Using Shipley Group's Checklist on Document Quality

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

Written quality standards are essential. See the attached copy of a Checklist on Document Quality for a list of suggested quality standards.

The Shipley Group's standards are generic suggestions, in that they would apply, with minor adjustments, to almost any business or technical document. They are especially relevant to documents prepared for compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). NEPA case law decisions often assess the readability or clarity of the impacts disclosed in required NEPA documents.

I propose in the following newsletter to make some suggestions for using the Checklist. As appropriate, I mention applications to NEPA documents.

Here is a list of my suggestions:

1. **Make sure all contributors (writers, editors, and reviewers) have the same list of quality standards from day 1 of work on a document or website.**
2. **Take time to review the standards with all contributors (especially managers).**
3. **Integrate quality features into the initial development of a storyboard.**
4. **Prioritize your reviews to match the three levels listed on the checklist.**
5. **Key your review comments to the written standards, as approved in suggestion 2.**
6. **Be sure your reviews include both praise and suggested changes.**
7. **Plan for periodic reviews and updates of the quality standards, especially their applicability to specific documents or websites.**

Over my Shipley career as a writing consultant, I have worked with both private companies and governmental agencies. Not a single one of these clients had a written list of quality standards. In the few cases where organizations had handbooks or guides, guidance covered content, such as required chapters or a list of topics for a technical appendix. Notice the lack of any guidance on the clarity or usefulness of the written information.

Many organizations assume that a warm body with a college degree must be a competent writer! And this assumption applies until the warm body submits a report to his or her manager. The manager's feedback is usually that the individual's writing needs work. So the manager rewrites sections, without any clear guidelines to the writers as to what the specific problems are in the draft text. From the manager's perspective, the changes sound better!

Organizational writing in the preceding scenario is ad hoc chaos. More often than not, both the manager and the writer are frustrated by the lack of clear guidelines or standards.

1. Make sure all contributors (writers, editors, and reviewers) have the same list of quality standards from day 1 of work on a document or website.

Quality standards are effective only if all contributors to a document have the same list of standards. Without the same list of standards, draft text from writers will be unpredictable and uneven. Managers asked to review draft materials will read until they see a problem and then try to decide if they need to rewrite the problem sentence or paragraph.

A final suggestion is that all reviewers should cite specific standards so that all contributors begin to work with the same assumptions and a common vocabulary.

Note: Shipley Group's Checklist on Document Quality is copyrighted, but we routinely grant our clients permission to reprint the checklist. We do ask that reprints include the Shipley Group name and copyright notice. We also do not grant permission for clients to use the Checklist in any commercial way, such as conducting their own writing workshops.

2. Take time to review the standards with all contributors (especially managers).

All contributors need to understand what the standards mean. Is something listed as a standard a true rule or merely a personal preference?   I am reminded of an oil company manager years ago, who remarked: " I hate semicolons!" In this situation, the manager's strong personal preference likely approaches a rule despite being only a preference.

 Most educated adults still carry "rules" in the minds from grade school or from their freshman composition instructor. Such "rules" are not universally valid. Some of them might have applied to grade-school compositions, but not to more sophisticated documents.

For example, a common grade-school rule has been "Don't start sentences with *and*." Teachers often state such a rule in their effort to encourage students to use *and* to connect two halves of a compound sentence. So the rule is designed to have students write longer sentences. The rule is not a rule, in the sense of a grammatical error.

Today's writers and editors can choose to start a sentence with *and* or *but*, especially if they value a shorter sentence for stylistic reasons. So the grade-school is not a rule in adult documents.

As in the preceding example, organizations need review all proposed quality standards for their acceptability. For example, Shipley's suggested rule 5 is a recommendation, not a grammatical rule. Shipley consultants recommend moving conclusions and recommendations to opening sentences as an emphasis strategy. So it is not right or wrong, but more of a stylistic and clarity recommendation.

All contributors should receive a list of the standards an organization stipulates as required. Without such a list, writing is unpredictable chaos.

3. Integrate quality features into the initial development of a storyboard.

Shipley Group recommends that complex documents, including NEPA documents, routinely begin with a storyboard. Designing a website should also begin with a storyboard. Shipley News (Vol. 61) November 2008, discusses storyboard preparation and includes sample storyboard pages for a NEPA Environmental Assessment. Shipley has an archive of newsletters at www.ShipleyGroup.com, under the Enews menu, click on Latest Enews.

Writers and editors working on an initial storyboard should include, as appropriate, many of the suggestions from the *Checklist on Document Quality*. How, for example, would Shipley quality standard 5 be useful in a storyboard?

The answer would be that work on a storyboard should identify where major conclusions or recommendations should appear in a document or website. Even before knowing what the conclusion actually is, the storyboard can set a call-out box, preferably on p. 1. This box becomes a placeholder for the conclusion yet to be discovered.

Or in another example, Shipley quality standard 7 suggests using a bulleted list instead of a traditional paragraph. So a page in the storyboard would include of sketch of bullets, perhaps only partially filled in. So the bullets are a placeholder to remind contributors that they need to fill the bullets with emphasized information.

4. Prioritize your reviews to match the three levels listed on the checklist.

The three levels on Shipley's Checklist on Document Quality allow writers and editors to prioritize their work. Level 1 (standards 1 through 6) would be the focus of early writing and reviewing. Level 3 standards are not useful until draft text exits. Similarly, Level 2 standards presume that enough text exists so that editors can begin to work with sentences and paragraphs.

Work on a storyboard or on draft text should focus one of the three levels. As appropriate, a writer might ask one or more reviewers to focus on Level 3 (standards 11, 12, and 13). This request asks for a careful proofreading of the draft text. Teams of writers properly turn to proofreading late in the writing process, after enough draft text exists to merit proofreading.

5. Key your review comments to the written standards, as approved in suggestion 2.

Reviewers should always cite the writing standard that applies to a suggested revision. So the terminology in the organizational list of standards become a useful way for writers and editors to communicate efficiently.

Citing written quality standards should eliminate mystery corrections. A mystery correction occurs when a manger rewrites draft text and attaches a comment: "This wasn't really wrong, but my revision sounds better." The mystery to the writer is why the manager bothered to do a rewritten version. Without a clear rationale, revisions are ad hoc mysteries.

6. Be sure your reviews include both praise and suggested changes.

Praise is always desirable, as long as it is specific and honest. Editors and managers should avoid the classic comment: "It is good, but . . ." If the document under discussion is truly good, the editor or manager should take time to explain why something is judged to be good!

7. Plan for periodic reviews and updates of the quality standards, especially their applicability to specific documents or websites.

A lessons-learned step is always useful. For example, a senior manager might suggest that a team of writers and editors review their writing process for ways to simplify or to expedite the process. In the same spirit, writer, editors, and mangers should take time to review the organization's written quality standards. Which standard works and which doesn't?

Checklist on Document Quality

Directions: Circle one response number for each question.

	Not Adequate	Adequate But Could Be Improved	Excellent
Level 1: Content, Format, and Organization			
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

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