. My estimate from Shipley clients suggests that an average document has at least six potential contributors, more if all document reviewers are included.

The copyblogger's suggestions mentioned reviewers several times. The premise was the same as expressed in the Ambrose Bierce's adage: **"If you write and edit alone, you are in bad company!"**

All these potential contributors must help with the detailed vision (as described above in suggestion 1). A missing contributor usually means one or more features of the final document or website are missing. In the case of colleagues, the missing feature is usually a gap in content, reflecting a colleague's technical information. In the case of managers, a problem means that document is later reworked, perhaps even completely rewritten. After all, managers usually have veto authority over what is judged to be the final acceptable version.

As suggestion 1 above indicates, a good storyboard includes all potential contributors. Thus a good storyboard captures essential information even before writers begin to write the necessary text.

As an aside, my most disastrous storyboard experience occurred when a senior manager, one with veto authority, refused to review the evolving storyboard. He finally reviewed the printed document

(some 300 copies of which had been printed). Only at that late stage did he decide to exercise his veto. The result was that all printed copies went into a dumpster, and the company paid to print another 300 copies.

3. Identify quality standards to support the detailed vision.

The title of the copyblogger's site ("73 Ways to Become a Better Writer") implies that all writers would agree as to what "better" really means. From my Shipley experience, most private companies and few governmental agencies have clear quality standards for their documents or websites.

Managers within these organizations seem to assume that their employees (many with advanced degrees) know what a good document looks like. Or similarly, they as managers surely know what a good document is. Both assumptions are doubtful. Witness how many times a manager/reviewer says that a document is not okay only to change key details back to their original form in the next review. Writers and their managers seem to be working with this guide in mind: "Keep reworking the document or website; I don't know what to ask for, but I will know it when I see it!" This is document management by idiosyncratic whim.

I am reminded of a governmental agency's direction to a private contractor: "All submitted documents shall follow the best academic writing standards." The agency representative felt satisfied that he had given the contractor clear guidance. Not surprisingly, the documents submitted were not quality products. And multiple submissions had very different writing styles! Where were the academic standards? Anyone with exposure to different academic departments and a variety of college instructors knows that no single academic writing standard exists.

What are useful quality standards? They are certainly not grammatical rules, such as the agreement of subject and verb or the choice of correct pronouns (as in "he" vs. "him"). Nor are they the conventions dealing with use of parenthetical citations instead of archaic footnotes. A poorly written document can be grammatically correct, but its message can be lost in unnecessary words and poorly chosen examples. Shipley consultants rarely find that grammatical problems or punctuation gaffs are a major problem.

Instead, professional adults need help deciding what information to record and how to emphasize the major themes so that the document's message is 100 percent clear.

The following list of questions focuses on quality standards. The suggested answer to each question reflects a useful quality standard. Such quality standards are the core content of Shipley's "Right Writing", "Clear Writing", and "Writing for Technical Specialists" workshops. See the Shipley Group's website [http://www.shipleygroup.com/environmental/index.html?pg=enrollment] for more information about these workshops and other Shipley writing workshops.

Examples of Quality Standards (A Sample List)

1. **How long should a paragraph be? Standard:** Paragraphs are a visual feature of well-designed documents. Paragraphs are shorter or longer depending on the width of a column of text, not on the content of the information recorded. Most paragraphs should require no more than perhaps 3 inches of space from a column. A full-page paragraph that takes up nearly a page is visually tiring. It also often fails to highlight or emphasize major points effectively.
2. **Are graphics designed to be understandable without references to the text? Standard:** Yes, increasingly graphics and text have separate but still overlapping content. The best graphics today have an interpretive caption that interprets the graphic. Such captions are often three, four, or more lines long. Readers have the option of ignoring the text because the graphics present a stand-alone message.
3. **How long should sentences be? Standard:** Average sentence length in a page or a section should not exceed 20 words. For key conclusions and important summaries, average sentence length should be closer to 15 words.
4. **Where should major conclusions and key information appear? Standard:** Place conclusions in headings and subheadings and at the beginning of paragraphs. Headings and subheadings function much like newspaper headlines, recording and emphasizing major content points. Within text, open with major conclusions and key information and then follow up with reasons and illustrations. A well-designed page of text (and the multiple headings) forces readers to see, at first glance, the major conclusions and other key information.
5. **Should writers preview content to follow? Standard:** Yes! Readers opening a document or turning to new subsection in the document should always know what content points will follow the initial conclusions or other major opening points. Previews are increasingly recorded in a clear format, such as bulleted list or even a shaded preview box in the margin.
6. **How valuable is repetition in a well-edited document? Standard:** Deliberate repetition signals a well-designed message. Key conclusions, major warnings, reminders, etc.—all major content points merit thoughtful and deliberate repetition. Repetition helps readers notice and then remember key information. See suggestion 5 below for its discussion of usability.

