WORDS THAT WORK: HOW CITY PLANNERS CAN WRITE MORE CLEARLY

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ABSTRACT

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City planners often have trouble explaining their work to
the general public. This problem is caused largely by the low
quality of writing in many reports, which often are planners'
primary work products. If planners wrote more clearly, the
public would understand the profession better. This thesis
examines research that explains why planners have difficulty
writing well. Methods for improvement are offered. This
thesis also examines how the planning department in East
Lansing, Michigan worked to produce a clearly written
comprehensive plan.

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Anything that can be said in Planning
can also be said in English.

                              --Dennis O'Harrow
                                former director
                                American Society of
                                Planning Officials

I

THE PROBLEM AND ITS SOURCES

A planning consultant was trying to sell his services to the City Council of a small town in northern Michigan. The council members were leery of spending $20,000 for their first comprehensive plan, and the consultant was finding it difficult to explain what they would get for their money. At one point, he admitted, "Not even my wife knows what planners do."(1)

Most planners have experienced similar frustration. A planner's work is not as concrete as that of a garbageman or other municipal employees. Most of the time, the only tangible product that planning staffs generate are written reports. Planners often are judged by the quality of these reports, but how well are they doing? There appears to be a great deal of room for improvement. If planners would write more clearly, the public would understand the profession better. This thesis will describe the sources of the writing problem in planning and propose methods for improvement.

How serious is the problem? According to consultant Richard Dymsza:

> Our writing is aimed at the public more than our profession, yet we are apt to write in a way that can be understood only by other planners. We have to view this

situation with alarm. The planning message gets out mainly by writing. Our failure to write clearly to legislators and to the general public can only mean that our ideas will not take hold and will not be put into effect.(2)

Former MSU Urban Planning Professor Steven Orlick put it this way:

Planners feel that they have been victimized, both by an ignorant and greed-ridden public in general, and by self-serving politicians in particular...(but) the truth of the matter is that many times planners have been their own worst enemies simply because they are unable to communicate their ideas clearly.(3)

As a group, planners probably don't write any less clearly than members of other professions. Consider the police officers who write that, "The car was proceeding in a northerly direction" instead of "The car went north." Lawyers also are well known for obscure prose, and much of the bad writing done by planners seems an attempt to legitimize the profession by giving it a pseudo legalistic tone. Gerald Luedtke, a planning consultant from Detroit, says that much of the bad writing found in planning reports comes from the compulsive following of federal regulations, such as those set forth in the Federal Register.(4) But he adds that it is still possible for writers to develop their own focus and style while meeting governmental requirements. It just takes more work.

On the surface, clear writing appears to be a "Mom and apple pie" issue with universal support. But do planners really mean it, or are they more concerned with sounding intelligent than getting their point across? According to East Lansing Planning Administrator Robert Owen, "I think that 20

years ago, planners were more concerned about sounding professional. Now we're more concerned with people understanding what we're trying to say."(5)

But Owen, who has emphasized the need for clear writing to his staff, adds that shades of meaning and intention often become very important and sometimes it is hard to communicate these shades without becoming verbose. He thinks that another part of planning's writing problem is that many planners consider the planning document a worthwhile end unto itself. "But I don't think the plan has any value except as it influences the decision-making process," Owen says. "That's why it is so crucial that it be written clearly."(6)

The problem of writing intelligent-sounding prose clearly plagues many professions. People feel they must assume a more pompous tone than they do in conversation or public speaking. According to language researcher Linda Flower:

> Probably the most frequent complaint made about college and professional writing is that it is stuffy and inflated or overly technical and full of jargon. And yet, it is often written by dynamic people who can think clearly and speak forcefully when they are face to face. These people often use inflated or "institutional" language because they hope it will sound more impressive.(7)

One of the major dilemmas facing those who favor clear writing is that many people equate superfluous language with deep thinking. Two English professors from Chicago have done research indicating that composition teachers, of all people, give better grades to student papers written in an overblown, wordy style. Rosemary Hake and Joseph Williams began with the

hypothesis that composition teachers claim they want clear writing (which the authors refer to as the "verbal" style) but give higher grades to papers written in a wordy, "nominal" style.(8) The researchers created several pairs of essays that differed only in their style and asked high school and college English teachers to grade them. The essays had the same number of paragraphs and sentences and were organized the same way. The following example is from one of the verbally written papers: "He can always seek out other people who think more freely." This sentence begins with a subject, followed by a predicate and concludes with an object. Here is the same sentence, as it appeared in a paper written in the nominal style: "Seeking out other people with more freedom of thought is always a possibility for him."

