Shipley Writing Strategies and
www.plainlanguage.gov

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Shipley Group writing strategies agree with and illustrate many of the guidelines from www.plainlanguage.gov. My last article in the Shipley News (June 2011, Vol. 81) made this same observation and applied *Plain Language* assumptions to National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documents.

In the following newsletter I explain more carefully the links between Shipley writing strategies and the Plain Language guidelines. For access to the archive of Shipley newsletters, see http://www.shipleygroup.com/environmental/index.html?pg=news.

The most recent legal guidance on plain language comes from the Plain Writing Act of 2010 (signed by President Obama on October 13, 2010). Obama followed up with Executive Order 23563 (January 28, 2011); this Executive Order made plain writing principles mandatory for governmental regulations. Recent Plain Language principles are not a new governmental mandate. A Plain Language governmental group has been functioning for years, with support from a number of recent administrations. The current website records the latest guidelines from this governmental group.

Here are Plain Writing guidelines as currently listed on the government website:

Plain Language Guidelines

1. Think about your audience
2. Organize
3. Write your document
4. Write for the web
5. Test

The government website then expands on these five guidelines with one or more additional screens. These guidelines and their checklists are a solid and useful starting point for discussions of quality writing skills. I will refer to these guidelines as I summarize Shipley Group writing strategies.

Shipley strategies are best summarized in the following five questions. Answers to the questions form the conceptual foundation for the writing strategies discussed in Shipley Group writing workshops.

Five Shipley Quality Questions

1. Why is 100 percent clarity an important documentation goal?

2. How is a team-written document different from the traditional one-author document?

3. Why is document design an essential strategy for business and technical writers?

4. How should writers choose and cite information so that it is both clear and credible?

5. Why are carefully constructed and correctly written sentences essential for the clarity and credibility of a document/website?

These five questions are the basis for the following newsletter. I answer each question briefly and then link it to the stated governmental Plain Language guidelines, as listed above.

1. Why is 100 percent clarity an important documentation goal?

Clear writing is the Shipley Group synonym for "plain language." All discussions of plain language initiatives presume that if a document uses plain language, it will be clearer than without plain language features.

100 Percent Clarity. The word "clear" implies readers or users (as in the notion of assessing your audience in the first of the Plain Language guidelines). After all, by definition a clear document is demonstrably clear to a reader or readers (its audience). The Shipley goal of 100 percent clarity means that even the most distracted of readers cannot miss a writer's intended meaning. And then the corollary, diverse readers all get the same message from a very clear document.

Misunderstandings of the writer's message are unlikely, perhaps impossible, given the emphatic design of the document and it use of plain language writing skills.

Usability Testing. This concept of clarity then links to the fifth of the Plain Language Guidelines—that is "Test." For years Shipley Group writing consultants have recommended usability testing for crucial documents. Notice that usability testing validates that the message is as close to 100 percent clear as possible. Usability testing, as used in Shipley training, is verification of the intended message for its users, not a cursory quick review from a late-stage editing or proofreading. Such a late review usually focuses on punctuation gaffs or ungrammatical phrases. Clarity (especially 100 percent clarity) is not the main goal of a late-stage review.

Verification of 100 percent clarity is the intent of usability testing. By analogy, rigorous document usability testing is like the field test for a water pump. When attached to a water line, the pump does or does not work as intended. Documents need to be tested with the same rigor. See Shipley News Articles-- August 2008 (Vol. 58 http://www.shipleygroup.com/news/0808.html), March 2010 (Vol. 71

http://www.shipleygroup.com/news/1003.html), and May 2011 (Vol. 80
http://www.shipleygroup.com/news/1105.html)--for more information about usability testing.

2. How is a team-written document different from the traditional one-author document?

Team Writing as Project Management. Writing from a team perspective is essentially a project management issue. With good project management skills, a project manager (or lead writer) coordinates information from 3, 4, or two dozen contributors (often both peers and different levels of management). The challenge is to weave all of their input into a document or website that addresses an agency's or a company's priorities. And if done efficiently, submissions from all contributors will fit into the final document (or website) with only minor editing and revision.

