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Myths about Writing Conventions

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Many professional adults are still writing documents using myths they learned in grade school. They likely learned more myths in the required freshman composition course. Many of these myths were valid and useful a generation ago. But writing has changed due to the computer revolution in the 1980s. Changes are still occurring, with today's writers creating business and technical documents that are far different from ones created only 5 or 10 years ago.

These changes are best summarized in the following list of myths.

Myth 1. Writing is primarily a language process of words and phrases.

Myth 2. Document format is a late-stage task, often best left to a graphic specialist or a staff assistant.

Myth 3. Chapter titles and headings and subheadings should be short—and never an informative phrase or a full question.

Myth 4. Graphics are a late-stage supplement for text that is often lengthy and difficult to read.

Myth 5. Paragraphs are the key content or organizational feature of acceptable text.

Myth 6. Short documents, like emails or formal letters, do not require either subject lines or frequent subheadings.

The following newsletter explains why Shipley consultants believe these six myths to be, indeed, myths.

> ***As myths, skillful writers today should ignore them when they create documents and websites.***

Participants in Shipley workshops often introduce myths as they ask questions. For example, I have heard many versions of the following questions or statements:

- *Are we allowed to use headings that are more than a single line long?*
- *Let's use "Introduction" as the Chapter 1 title; after all, it tells readers that the first chapter is providing introductory stuff.*
- *Is a subject line acceptable in a formal written letter?*

Note that these questions imply that language customs are linked to legal permission, perhaps from some governmental academy of experts. In the United States and Britain, best language rules are simply customs—that is, correct language is what is used and accepted as correct by educated

writers. So language experts or writing teachers focus on what has become acceptable today, not a generation ago. Current language guides, either on the Internet or in a published dictionary, record current language customs, not legal rules from governmental experts.

Current writing customs are evolving based on our many visual and electronic tools. We increasingly expect to see professional-appearing, sophisticated documents (both on the web and in printed versions). Successful documents/websites use tools from the most current software. Participants in a recent Shipley writing workshop remarked that their children won't turn in a school report unless it is written using current software tools. Talk about language customs and the evolving expectations of writers and readers!

I discuss each of the six myths in the following newsletter.

Myth 1. Writing is primarily a language process of words and phrases.

Writing in the current computer age is increasingly a visual product, not simply traditional words and phrases. Visual emphasis techniques are now essential for documents and websites to be successful.

Yes, traditional language with its words and phrases is still relevant. But users of today's documents increasingly scan a document/web screen for visual highlights. If they are interested in a highlighted point, they may read a short passage of traditional text. Note that traditional text still has its role, but it often is not the primary communication mode. Readers are using a skip-and-scan reading strategy rather than reading text from beginning to end.

Shipley writing sessions routinely introduce visual design as an early writing decision (that is, a decision before the text is written). The reason for this suggestion is that design decisions control and change language in the text. A simple example is the width of a column of text. For narrow columns (either in printed versions or on web pages), writers automatically prefer shorter paragraphs. And shorter paragraphs then trigger shorter sentences (on average).

As in this example, a simple early design decision changes the words and phrases. Writers are wasting their time (and perhaps money!) if they write text before choosing a format and associated writing standards.

Myth 1 was true up until the 1980s, when computers began to change our vision of acceptable writing.

Myth 2. Document format is a late-stage task, often best left to a graphic specialist or a staff assistant.

Myth 2 describes the writing process prior to the 1980s.

Skillful writers today choose format features early in the writing process. Such decisions must come before writers work on text.

Professional writers prior to the 1980s routinely wrote a draft version of the text, but without format features we now consider essential. Accounts by these early writers routinely recorded that editors worked with authors to improve, condense, and focus rambling draft pages of dense text.

Notice that extensive late-stage revisions and editorial reworking was the norm in these pre-computer decades. So Myth 2 was the norm in these earlier decades because graphics and most format features were only attached to draft text after an acceptable draft moved into the printing phase of the publication process.

In contrast with the Myth 2 approach, today's business and technical writers should begin creating documents with well-planned, integrated graphics and with format decisions settled. Today's writers often work with well-defined models of documents to be written. In such cases, writers usually know on day 1 of their writing process what they need to write and how best to organize their information (that is with headings, subheadings, and graphics).

In a team-written environmental document, for example, a technical contributor should know that she is responsible for three pages of text and graphics on water quality impacts. She also knows what headings and subheadings should appear on these three pages. Notice that the most efficient current writing process presumes that all contributors know exactly what they need to contribute. Such an approach means that today's writers should never write pages of rambling, unfocused text.

Storyboards as an Efficient Planning Strategy. Shipley consultants recommend that writers collaborating on complex documents create an initial storyboard. This storyboard, essentially a visual map of the expected document, tells each contributor what he or she is expected to contribute. For more information on storyboards, see Shipley newsletter 61 (November 2008) at, http://www.shipleygroup.com/news.html. The Shipley group also offers a course specifically on Storyboards, see http://www.shipleygroup.com/courses.html?id=101 and http://www.shipleygroup.com/courses.html?id=102

Myth 3. Chapter titles and headings and subheadings should be short—and never an informative phrase or a full question.

In current documents and websites, titles, headings, and subheadings are increasingly communicating useful information. The benefit of such headings is that skip-and-scan readers can easily survey informative headings as they decide what content to review.

The need for informative headings means that the classic one-word heading does not help readers. Here are some headings that have lost their usefulness:

- **Chapter 1: Introduction**
- **Background**
- **Results**

Each of these one-word headings fails to announce what substantive content follows the heading. A useful heading should announce the content, thus allowing readers to decide if they are interested in the content.