The teachers who graded the papers were told they were rating the essays as part of a study of the competency examination at a local university. The experiment was conducted four times, using a total of 67 teachers. According to the authors, "The graders overwhelmingly preferred the nominal version of each essay over its paired verbal version (the X2 test is significant at the two percent level)...graders preferred the nominal style so strongly that it appears to have influenced their discursive judgements about other, more general components of the essays."(9) In the first test, 84 percent of the teachers preferred the nominal form, none preferred the verbal and 15 percent rated them both the same.

One teacher described a nominal paper as an "intelligent understanding of the problem" and characterized the clearly written, verbal version of the same essay as "flippant and without purpose other than criticism; lacking in sentence/paragraph structure."(10)

The second, third and fourth experiments used larger groups. The pretentious, indirectly written papers continued to receive better grades. The high school teachers consistently preferred the nominal papers. In one test, college teachers preferred the good nominal over the good verbal papers but preferred the bad verbal over the bad nominal. Commenting on this difference between high school and college teachers, the authors say, "The least sophisticated teachers of composition, high school teachers, were the most impressed with what appears to be verbal sophistication."(11)

But perhaps all this proves is that people can learn to understand wordy writing just as well as writing done in a more verbal style. If so, then what is wrong with the type of writing criticized as stuffy, indirect and hard to comprehend? To test this, Hake and Williams gave to 73 typists two passages, one written in a clear, verbal style and another, with the same content and organization, but written in the nominal style. The subjects were then given standard typing tests, first typing the verbal paper, then the nominal, the results were as follows:

1. 19 high school typists: Verbal, 20 percent faster, 22 percent fewer errors.

2. 26 college typists: Verbal, 13 percent faster; seven percent more errors. (This discrepancy is based on a single additional error in the mean of verbal vs. nominal passages; seven in verbal and six in nominal.)

3. 24 secretarial college typists: Verbal, 12 percent faster; 43 percent fewer errors.

4. Four professional typists: Verbal, eight percent faster; no difference in errors.

What we have here is an economic argument for a verbal style. Apparently, the typists are processing sentences not just through their eyes directly to their fingers, but cognitively as well.(12)

Other research indicates that clear writing saves money. In 1977, at the height of the CB radio craze, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) re-wrote the Citizens Band Radio Regulations into plain English, using a question and answer format. Before the rules were re-written, the FCC employed five people to answer telephone questions about CB radio rules. After the regulations were simplified, the calls stopped. All five employees were transferred to other jobs.(13)

What does all this mean for planners? In a field where the public doesn't understand much of our work, it is important to write as clearly as possible. This thesis will describe how

planners get into trouble when they write, and what they can do about it. Chapter Two will discuss the process of writing and describe how planners can produce more organized, thoughtfully written reports. Chapter Three will offer practical tips for writing simple, clear sentences, with a special emphasis on editing. Chapter Four will present a case study of how East Lansing applied the principles of clear writing when preparing its comprehensive plan. Chapter Five will describe how a planning office can implement the guidelines offered in the earlier chapters.

This paper does not claim that planners should write everything at the most simple level possible. As Hake and Williams write: "The eternal problem is to express a series of propositions so that the content is clear enough to understand but formal enough to impress."(14) This thesis attempts to help planners achieve this goal.

II

THE WRITING PROCESS

A Problem Solving Process

The introduction of this thesis indicated that planners have trouble making words work. This chapter will propose some solutions.

How can planners write more clearly? One answer is to look at the methods of technical writers, who compose such things as forms and training manuals. Many planners are unaware that their writing efforts are often forms of technical writing. Like technical writers, they must make complex data understandable, informative and, often, persuasive.

Like planning, technical writing is not a profession of absolutes. There are no guarantees that the same action will always generate the same result. Every writing project, every sentence, in fact, presents different circumstances. This innate aspect of the writing process will no doubt sound familiar to planners.