Planning with a Storyboard. A routine Shipley Group recommendation is that team writing begin with a coordinated storyboard (or prototype) of the document or website. Technical writers for decades have used storyboards as an efficiency technique. See Shipley News Articles--November 2008 (Vol. 61 http://www.shipleygroup.com/news/0811.html), and July 2007 (Vol. 56 http://www.shipleygroup.com/news/0707.html)--for information about storyboards. From my sampling of www.plainlanguage.gov, I failed to find much information about early planning steps, especially the use of storyboards. I even searched for "storyboard" and got no hits. Understandably, the Plain Language site's major topics are plain language skills, not team management strategies.

Early documentation and website planning is essential in today's complex technical world. And it surely must be important for governmental agencies, whose technical studies and regulations go on for hundreds of pages (or screens). Instead, the Plain Language site focuses most of its attention on graphics and text. It has little to say about tools for coordinating teams of writers, especially when writers are at different sites and from different organizational units.

Early and Ongoing Collaboration. Without early and collaborative coordination of text (and graphics), written text and graphics from contributors are likely to be too long, too short, or beside the point. In team writing, if the final requirement is for 300 words of well-defined text and one routine graphic, that is what a writer should submit. This submission should fit into the final document seamlessly, with only minor edits or revisions.

Dysfunctional teams often have individual submissions that go on for dozens of pages when only 300 well-written words would have been sufficient. The writers of such windy drafts often warn against any change in their sacred draft text! *Talk about dysfunctional writers!*

3. Why is document design an essential strategy for business and technical writers?

By implication, the listed Plain Language guidelines mention only indirectly the design of the final document. They do mention the need for frequent and well-designed headings and subheadings. They also encourage writers to replace dense lengthy paragraphs with headings, lists, and graphics. The guidelines, however, do not emphasize design as a discrete and early step in document preparation.

Design Considerations. Design includes the width of text columns, headings, all subheadings, the header and footer on pages/screens, the ratio of white space to text, the placement of graphics, captions for graphics, typefaces, type sizes, text shading, and even color (especially for websites). Today's readers/users expect a document or website to be a professionally prepared product!

With an early, detailed design (as in a detailed storyboard), writers should have a full list of headings and subheadings before writing a sentence! And for documents of any complexity, the headings should be numbered (as in 2.2, 2.2.4, etc.) for easy reader navigation and efficient cross referencing. Writers should also know all projected graphics before writing text.

In today's communication culture, the design of document's page or a web screen is a crucial step. Studies show that users rely on visual cues when they glance at a screen or thumb through a document looking for answers to their questions. These visual cues are why the storyboarding step is important, as mentioned above under questions 2. A complete storyboard begins by designing all expected pages or screens.

A complete storyboard is the guiding vision of a projected document or website.

Design and Only Then Write. Nearly three decades ago, Shipley documentation guidance began to recommend that a documentation team set the design of a page or screen before investing time in text and associated graphics. By contrast, in most of the twentieth century, writers finished their draft text before even sending it to a publications design specialist. The specialist then decided how to publish/print the text and began to work up the required graphics.

Today, early design decisions are crucial. For mere efficiency, if text has to fit within a narrow column or within a set number of pages for a subsection, then the design of these pages surely precedes the drafting of text and the preparation of graphics. A late-stage redesign of all pages or screens could add as much as 20 percent or more to the final cost (and time) for completing a project. A redesign may even require rewriting key text and rethinking the associated graphics. That should be an avoidable expense.

Design as a Navigation Aid. Document/web design is important because readers/users use the visual design to navigate from one point to the next or to answer questions. Without thoughtful and useful design signals, readers are likely to get lost in a document or on a site (as has happened to all of us on occasion). A reader or user that is lost is looking at a document or site that is unclear (and surely not even close to 100 percent clear, as the Shipley goal in question 1 stated).