Quality standards like the preceding sample ones are the core content in Shipley Group writing workshops—for example “Right Writing” for general technical and business writing or “Clear Writing for NEPA Specialists” for writers contributing to National Environmental Policy Act documents.

See Shipley newsletters 43 (June 2005) and 41 (April 2005) for more information about language and editing standards.

Classic Style Guides

Classic style guides and traditional college composition guides do not really help writers translate chaotic content points into a high-quality professional document or website.

Instead, classic style guides are excellent sources for verifying punctuation rules and answering other editing and proofreading questions. Classic style guides usually cited include the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), *Scientific Style and Format: Council of Science Editors Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers*, 7th Edition (New York: Council of Science Editors, 2006), and the U.S*. Government Printing Office (GPO) Style Manual*, 30th Edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2008).

These three superb guides realistically begin to be useful after you have finished your rough draft. They all state or imply in their front material that their major function is to help writers get a manuscript ready for publication. Writers rightly worry about completing the manuscript. But these classic guides leave questions of manuscript content and its organization to individual authors**.** As such, these guides do not list nor discuss the quality standards listed earlier in this newsletter. And they really do not address writing skills as listed in the copyblogger's 73 points (from the opening of this newsletter).

All three guides seem to assume that writers intuitively know what good writing looks like. But is there a universal standard of excellence for writing? I have never found one. So, I always recommend the three guides listed above, but I always add the warning that a quality document begins with the writer and clearly stated quality content standards. The guides are thus useful helping writers get a document or website ready for publication. The guides don't help writers decide what to write nor how to translate ideas from the writer's head into text on the page/computer screen.

4. Make written task assignments, both for writers and for reviewers, and develop an achievable schedule.

Writers often deal with unclear or even missing guidance about what information needs to be in a document or website. Often a manager will informally talk over an assignment, perhaps at the water cooler! Then, later, when the writer has trouble meeting the manager's expectations, the manager is able to say that the assignment was clear. Where are the problems in this scenario?

If writers and their managers complete Shipley suggestions 1 through 3, as listed above, assignments will be fairly clear. And writers and their managers will have in hand both a working storyboard and a list of quality standards. A de facto written task assignment exists!

I include this step, however, because I want to remind anyone working on a major document or website that they need a written task assignment. Sometimes, a manager will not write up an assignment. In such cases, I recommend that the writer (or writers) write up their own task assignment. Who better than the writer or writers to clarify the tasks at hand? Then ask the manager to review the written task assignment and to sign it if it is satisfactory. If the manager has questions or changes, early in the writing process is the time to address such problems.

5. Encourage all contributors to review the evolving document or website using a usability approach.

Many reviews are not well planned. And most are not listed in anyone's budget. Thus, I often get a request: "Larry, would you take at look at this?" Notice that the request sets no review priorities. For example, the writer might ask for a better argument justifying the delay in a project. And the request does not come with permission to charge time against the project budget! Thus, most reviews are done too late and too little. And reviewers are often seen as survivals of the vanishing secretarial ranks. The misconception is that true professionals work on professional tasks, not reading someone else's writing.

Based on problems such as in the preceding scenario, Shipley consultants routinely recommend that a **written review plan** exist early in the life of any project. Notice that reviewers need to be brought into the storyboard step and into discussions about relevant quality standards. And they should be included in the appropriate budget for the project (that is, budgets are an issue if a serious review takes perhaps hours or days to complete, and is not a mere turning of pages).

The reason for mentioning the quality standards is that reviews should be guided by clear criteria. Many reviews are not focused on criteria. The more common review is conducted by a reviewer who reads until he or she spots a problem—perhaps a misspelled word or a semicolon instead of a colon. Notice that an unfocused review ranges from minor errors to comments reflecting personal preferences (thus not errors at all). And then later, the reviewer may notice a gap in content or an error in facts; this is finally a useful review observation.