Planners are taught to break large problems into smaller, manageable components. So are writers. Following is an overview of technical writing and how it can be useful to

planners. This chapter also will examine the writing process and propose some ways it can be applied by the planning writer.

The guidelines and research that follow should not be taken as absolutes, however. In the words of the poet William Yeats, "The correcting of prose is endless, because it has no fixed laws."(1)

These are wise words, but by understanding the writing process better, planners will at least know how to begin the endless search for perfect prose.

Getting Ready To Write

Most of the writing planners do, such as a staff report or comprehensive plan, is more technical than a newspaper but less technical than an article for a professional academic journal. The goal of these semi-technical writing efforts is to provide the readers with information they did not previously have in a form they can understand easily.(2)   Because most people do not understand planning very well, the first part, providing new information, is not that much of a problem. But presenting the information in an understandable manner proves more difficult.

Many modern books on writing sound much like efforts to describe community planning. Author Linda Flowers puts it this way:

> "Writing is a thinking process. To be more specific, it
> is a problem solving process...Good problem-solvers
> typically have a great deal of knowledge and a large
> repertory of powerful strategies to use in attacking their
> problems. Good writers are the same."(3)

Planners use strategies and techniques such as subdivision regulations and capital improvement programs to reach their goals. They can do the same thing when they write. The first writing technique is dividing the project into logical steps. There are various ways to do this, but the format chosen probably isn't as important as the very process of going through the mental exercise. The writing process can be broken up into three steps: The pre-writing stage; the actual writing steps; and the post-writing steps.(4) As Figure One demonstrates, these three steps are further subdivided, but first it is important to realize that the pre-writing and post-writing stages even exist. From the poor organization of many planning reports it appears, ironically enough, that many planners just start writing without planning what they are going to do. This makes no more sense than proposing a major expressway through a community without first investigating the potential technical and political difficulties. Notice that in Figure One, the actual writing stage is relatively brief. Most of the work is in the pre-writing and post-writing stages. People who spend the vast majority of their time in the actual composition stage have a problem--they run the risk of producing a poorly organized, sloppy document.

FIGURE ONE

THE PROCESS MODEL OF DOCUMENT DESIGN

I. Pre-Writing Steps	II. Writing Steps	III. Post-Writing Steps

```
┌─────────┐              ┌─────────┐
│Determine│              │Determine│
│scope    │              │task     │
│(what    │              │.fill out│
│message  │              │ form    │
│you want │              │.read and│
│to       │              │ act     │
│convey)  │              │.read and│
│         │              │ remember│
└─────────┘              │.locate  │
                         │ informa-│
                         │ tion    │
                         │. . .    │
                         └─────────┘
```

```
┌─────────┐           ┌─────────────┐ ┌──────┐ ┌─────────┐ D
│Define   │           │Draft document│ │      │ │Evaluate │ O
│purpose  │           │.select appro-│ │      │ │(does    │ C
│(why do  │           │ priate       │ │      │ │your doc-│ U
│you need │           │ content      │ │Review│ │ument    │ M
│a docu-  │           │.organize     │ │revise│ │achieve  │ E
│ment?)   │           │ for your     │ │and   │ │its      │ N
│         │           │ audience     │ │edit  │ │purpose  │ T
└─────────┘           │.write        │ │      │ │for its  │
                      │ clearly      │ └──────┘ │audi-    │
                      │ use graphics │          │ence?)   │
                      │ to help      │          └─────────┘
                      │ clarify      │
                      │ your         │
                      │ message      │
                      └─────────────┘
```

```
┌─────────┐              ┌─────────────┐
│Define   │              │Determine    │
│audience │              │constraints  │
│who will │              │posed by     │
│use your │              │.the system  │
│document?│              │.how the     │
│(What are│              │ document    │
│their    │              │ is used     │
│needs?)  │              │.how the     │
│         │              │ document    │
└─────────┘              │ is distri-  │
                         │ buted       │
                         │             │
                         └─────────────┘
```

Source: <u>Writing in the Professions</u> by the Document Design Center

The writing model in Figure One can be used for any type of writing project, from a short memo to the boss to a new comprehensive plan.