4. How should writers choose and cite information so that it is both clear and credible?

Clear information usually answers a reader's need for useful information. Plain language advocates have the same goal. At the same time, clear information needs to be credible from a reader's perspective. So Plain Language guidelines encourage writers to choose information and language that credibly speaks directly to the identified audience. Information and its associated text are inseparable.

Explaining the Importance of Cited Information. Writers need to explain why they are relying on cited information. How reliable is the information? Is it the Best Science (to use a common test phrase)? Have the writers surveyed competing points of view?

Credibility problems most often occur when writers don't answer the preceding questions clearly and honestly. Unclear and confusing documents were the source of a Federal Highway Administration effort in the early 2000's to improve the quality of their environmental documents. The result was *Improving the Quality of Environmental Documents*: A Report of the Joint AASHTO/ACEC Committee in Cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration (May 2006).

Storytelling Strategies and Message Credibility. I mention the preceding report because it opened with a useful quality principle: "Tell the story of [a transportation] project so that the reader can easily understand the purpose . . . and the strengths and weaknesses associated with [the project]" (Section 2.1, p. 4). The Federal Highway Administration was telling its State Departments of Transportation to be clear and credible in their discussions of proposed transportation projects. See Shipley News Article, January 2007 (Vol. 54 http://www.shipleygroup.com/news/0701.html), for discussion of strategies for environmental writers needing to use storytelling strategies. These storytelling strategies are a core message in Shipley writing programs. The same writing strategies are the basis for most of the Plain Language guidelines listed above.

Here is a list of storytelling strategies from the Shipley newsletter 54:

1. **Adjusting to a listener's or reader's key concerns and questions**

2. **Providing clear explanations for conclusions and related actions**

3. **Linking steps and decisions to an understandable logic trail.**

4. **Emphasizing relevant steps and decisions and downplaying less important details**

5. **Creating for the agency a reasonable and credible image or role . . .**

Notice that these storytelling strategies merge content decisions and the associated language. As I noted above, content and language are inseparable.

5. Why are carefully constructed and correctly written sentences essential for the clarity and credibility of a document/website?

Grammatical precision and punctuation correctness are the final, yet necessary ingredient for a clear, professional document/website. The Plain Language guidelines include such technical language concerns in its discussions of Write your Document and Write for the Web (guidelines 3 and 4 listed above). Both of these writing discussions touch topics from sentence structure and sentence length to correct abbreviations and clear punctuation. The website also has valuable language/text checklists for writers or documents and writers for websites.

A document without the correct and proper language features is a professional failure. Often such errors are so distracting that readers can't see beyond the errors.

I am reminded of a participant in a Shipley writing session years ago. I was asking her about the clarity of a short document. Her response was that she saw a split infinitive and a comma splice. She had looked through and beyond the content and clarity of the document. With the identified errors, the document had no credibility. She assumed the writer must have been either ignorant or careless. Actually, neither of her "errors" was or is serious. For details about the difference between real and imagined errors, see Shipley News Article, January 2011 (Vol. 78 http://www.shipleygroup.com/news/1101.html).

Shipley consultants would agree that the final polish (the Shipley third level of review priorities) is necessary for a professional document or website. All technical and business professionals need to create excellent documents, which necessarily include both clear content and correct language. So Shipley consultants routinely answer questions about grammar and punctuation. Also, both Shipley News Article 78 and the Plain Language website provide a list of recommended style and language guides for writers to use as essential references.

But notice that if writers have not written for their readers a clear and credible document, admirable grammar and accurate punctuation will not save the document. So, as the Plain Language guidelines state and the Shipley quality questions illustrate, quality documents are a complex blend of language and information.

Writers should remember that their main job is to answer their readers' questions as clearly and as credibly as possible (as Plain Language guideline 1 implies).