Any reviewers working on a document should begin their review with a list of clear requirements. Reviewers can then assess the document or website by checking to see if it meets all requirements.

Below I recommend a usability approach because it helps reviewers to focus on major content problem, not minor errors in wording or mechanics.

A Usability Approach

Usable content information is or should be the result if someone reads a document or accesses a website. So let me suggest some usability tests that focus reviews on usable information:

1. Ask reviewers to read a key passage (several pages or a short chapter) and then list main points/conclusions. Compare the answers from at least three or four reviewers. If their answers differ, the document is not clearly expressing its main points.
2. Frame several content questions about a short passage (several pages or a short chapter). Give the questions to several reviewers. Ask them to time themselves on how long it takes for them to find answers. Also, they should circle or check the text answering each question. If they can't find the answers or it takes them a lot of searching, the document (or website) is flawed. It is not clearly and efficiently conveying its meaning.

3. For a complex chapter or subsection, prepare a short executive summary. Then ask the writers of the chapter or subsection to verify the content in the executive summary. If they argue that you missed main points, then you can tell them that their original text is not clear.

Usability has been a conceptual tool for decades. In the engineering field, prototypes would often be constructed and then field tested. This process is what the examples above are suggesting for the document. Notice that usability testing, as described, puts the burden back on the writer or writers to be clearer.

How is usability testing different from routine editing and rewriting? First of all, I assume that the person or persons responsible for rewritten or revised text should be the original writers. Second, the reviewer working from a usability approach is providing valuable feedback, not trying to rework or revise the intent of the original document. A side benefit is that reviewer is not relying on subjective statements that such and such a paragraph is unclear. Good usability tests verify that the content in a passage is or is not clear.

See Shipley newsletters 52 (August 2006) and 47 (December 2005) for more information about document reviews and the usability approach.

Checking the usability of a website is especially easy. Have several people try to answer several content questions using only the website. Time them and record how many different menus or screens they have to open. Their search process will tell you whether the content in the website is clear or confused.

As noted above, provide a written review plan before you finish writing the document or completing the website. Such a written review plan identifies the reviewers and assigns them to conduct timely reviews (usability tests, if possible) beginning with the early storyboard. And, of course, the review plan includes funding for the proposed reviews.

6. Provide positive feedback to all contributors so that the writing process is a learning process.

The copyblogger's suggestions list positive feedback several times. After all, as I noted above, if a writer works in isolation, helpful feedback is missing.

I included this suggestion because too often managers and other reviewers of a document or website hit all the negatives, but give little time to the positives. The common reviewer's initial comment is like this one: "Paragraph 3 is good, but . . . ." And then come four or five listed problems. Also, notice the reviewer did not even have the courtesy to explain why paragraph 3 is good. I have had managers tell me that they are so busy that they don't have time to mention the positives!

Going back to suggestion 1 above, the storyboard process I sketched assumed that colleagues would collaborate to review the initial ideas. Hopefully such early reviews would be as positive as possible.

And negative comments should be limited, especially since content points are still evolving. Contributors are more likely to make positive suggestions if the process is still open and non-judgmental.

7. Identify ways for you and your organization to make good documentation habits the rule rather than the exception.

This final suggestion is mainly an organizational one, but first a suggestion for individual writers.

All writers should take time to consider what helps them write effectively and what hinders their writing. This sort of assessment was the reason the copyblogger site got 73 suggestions for better writing. The copyblogger manager wanted all readers to suggest things that helped them become better writers. And individual writers can and should regularly assess their strengths and weaknesses. Good feedback, as mentioned above in suggestions 5 and 6, will always help an individual assesses personal writing success.

From an organizational viewpoint, each writing team should convene a final lessons-learned meeting as to what worked and what didn't. Included would be all contributing writers, their managers, and, if appropriate, major reviewers. Such an organizational review rarely occurs, perhaps only when a company has failed to gain needed business (based on an inadequately written business proposal). However, any major document merits a lessons-learned review. Writing is too much of an unruly skill to pass up the opportunities for an organization to reinforce good habits.

At the very least, a writing team should record a working list of project do's and don'ts for the next team of organizational writers working on a major document (or website).