In the pre-writing stage, begin by determining the scope of the project. Ask:

*Who will be reading the document?
*Why is it being written?
*What message do you want to convey?
*What specific questions is this writing project supposed
  to answer?
*Is the assignment clear to the writer?(5)

Even if the writer has trouble answering the questions, just thinking through them will sharpen the focus of the project. Answering them can help the writer avoid a rambling, disjointed product.

One of the questions: "Is the assignment clear?" deserves some special consideration here.

The writer must understand the assignment before the actual writing begins. All too often this is not clear in the writer's mind. It ends up being unclear to the reader as well.

The problem might be caused by supervisors who don't spell out instructions clearly. Solving this problem is beyond the scope of clear writing, but even in self-generated assignments, the topic and format usually are dictated by the situation. There almost always will be some gaps in the writer's understanding of the situation, which should become apparent during the actual composition. This is why a writer shouldn't hesitate to do additional research at any step in the writing

process. Even at the best newspapers, editors must constantly discern important information that is missing from the reporters' stories. This can be kept to a minimum by asking as many questions as possible before actual writing begins.

Once the scope of the writing project has been determined, it is time to decide why the proposed document is needed. Maybe it isn't. Maybe a telephone call or a meeting would be a more effective form of communication. Most writing done by planners is what technical writing scholars call "transactional," meaning that information is being exchanged between people. This is the writing that gets the work of the world done, as opposed to writing which entertains (humorists such as Art Buchwald), or uplifts and makes a philosophical statement, such as a great novel or poem. (If a reader doesn't understand a great, but obscure poem such as T. S. Elliot's "The Wasteland," that certainly doesn't mean Elliot failed. Elliot wrote the poem for himself, without any audience in mind. If you understand it, fine. If not, read a different poem.)

But transactional writing, which informs and/or persuades, is held up to a different test. If the reader doesn't understand it, the writing project hasn't been successful. A memo summarizing a meeting is an example of writing which informs, while a job seeker's letter is an example of writing which is meant to persuade. When writers ask themselves the purpose of what they are about to write, the reader will

probably have a better chance to understand it as well. Many writing projects, such as comprehensive plans, attempt both to explain and persuade.(6)

Who will read what you plan to write? The answer to that question plays a major role in the process of solving a writing problem. In much of the research on planning communication, planners are urged to avoid using jargon.(7) Just for the sake of forming good habits, avoid phrases like, "Disseminate RFPs to do a TIF project in the CBD." Jargon and acronyms are verbal shorthand and have their place. In a memo to another planner, there is really no need to tell the reader that RFP means request for proposal. But if the memo is going to a citizen's group, the readers wouldn't know what the initials meant. This doesn't mean there is no room for personal style, but it does mean you have to gauge your writing to the audience. People don't talk the same way to a three-year-old as they do to professional colleagues, and planners should not write for the general populace the way they would write for each other. Writers can still make strong points without becoming obtuse.(8) As the authors of <u>Writing In the Professions</u> put it:

> Writers in organizations write to people inside the organization and outside. A major problem in much organizational writing is that the writer acts as if the readers are insiders even when they are not. (Another problem is that even people inside the organization or the profession may not be as much insiders as the writer thinks.)(9)

The last point is important for planners to remember because the field is so diverse. The staff transportation planner and the economic development planner could have trouble communicating with each other if they forget that their areas of specialization have very different jargon.

Author Flowers writes that the best way to analyze your audience is to "gauge the distance between the two of you."(10) For example, there is much more distance between a planner and a typical homeowner than between the planner and a land use lawyer. But in addition to comparing levels of knowledge, it is also important to keep the reader's attitudes in mind as well. To some people, the term "land use control" conjures up images of socialism, while to others, the term describes needed regulations which make communities better places to live. Once a writer starts to consider the reader's attitudes, it becomes easier to predict how the reader will react - always an advantage to the writer. Closely related to the readers' attitudes are their needs. Flowers suggests analyzing the reader through the use of an audience chart such as the one shown in Figure Two.(11) This enables the writer to examine the components which cause the differences between different types of audiences.

FIGURE TWO

AUDIENCE CHART FOR SECONDARY AUDIENCE: THE NEW TRAINEE

CRITICAL FEATURES OF THE READER

KNOWLEDGE	ATTITUDES	NEEDS
Probably won't know basic terms or procedures.	May think of it as a "simple" part-time job. Might not recognize the opportunites or demands really involved.	Needs to know what to do and how to do it: an operational description of the job.

