Utah's DMV Website: Quality Design and Good Writing

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Last week I opened Utah's Department of Motor Vehicle (DMV) website for the first time. On that initial visit, I was impressed with the design of the site and the quality of its writing.

I was visiting the site because I needed information about renewing the registration on my Ford SUV. Usually I rely on DMV's mailed renewal notice. This year's notice did come in the mail, but it was likely discarded along with the prior week's junk mail. So I went to the DMV website for renewal instructions.

My search took less than 5 minutes, and I found clear and useful answers to my questions. Based on my initial experience with the DMV website, I noted five features that made the website successful:

1. **The screens had user-friendly menus and many sub-menus and linked topics—that is, a website designed for the skip-and-scan reader.**
2. **Content was tightly focused on a user's potential questions.**
3. **Explanatory information was short and clear (no long-winded traditional paragraphs!).**
4. **Technical concepts and confusing terms were limited and, if present, explained clearly.**
5. **A usability/clarity rating for the Utah DMV website would be high.**

These document features parallel writing criteria that I recommend to writers of National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documents. Such writers are the primary audience for Shipley Group environmental workshops. Shipley consultants also present non-environmental workshops on the design and writing of business and technical documents.

> *I wish NEPA writers, editors, and managers would take the listed document features to heart. If they did, dense NEPA EISs and EAs would be more legally compliant and easier to read.*

The following newsletter discusses why the listed document/website features help writers create quality documents. Current NEPA hard-copy documents are now routinely published on agency websites. For consistency, documents and website publications are now identical.

In addition to the Utah DMV site, I opened DMV sites for several other states—Colorado, Wyoming, Missouri, and Oregon. All sites relied on the same features I identified in the Utah site. These state websites are using similar strategies for making their compliance information as user friendly as possible.

These state strategies parallel the recommended federal plain language principles, as recorded at www.plainlanguage.gov. For more information about the federal plain language initiative, see Shipley Group newsletters 81 and 82, which are available in an archive of newsletters at http://www.shipleygroup.com/news.html.

1. The screens had user-friendly menus and many sub-menus and linked topics—that is, a website designed for the skip-and-scan reader.

Quality documents and useful websites begin with good document/screen design. Some traditional writers might argue that quality begins with the words and phrases in text. They are wrong. Today's readers/users expect professionally done pages or screens. They expect documents to be open, inviting, and visually effective.

Most importantly, readers today are more likely to be skip-and-scan readers. They expect to see menus and sub-menus of topics (often called preview call-out boxes in documents). Such format previews allow readers to read selectively from topic to topic. A primary goal for writers and editors is to design a document or website so that readers or users can navigate from topic to topic. Usability tests rate a document on its accessibility; see topic 5 below.

Quality decisions about page/screen format should come before writers create text. Traditional writers in the pre-computer era created pages and pages of text before turning them over to an editor or publisher. Editors were responsible for introducing format features and graphics; these changes often required time-consuming revisions of the text. Traditional publication policies were not efficient, especially if text needed substantial revisions to accommodate late-stage format changes.

2. Content was tightly focused on a user's potential questions.

Identifying a reader's potential questions has been a time-proven writing strategy for decades. In today's writing, questions are still important, but the difference in the Utah DMV site and in the other state websites is that the questions are now recorded as bolded subheadings. As such, they assist users to locate and then track relevant information. For instance, my search of the Utah website focused on several key questions:

> **My registration is about to expire. Do I need a safety and/or emissions inspection this year?**
>
> **How do I replace a lost registration, license plate, or decal?**
>
> **My registration is about to expire. Why didn't I receive a renewal notice?**

The preceding questions are recorded as bolded subheadings at the Utah website. Notice that as subheadings, they are content rich, often extending beyond a single sentence or question. Such lengthy headings are increasingly replacing mystery headings that were common a generation ago:

> **1.3 Background**

2.3.2 Criteria

1.1 Introductory Stuff

4.3.2 Results

These headings are mysteries because they provide no content information about the specific information to be discussed under each subheading. Under 1.3, for example, what background is going to be covered? Site conditions? Legal challenges? Funding problems? The list of possible topics is endless.

3. Explanatory information was short and clear (no long-winded traditional paragraphs!).

Explanations under the three headings listed in the prior section extended to no more than two or three short sentences. None became a dense, lengthy paragraph. Increasingly writers are focusing on chunks or segments of information; this trend is especially true of websites.