Here are some possible expansions of the first heading listed above:

Chapter 1: Public Questions about Site Options for Proposed Warehouse Complex

Chapter 1: Funding Concerns about the Proposed Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

Chapter 1: Proposed Governmental Actions and the Structure of the Final Investigative Report

For decades skillful technical writers have suggested that major headings and subheadings be content rich. As in the preceding three expansions, readers seeing a content-rich chapter heading/title should instantly know what chapter 1 will discuss. The single word "Introduction" provides no such useful information.

Options do exist, even if a writer wants to retain the word "Introduction":

Chapter 1: An Introduction to the Site Options for the Proposed Warehouse Complex

Or another common option:

Chapter 1: What are the site options for the proposed warehouse complex? [Note the capitalization of only the initial word in the title. This variation is increasingly used on websites and with question headings.]

Question headings are an increasingly popular option, especially when writers want to involve their readers. Writers unfamiliar with the Plain Writing Act of 2010 (signed by President Obama on October 13, 2010) should go to the governmental website www.plainlanguage.gov. The website discusses (and illustrates) substantive headings. The website also recommends that writers address readers' questions as they create documents or websites. Also see Shipley Group newsletters 81 (June 2011) and 82 (July 2011), both of which discuss plain language. Link to Shipley Group newsletters, http://www.shipleygroup.com/news.html

Myth 4. Graphics are a late-stage supplement for text that is often lengthy and difficult to read.

Myth 4 was especially true in the decades before the 1980s. Writers had to rely on graphics specialists for even simple graphics. These specialists routinely observed that their skills weren't used until very late in the writing process. So the resulting documents often had few graphics, and those used were not integrated into the text. Printed volumes in those early years would often print all graphics in a separate glossy supplement, not even attempting to integrate them into the pages of text.

So Myth 4 didn't really work for skillful writers before 1980, and it surely doesn't work for today's documents. Both today's writers and their readers expect text and graphics to be integrated. Graphics routinely appear on the same page as the text discussing the graphics. Web pages also integrate pieces or chunks of text with relevant graphics. Good integration presumes that text and graphics are emphasizing the same major points.

Myth 4 is also wrong for another reason. Graphics since 1980 have increasingly become a stand-alone feature on pages and screens. Good graphics now have informative captions, often several sentences long. *Scientific American* was a pioneer of such extended captions; their style of writing, including informative graphics, invites readers to scan graphics before even reading text. (I would confess that I read the text for only a few articles in *Scientific American*; I do scan the graphics for the many of the other articles. I am a typical skip-and-scan reader of *Scientific American.*)

Remember that current stand-alone graphics are still integrated into pages or screens, along with chunks of text. As I said earlier in this newsletter, a reader scanning a graphic has the option of reading the relevant text. So in this sense, stand-alone graphics function much like informative headings; they highlight ideas, thus allowing readers to decide if they want more information.

Myth 5. Paragraphs are the key content or organizational feature of acceptable text.

Myth 5 builds on the notion that text is primarily a series of paragraphs, often with no headings or subheadings and few graphics or other emphasis techniques. This notion is still current with writers. Many folks assigned to write something turn to their computer and begin to write paragraph after paragraph of text. To them, solid writing is paragraphs and more paragraphs.

Shipley Recommendation: Resist the temptation to write text until you have decided what ideas you need to emphasize and what emphatic format tools you intend to use.

Paragraphs are a weak format tool. And long paragraphs more likely confuse readers than highlight major points. In *Documentation Strategies for Business and Technical Writers* (a Shipley Group publication), I survey current paragraphing conventions. Here are some of my recommendations from that reference book:

- **Keep paragraphs short.** As a visual test, limit a paragraph to no more than perhaps 2 inches of space on a page without a paragraph indentation. The shorter the lines of text (in characters), the shorter the paragraph should be.
- **Use the first few words in a paragraph to announce its primary content**. These few words visually announce the content to follow. Stick with the announced content for the rest of paragraph.
- **Don't end a paragraph with a new conclusion or new information.** Teachers often recommended ending a paragraph with a new fact or conclusion. This recommendation was applicable because students were often writing a single paragraph, which needed a clincher point as a closing. In a sequence of paragraphs, move major content up and left in each

paragraph. Don't use paragraph closings to emphasize information. When a paragraph ends, stop.

- **Use a displayed list (with bullets or numbering) to break up a lengthy paragraph.** Sometimes a new subheading introduces the list.
- **Use a carefully planned graphic to replace a lengthy paragraph.**

The preceding list is a displayed list, with bullets. I used it to replace two or three paragraphs of text

Myth 6. Short documents, like emails or formal letters, do not require either subject lines or frequent subheadings.

In a recent workshop, a participant asked: "Should we use headings even in short letters or emails?"

I answered by saying that no writing rules forbid headings even in a single-page document**. So Myth 6 is wrong. Do not follow its suggestion.**

Headings and subheadings in a short document or brief website are important visual highlights. Recall that the analysis of Myth 1 emphasized a document's visual impact. The visual impact of a short document is also more important than following misguided Myth 6, as stated above.

In regard to subject lines, Shipley consultants recommend content-rich subject lines for both emails and for formal letters. Such subject lines, even if perhaps two lines long, are more helpful than a mystery heading such as "Discussion." Emails should always have subject lines, which help readers use and retrieve relevant emails.

Simplified Letters. Some 50 years ago business typing courses introduced the Simplified Letter. Its features included a content-rich subject line. It also recommended omitting the traditional Salutation ("Dear Miss Johnson") and the insincere Complimentary Closing ("Yours very sincerely"). The inside address replaced the unneeded salutation. A signed writer's block replaced the archaic complimentary closing.

I have often recommended the Simplified Letter format. It is useful and acceptable in most business and governmental contexts. Some traditional organizations (either businesses or governmental agencies) might prefer traditional letter formats. If so, that is their choice.