Making Documents Credible

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Readers trust a document when the writer is in control of the language and its message. A document is out of control when its message is chaotic, unpredictable, and conceptually unclear. These problems signal an out-of-control document and an amateur for a writer. Credibility vanishes, and readers cease to trust the writer or the writer's document.

The preceding paragraph summarizes the Shipley Group's approach to writing documents and creating websites. The primary assignment for Shipley consultants is to help writers create messages that are 100 percent clear and thus credible.

> *Notice the lack of emphasis on grammar and punctuation in the Shipley approach. Instead of grammatical worries, effective writers should emphasize major concepts and the persuasive rationale supporting these concepts.*

My experience with scores of professional documents suggests that lapses in grammar and punctuation are rare. Readers look first to see if the essential message is 100 percent clear. If it is, they will trust the writer and will judge the document to be credible.

The goal of 100 percent clarity is a major theme from *Documentation Strategies*, a Shipley Group publication. *Documentation Strategies* is a key reference in all of Shipley's writing and communication workshops. We use an environmental version *of Documentation Strategies* in our workshops on compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Here are some suggestions for ensuring that documents are credible:

1. **Open a document or subsection with a clear preview of the content to come.**

2. **Focus the content by answering likely questions from potential readers/users.**

3. **Move conclusions and key concepts up to the opening sentence, the initial paragraph, or the opening page of subsections.**

4. **Cite relevant information by explaining its relevance to the topics and questions of interest to readers. (Avoid mystery citations!)**

5. **Remember to record a clear chain of evidence or reasons justifying major conclusions.**

I discuss these suggestions with environmental examples, but the writing principles apply to both business and technical documents devoted to non-environmental topics.

1. Open a document or subsection with a clear preview of the content to come.

Readers should always know from the first page (or even the first line on the first page) what is coming next and then what follows that next point after the first. The architecture of the document should be clear enough that even the most distracted of readers can't miss what the primary message is and how its supporting information is organized.

A common newsletter strategy is to preview all major points on p. 1, as I do in the bolded list above. Then each of the bolded points comes back in repetition as the subheadings for separate discussions. An optional practice is to insert the bolded list of topics into a preview box on p. 1.

This preview of major content points helps the message in the document approach the goal of 100 percent clarity. And if well done, this preview means that readers can read selectively, that is, skipping known information, if appropriate, and then reading unknown information. Note that the typical reader is assumed to be a skip and scan reader.

Environmental Application. Previews of content are desirable for all major chapters and subsections in Environmental Assessments or Environmental Impact Statements [the major compliance documents under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)]. NEPA case law decisions beginning in the early 1970's set readability as a basic legal requirement. Content previews are just one obvious strategy for ensuring readability and document quality.

Previews of a document's content, as just described, are also consistent with the Plain Writing Act, passed by Congress in 2010 and signed by President Obama. Under this law, all federal agencies must integrate plain writing strategies into their routine documents. For more information about the governmental Plain Language initiative, go to www.plainlanguage.gov. Also, refer to Shipley Group newsletters 81 (June 2011) and 82 (July 2011). Shipley newsletters are available at http://shipleygroup.com/news.html

2. Focus the content by answering likely questions from potential readers/users.

The user emphasis under the Plain Writing Act begins when agency writers structure their documents by answering real and likely questions from the public (the ultimate users of federal documents).

Environmental Application. One development of this question-and-answer approach is that headings and subheadings in agency environmental documents are increasingly being written as questions. Here are some simple question headings from typical NEPA documents:

1.5. 2   How can the public learn about the planning process for the Route 52 bypass outside Springfield?

2.4.1   How would the No Action/No Build alternative fail to meet the objectives within the DOT's Purpose and Need?

4.7   What will be the impacts of the Route 52 bypass alternatives on Springfield's historic buildings along Main Street?

4.9.2   How will the Route 52 bypass alternatives differ in light of projected traffic flow patterns in downtown Springfield?

Note that these question headings are content rich and, as such, they would assist readers to find answers to likely questions. Federal Highway Administration document guidelines are increasingly recommending that state DOTs consider adding question headings to their required NEPA documents.

3.   Move conclusions and key concepts up to the opening sentence, the initial paragraph, or the opening page of subsections.