A classic feature of readable text is that the average length of sentences is short. The Utah DMV website had very short explanatory sentences.

4. Technical concepts and confusing terms were limited and, if present, explained clearly.

As appropriate, the Utah DMV text defined terms or concepts when they first appeared. No separate glossary was necessary because a definition appeared the first time a term was introduced.

Again, the preceding approach is a valuable one for NEPA writers to remember. For clarity and usability, terms should be defined on the page or the screen when they are first mentioned. If a term or concept is not mentioned again until much later in a chapter or website, a writer should repeat the definition when the term is reintroduced. Note that this recommendation presumes that readers are more likely to be reading selectively, as in a skip-and-scan approach to a document or a website.

A separate glossary is still a desirable tool in published documents, either following the Table or Contents or included as an Appendix.

5. A usability/clarity rating for the Utah DMV website would be high.

For several decades serious editors and publishers have been conducting usability tests for key documents. In a usability test, readers/users are given a list of content questions. They are then asked to find answers and to record how long it took them to find the answers. Multiple readers/users then compare their answers and their recorded times.

A flawed document (one with a poor usability rating) will have low and conflicting results as readers/users report on the answers to the set questions. In a really poor document, multiple and conflicting answers are present in the text.

From a usability standpoint, a highly useful document is as close to 100 percent clear as possible. Even unskilled, distracted readers should not miss major conclusions.

Usability tests are quite different from informal editing and proofreading. In informal editing, a colleague is asked to edit or proofread a document. Rarely does the colleague have content questions (as in a usability test) or even written quality criteria. So the colleague begins to read until an error appears, perhaps a misplaced comma or a misspelled word. Such an approach to editing or proofreading is chaos. Neither the writer of a text nor its reviewers are working against recorded quality standards. The assumption seems to be that anybody with a basic degree is a qualified writer (or editor).

Shipley Group writing workshops start with the assumption that all contributors to a document should have a written list of quality criteria. The document/website features recorded on the first page of this newsletter is a basic list of quality criteria. Other criteria are recorded in the attached Shipley Group Checklist.

Link to Shipley Group Newsletter Articles: http://shipleygroup.com/news.html

Checklist on Document Quality

Directions: Circle one response number for each question.

Level 1: Content, Format, and Organization

	Not Adequate	Adequate But Could Be Improved	Excellent
1. Does the document format (page layout) aid readers to navigate from chapter to chapter and section to section? **[Documentation Strategies—Page Layout and Emphasis]**	1	2	3
2. Do readers know when they begin the document, a chapter, or a subsection what they are going to read and why? **[Documentation Strategies—Organization, Emphasis]**	1	2	3
3. Are legal, regulatory, and policy implications clearly stated?	1	2	3
4. Are sections and subsections clearly and logically linked, usually through headings, subheadings, and deliberate repetition of key information? **[Documentation Strategies—Organization, Emphasis]**	1	2	3
5. Do conclusions and recommendations appear at the beginnings of sections, subsections, paragraphs, and sentences? **[Documentation Strategies—Organization]**	1	2	3
6. Are graphics (tables, figures, charts, graphs, illustrations, and maps) used effectively to convey information? **[Documentation Strategies—Graphics for Documents]**	1	2	3

Key

1 = Not Adequate: Causes reviewer to provide suggestions for fixing
2 = Adequate But Could Be Improved: Causes reviewer to provide suggestions for improvement
3 = Excellent: No comments required by reviewer

	Not Adequate	Adequate But Could Be Improved	Excellent
Level 2: Paragraphing and Sentence Structure			
7. Are paragraphs clear and readable? Do lists and graphics replace, as appropriate, dense, unreadable paragraph? *[Documentation Strategies—Paragraphs, Lists, Graphics for Documents]*	1	2	3
8. Do sentences move clearly from old information to new information so that the logic is smooth and understandable?	1	2	3
9. Are sentences relatively short (on average)?	1	2	3
10. Are sentences free from unclear and confusing jargon (also called gobbledygook)? *[Documentation Strategies—Gobbledygook]*	1	2	3
Level 3: Grammar, Spelling, and Punctuation			
11. Is the document free from errors in word choice (including errors in pronouns and in the agreement of subject and verbs)? *[Documentation Strategies—Word Problems]*	1	2	3
12. Are all words correctly spelled and consistent from section to section?	1	2	3
13. Is the punctuation clear (that is, helpful to readers) as well as being correct? *[Documentation Strategies—Commas]*	1	2	3

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