What Are Your Writing Habits?

by Larry Freeman, PhD
The Shipley Group, *Senior Consultant*

Personal writing habits begin in the earliest days of our schooling. These early habits continue to be relevant years or even decades later. We may be professional adults, but our writing habits from tenth-grade English class remain in our thoughts and feelings. And these early thoughts influence our current writing habits. As we write a current document, we may experience the same uncertainty or nervousness we had about our tenth-grade writing. This nervousness is even more likely when we know that our supervisor and colleagues are going to review something we've just written.

The following newsletter asks you to examine your current writing habits by answering three questions:

1. **Which of today's habits help you write successful documents efficiently?**
2. **Which habits make your personal writing tasks more difficult and less efficient than they should be?**
3. **Which of your current habits would you like to reinforce, to change, or to eliminate?**

I decided to discuss writing habits when National Public Radio reviewed a recent book in its Morning Edition show on February 27, 2012. The book being reviewed was Charles Duhigg's *The Power of Habits: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* (New York: Random House, 2012). See the NPR website for information about NPR's review. The book itself is currently available for about $22 at your local Barnes and Noble.

Duhigg opens his book with the basics of what a habit is and how it affects all of us. His lead-off example on pages 3 through 12 is of an elderly man who had lost all of his recent memories but still appeared to remember many early habits. From this example and from others, Duhigg generalizes the structural parts of a habit:

- **The Cue.** What event or incident triggers the steps in a habit?
- **A Routine.** What steps constitute a habit's routine, often unconsciously?
- **The Reward.** What feelings or tangible benefits reward success with the routine?

Duhigg continues by giving many examples of habits that most of us internalized years ago and now perform almost every day. The example that caught my attention (p. 17) was the habit associated with the opening of a garage door and then guiding a car down the driveway.

Both a Shipley colleague and I have had the same experience with this habit. He and I both got into our cars, triggered the garage door opener, and then moved into the routine for going down the

driveway. Our driveway habit's cue took over, and we initiated the driveway routine. Our conscious thoughts turned to the radio or drinking coffee. We both then backed into our opening garage doors!

As in this driveway example, habits are so powerful because they allow us to turn our attention away from routine tasks. Both the colleague and I failed to monitor the height of the garage door. We trusted routine steps. Many habits are similarly unconscious. For example, I frequently ask my wife if I have closed the garage door. I almost always have, but I do not remember doing so. The habitual steps in my driveway routine include the closing of the door, but my conscious memories do not record that step because it is so much a part of my routine actions.

Duhigg explains on pp. 12-21 that habits are so powerful because they reside in the oldest and deepest parts of the human brain. This is one reason why an individual can lose their short-term memories but still perform long-standing habits flawlessly.

Habits for Writers. Many habits a writer uses to write are similarly powerful and also unconscious. As I write, text flows onto the screen (or paper), but I am unable to explain exactly where my ideas come from. The flow of language follows tight rules, but I do not have to be conscious of the rules. I am also unable to forecast what the next sentence will look like until I write it. And the sentence after the next one is even more unpredictable. Much as in my garage door example, many writing habits are ones that I perform unconsciously--and have for years or decades.

Writing is a unique cognitive task because conscious thinking occurs when unconscious habits are also at work, such as a person's habitual patterns of phrasing and of word choice. Note the use of "habitual" in the preceding sentence. Our habitual thought patterns are uniquely ours precisely because they are learned habits. As we learn them and as they become internalized, we begin to forget that they exist. These habitual features control an individual's unique skills and choices within the structure of the language they are creating.

Much else in Duhigg's book is interesting and useful. And the book itself is an entertaining read. The book opens with Chapters 1 through 3 on "The Habits of Individuals." Some personal habits discussed include overeating, drinking, and nicotine addiction. But Duhigg's main goal is not to help readers change such bad habits, which often require major relearning if they are to change. Duhigg notes that these bad habits are so powerful because they have been with us for many years and because they share the universal features of other human habits. Next come Chapters 4 through 7 on "The Habits of Successful Organizations." Chapters 8 and 9 cover "The Habits of Societies."

Organizational Habits. I especially liked Chapters 4 through 7 on organizational habits. Many writing tasks are or should be tasks working across an organization. Yes, the resulting scientific, technical, or business documents use a writer's language and individual writing skills, but success of such documents rests with their links to organizational procedures and expectations (which are other terms for organizational habits). Here is where organizational checklists and their associated organizational habits become critical in everyday activities.