Source: Problem-Solving Strategies For Writing, by Linda Flower

In the process model shown in Figure One, the last step in the pre-writing stage is to determine what constraints the author must face.(12) Most planners face many such constraints on almost every project. Thinking this through early in the process can save effort and prevent problems later. For example, a proposal for strict design controls in a commercial district should probably be phrased somewhat more delicately when presented to a chamber of commerce than when it is suggested to other staff planners. But constraints are not always political. Writers should consider constraints such as length (interoffice memos to the boss should be shorter than

more formal, public documents), format (will it be typed or typeset? in a binder?) and budget (how much will it cost to reproduce this?). These considerations might seem mundane, but they can save a good deal of trouble if considered well before the project's deadline. For example, as will be discussed in a later chapter, East Lansing's planning staff decided to make many last minute changes in its 1980 comprehensive plan shortly before it was to be published. The plan had not been typed on a word processor, so it had to be entirely re-typed, even though some sections were changed only slightly. ,Today, the secretary who had to do all that last minute work sits next to word processor, which will save the City staff a great deal of time the next time they decide to make eleventh hour changes. A final constraint worth considering is the reaction your writing will get from its internal reviewers, such as a boss who approves writing projects before they are distributed to the public. If for example, your boss demands a formal writing style, then you probably should avoid personal pronouns (I, we, they, your, etc.) or contractions.

This first stage of the writing process, the planning phase, is crucial to the success of the final written product. Those who are new to the idea of planning before they write may find an issue tree helpful. As proposed by Linda Flowers and illustrated in Figure Three, an issue tree is a sketch that looks like an upside-down tree and helps put ideas into a hierarchical order.(13) The top-level idea, such as "Planners

have trouble being understood largely because they don't write well" should be the most broad and inclusive. All the other ideas, such as "Avoid excessive jargon," are responses to the main idea and subsystems of it. An issue tree lets the writer test out ideas and relationships and helps make the total picture easier to see. This prevents the "can't see the forest for the trees" syndrome that can so easily befall a planner, who usually must present a great many facts and details on any given project.

FIGURE THREE

An Issue Tree Generated Through the Questioning Method

RUNNING IS A GOOD INVESTMENT OF TIME

MEANING	MEANING	MEANING		MEANING
A limited effort has a large effect	It affects health	It affects morale		A better source of exercise than other sports

SUCH AS?	HOW SO?	HOW SO?	HOW SO?	WHY?	WHY NOT?
30 min. a day, 4 times a week	Tones muscles Improves cardio-vascular and res-piratory system	Increases energy Improves sleep Offers visible accomplish-ment. No special talent needed to succeed	Uses more calories per hour than other forms of exercise	Needs little equip-ment Good at any age Do any place	Not com-petitive Not a social sport

SO WHAT?	HOW SO ?		SUCH AS?		SO WHAT?
1/6 of Americans have cardi-ovascular disease	Strengthens heart lowers blood pressure increases red blood cells. Improves oxygen capacity		Running 600 Tennis 420 Golf 150		Leads to giving up

HOW DO YOU KNOW?

Aerobic research
Am. Heart Assoc.

Another way to formalize the pre-writing planning process is to fill out a form that asks specific questions dealing with the issues raised here, such as the scope, message and audience. One of the more comprehensive is published by the Document Design Center and shown in Figure Four. Some modern technical writing researchers prefer alternatives to the traditional outlines, which they feel inhibit the writer from fully seeing how the entire writing project should tie together and how the different parts of the document can relate to each other.(14) Others, such as the writers at the Document Design Project, encourage outlining but don't insist on the traditional, formal outline with Roman and Arabic numbers. Instead, they see the outline, especially in the early stages of a project, as an ordered list with phrases for the points the writer knows come under each heading.(15) The first step in an outline is to find the unifying organizing principle for the major sections. That makes it easier later to organize the points within each section.

<u>FIGURE FOUR</u>

FORM FOR ANSWERING PRE-WRITING QUESTIONS

<u>Pre-Writing Decisions</u>

Ask yourself these pre-design questions about your document. If you
don't know the answers, discuss the questions with appropriate others
to find the answers.