Begin documents with conclusions and key concepts. Serious documents and useful websites should never begin as mysteries. Yet writers often create mysteries when they begin with the history of events or with their personal reasons for being interested in a topic. Such background information often frustrates readers, who want a document to get to its key message.

Recall that the classic abstract for a technical report laid out its key message. Abstracts often were reprinted on the cover page or, optionally under the title on page 1 of the report.

Environmental Application. Stated impact conclusions should open impact sections in the classic NEPA Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences. So, for example, the first page of the water quality section should summarize the water quality impacts of all alternatives, including No Action. Writers should save the following pages in the water quality section for methodology information, baseline survey interpretations, and other technical information.

If the preceding recommendation seems to be strange or even unacceptable, imagine that the first page of the water quality section opens with a classic abstract, one summarizing the

impacts of all alternatives. I would further suggest that the classic abstract format could become a matrix, with water quality values along one axis and alternatives along the other axis.

4. Cite relevant information by explaining its relevance to the topics and questions of interest to readers. (Avoid mystery citations!)

Citations to other documents, including prior NEPA documents need to be conceptually linked to the site-specific conditions. Without such a linkage, writers often include citations that don't make much sense to readers/users. I call such citations mystery citations.

Environmental Application. Review the following three sample environmental passages (with fictional content). One illustrates an unclear mystery citation; the other two do not. Note that all citations use the preferred parenthetical system for citing sources, including the relevant page numbers. A complete bibliography would give full publishing information; I omit sample bibliographic information.

1. Habitat for mule deer in the project area is in poor condition from the last several years of drought. Based on the poor habitat conditions, fawn survival rates of under 30 percent are likely next spring. Field research by Frampton and Rideout in 2009 showed a similarly low survival rate for fawns; their population survey in 2009 followed three years of drought in the affected Nevada counties. Their study, although done in Nevada, is applicable to our project area in California; vegetative species are similar, and deer populations are similar, both in their density and in their reproductive patterns. Frampton and Rideout's study (2010, pp.233-247) is the best available approach for estimating deer populations in at-risk populations, such as those in our project area in California.

2. Baseline cultural resources in the project area were originally surveyed by Jamison in 1937. Jamison's technical report (1939, pp. 55-68) is still the best available published report even though Jamison's field survey methods are not up to current survey standards. Information from the Utah State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO confirms that over 90 percent of Jamison's identified sites still exist and many still merit protection (Letter from the SHPO, November 15, 2011).

3. Survey of trout in the Big Sugar River shows three primary spawning areas, with reproductive rates maintaining a stable population throughout the 33 miles of Big Sugar in Missouri. Populations in the Kansas section of Big Sugar are stressed by the longer fishing season in Kansas. Our projection is that populations in the Missouri section of Big Sugar will continue to be healthy and to maintain themselves in future years (Smucker and Hook, 2011, pp. 9-23).

If you guessed that the third sample passage includes the mystery citation, congratulations.

That third passage fails to mention what Smucker and Hook studied and how it relates to the trout populations. Also, notice that the text in the third example does not help readers to decide if the cited study is relevant. Without some data adequacy text, readers are left to guess about the value of a citation (especially what it did or didn't discuss.) Truly an unprofessional, sloppy mystery!

For more information about the "Best Science" in NEPA analyses, see Shipley Group newsletter 55 (June 2007).

The Federal Highway Administration has begun to suggest that NEPA documents discuss data adequacy information, especially when cited studies are not clearly relevant or likely to be considered out of date. Data adequacy information has a lot to do with the credibility of documents that are relying on cited studies and reports.

5. Remember to record a clear chain of evidence or reasons justifying major conclusions.

A list of reasons or evidence properly follows a stated conclusion. And how best to emphasize such reasons? A numbered list is the easiest and most obvious answer. Once numbered, reasons can be linked to later discussions in the text. An obvious advantage is that, with numbering in a list format, even the poorest of readers cannot fail to notice the list of reasons. The list helps dense text and concepts to be 100 percent clear!

Environmental Application. Impact conclusions and a list of supporting reasons are the central NEPA compliance requirement. NEPA court decisions routinely address the credibility of the impact conclusions and the supporting evidence. If the evidence is murky and confused, the judge in a federal court has an easy verdict. The judge can find that the impact information would not comprehensible either to the decision maker or to interested members of the public.

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