One of Duhigg's most convincing examples (pp. 176-178) comes from events at Rhode Island Hospital. The initial organizational problem was when a surgeon operated on the wrong side of a patient's head. Organizational habits, including even an existing checklist procedure, failed the patient. Duhigg goes on to recount how the organizational culture of the hospital changed, including an increased use of new checklists, which helped all employees internalize good working habits. But the key change was not a new checklist. It was a commitment from all employees to be open to questions and comments from all other employees (even a senior surgeon). The organizational culture within the hospital changed.

My goal is not to provide more review comments on Duhigg's book. Instead, let me return to my three recommended questions, from screen/page 1 of this newsletter:

1. **Which of today's habits help you write successful documents efficiently?**
2. **Which habits make your personal writing tasks more difficult and less efficient than they should be?**
3. **Which of your current habits would you like to reinforce, to change, or to eliminate?**

I encourage writers to consider these three questions. Writing is a challenging intellectual task. As such, my personal goal is to write as efficiently and as skillfully as I can. In the following text I suggest strategies for helping writers answer the three questions. Also, see Duhigg's book (pp. 275-286) for a short appendix with his recommendations for surveying an existing habit and discovering strategies for changing that habit.

In contrast with Duhigg's broad survey of habits, my recommendations focus on strategies for making your personal writing habits more efficient and skillful.

1. Which of today's habits help you write successful documents efficiently?

Conduct a formal or informal survey of your current writing habits. **In a formal survey**, you would record written observations about your habits for a week, two weeks, or even a month. This working journal would document the conditions, times, and steps you use to write a complete document (or key sections of the document). Be sure to record how long it takes you to complete a typical page of text. Differing times should signal different levels of writing efficiency.

In a more informal survey, you could answer many of the same questions below but not in written notes. In this case you would be recalling details about your writing habits and then using them to set priorities for adjusting your habits.

Professional writers have noted for decades that physical surroundings are important in helping a writer write efficiently. **Where do you usually write? Do you have a favorite room and chair?** Is your preference a table at your local Starbucks? **Do you need to have your favorite music playing in**

the background? (For some years I had a large print of two polar bears on the wall in my office. The presence of the print and the bears seemed to help me start to write.)

What do you do to get ready to write? (In Duhigg's terminology, what cue causes you to start stringing words and phrases together?) **Do you have to review your planning notes or an outline?** How essential is the review? Is it more of a procrastination? **Do you need that final cup of coffee or hot chocolate?** Some writers find that aligning all the pens and pencils on their desk helps them feel ready to write. What is your personal ritual?

How detailed and helpful are formal assignments? Of course, you may be working on documents that you want to write, not on assigned topics. How do the origins of a topic change your writing strategies? For business assignments, an assignment may be in writing. In other instances, a manager makes an oral assignment. Do the differences in the two assignments help or hinder you? **How much detail would you prefer to have in a useful assignment, either written or oral?** Does a good assignment list the target number of pages? What about deadlines? How firm are the deadlines? Would identified interim milestones help you meet the eventual deadline?

Do you know the format and design for a document before you begin to write text and prepare graphics? If you don't, who is responsible for reworking your rough text to make it fit into a document with two columns, three specified levels of subheadings, and required graphics?

I ask about format because my assumption as a manager for technical documents is that contributing writers need to know exactly what is required and where their text and graphics will fit into the final document. Their goal should be to submit text and graphics that require no revisions beyond replacing a word or two here and there. More major revisions and late-stage document redesign, if they occur, are inefficient.

How early and how often do you have help from colleagues in planning, writing, and reviewing of key information for inclusion in a major document (either a hard copy or electronic version)? I ask this question because much business and technical writing today is organizational in nature. So if collaborators don't jointly plan and then write key documents, efficiency suffers. Also, don't forget early and ongoing reviews of the evolving document. Without careful reviews, both document quality and efficiency decline.

Do you and your colleagues ever prepare a detailed storyboard for a document? I mention storyboards because they are the most powerful tool I know for planning the exact form and content of a proposed document. For more information about storyboards, see the Shipley Group archive of past newsletters at http://www.shipleygroup.com/environmental/index.html?pg=news**.** The Shipley News (Vol. 61) November, 2008-- Discussion: "A NEPA Storyboard Example." The newsletter reprints 8 sample pages from an actual storyboard; it also makes some recommendations for writers to use if they want to introduce storyboards as a writing tool for their next team-written document.

To summarize, monitor your personal writing habits and, if appropriate, the writing habits of your colleagues. Both types of habits will influence how efficiently you and your team write key documents.

Your goal should be to identify habits for yourself and perhaps for your organization that enable document preparation to be productive and efficient.

2. Which habits make your personal writing tasks more difficult and less efficient than they should be?

Return to your notes and observations for question 1 above. Place a "+" mark in the margin when a habit is helpful. Similarly, place a "-" in the margin when you see a habit that impairs your efficiency as a writer. Optionally, insert smiley faces and frowns.

In the following text, I list some of major inefficiencies from my own personal writing experience. Many of yours may be different, but, hopefully, some of mine will sound familiar.

Here are some major writing problems:

1. **Poorly framed assignment that begins to shift and change even as a writer begins to write**
2. **No clearly identified and recorded documentation standards**
3. **Starting to write before you have firmed up your thoughts and ideas (perhaps in a detailed storyboard, as suggested in the prior discussion)**
4. **Poor coordination and consistency between related sections of a key document, but written by different writers**
5. **Procrastination by reviewing your notes and planning ideas and then reviewing them again and again**
6. **More field work and data gathering than is necessary for adequate impact projections (in a NEPA context)**
7. **Failure to provide clear and credible examples and reasons for your conclusions**
8. **A poor conceptual design for a document, one that fails to help readers find and use key information (This problem is the number 1 goal in the recent Plain Language statute and its associated Executive Order.)**
9. **Pushing essential reviews to the last day or the last hour, with the result being no time to rework major problems**

Many of the preceding problems are organizational ones. This is why I found Duhigg's Chapters 4 through 7 especially relevant.

Earlier Shipley Group newsletters have touched-on many of the preceding problems. An archive of newsletters is at http://www.shipleygroup.com/environmental/index.html?pg=news. Three especially relevant newsletters are the following ones:

- "Quality Assurance/Quality Control" Newsletter 75 (September 2010)
- "Shipley Writing Strategies and www.plainlanguage.gov" Newsletter 82 (July 2011)
- "Reviewing Documents Efficiently" Newsletter 85 (December 2011)

A Lessons-Learned Step for Major Documents. Organizational efforts and constraints are often the main problems with a document. All writing teams should assess their organizational procedures and constraints after they finish a major document.

As an example of such a process, let me suggest a strategy from the proposal-writing world. Many major companies carefully review their unsuccessful proposals for lessons to be learned. Their process involves both internal and, if possible, external reviews of both the written proposal and the process steps used to write and assemble the proposal. A formal fact-finding team then assesses the organization's actions and comes up with a list of do's and don'ts for the next corporate product.

I have rarely seen a lessons-learned loop in many of the technical and scientific documents that come to the Shipley Group for review. For example, in the world of National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documents, I have only seen a handful of written NEPA reviews that covered both actual team procedures and the parallel documentation steps. The presumption seems to be that a lessons-learned loop is unnecessary or, perhaps, even a waste of time. As one Shipley participant observed, even marginally successful NEPA work ensures that your next assignment is the next NEPA project in the queue. In such a context, the relevant management assumption appears to be this: **Time spent should be on the new assignment, not revisiting the sins of the prior NEPA project!** This assumption encourages NEPA teams to repeat the same project mistakes in future assignments.

3. Which of your current habits would you like to reinforce, to change, or to eliminate?

This question invites you to prepare your own personal action plan for writing more efficiently. I consider this list as your responsibility, especially because everyone's list is going to be different.

I would also suggest that you work within your department or section to improve its overall documentation efforts. See my lessons-learned suggestion for improving your organizational efficiency. Such improvements would not only help your organization, but you and your professional colleagues would find everyday documentation tasks easier to complete.

To end on a good note, I am seeing better NEPA documents all the time—that is, ones that are more technically accurate and better written. So keep up the good work!

As you work on your next document, practice writing habits that help you write quality documents and avoid habits that don't help you.