Brief Statement:_____
                        (type of document and what it is about)

Scope: What is the topic? the message? Where did you go to find
        out information?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Purpose: What purposes will your document serve?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Audiences: Who will read your document? Who else is concerned about
            what your document is like?

The (primary) readers who are most important to you are:

    1. _____   2. _____

Figure Four (cont'd)

The (secondary) readers who are also important to you are:

1. _____   2. _____

3. _____   4. _____

Some important characteristics of the primary audiences that might affect how you write the document are:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

For the secondary audiences, you should be concerned about these specific points:

audience _____   concerns _____

audience _____   concerns _____

audience _____   concerns _____

audience _____   concerns _____

Tasks: What does your primary audience have to be able to do to use your document?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Constraints: What else must you keep in mind when writing?
               Is it an impediment to your purpose? What can
               you do about it?

constraint _____ OK? ___yes ___no

If it is not OK, what can you do about it? _____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Source: <u>Writing in the Professions</u> by the Document Design Project

The Writing Stage

The planning segment of a writing project tends to merge together with the organizational stage. But, while the document should be well-planned and organized before actual writing begins, the writer should be careful not to get carried away. Excessive effort at planning and organizing can lead to serious deadline problems. This thesis is a perfect example of that. So much effort was put into planning and organizing that now the time remaining to write is short. Writers should remember that when they plan projects, they are not etching them in stone. As new ideas and relationships come to light, it is fine to include them, as long as they don't upset the general organization of the product. The above comment is an example of a thought that didn't occur in the planning process, but seems to fit well in the introduction to this section on the writing phase.

Before the actual writing begins, the writer should deal with the question of tone. Observe the daily newspaper. Both the editorials and the columnists on the editorial pages express opinions, but the tone is different. The editorials are more impersonal--they never refer to the writer as "I." The columnists, on the other hand, often interject themselves into the story ("I was sitting in this bar and a cab driver started

telling me that Reagan ought to..."). The difference is a matter of tone. The editorials are more formal and less personal than the columns, but are still less formal than the opinions found in professional publications such as the Journal of the American Planning Association. The APA Journal, however, is deliberately more formal than APA's Planning Advisory Service Reports, which in turn are deliberately more formal than Planning magazine. All are published by the same organization and have planners as their main audience. But the tones of the publications differ so the parent organization can offer greater variety. It takes more effort to wade through an issue of the APA Journal than to read Planning. The tone of this thesis, for example, is aimed to be approximately on the level of the PAS Reports--more formal and technical than the magazine but less formal than the Journal.

Most books on writing well caution against what author Jacques Barzun calls "pseudo-technical tone." This is the tone often found in many planning reports. What causes it? Barzun says:

> The attitude that produces the pseudo-technical tone is made up of a desire to dignify the subject and the writer, coupled with the belief that important matters require a special vocabulary. Since most matters neither have nor need one, the vocabulary is made up of nouns and verbs used metaphorically."(16)

Barzun goes on to quote a scientist who declines committee membership by saying, "I am sorry not to be able to accept the experience of a more intensive interaction with your group and

its constituency."(17)   The next chapter will discuss the specific problems that lead to a stilted, overblown tone, but it is important that the writer begin considering the tone of the writing product in the earliest part of the writing stage. If you decide halfway through writing that your tone is wrong, it is going to take a good deal of re-writing to make up for not planning better at the outset.

Is the planner now finally ready to write? Not quite. First the writer must decide what organizing principle to use. Different documents require different organizing principles. They can include:

-- a time sequence (often good in background sections of staff reports);

-- steps in a logical process (the organizing principle being used in this chapter on the writing process);

-- issues raised and discussed in order of importance or relevance;

-- elements or objects being compared on several factors;

-- a chain of cause and effect (if the shopping center is expanded, traffic will become congested);

-- sources of information (heavily used in term papers);

-- audiences or roles;

-- the format of the document the writer is responding to; or

-- any traditional format that the audience will recognize.(18)

Another aspect of tone which must be considered early is length. Many writers don't think about how long their projects should be and just include everything they think is important, even at risk of producing something nobody will have time to read. Even worse are writers who include extensive details just to impress the reader with their knowledge. As Richard Dymsza wrote:

> Most planning reports are much too long for their readers. Part of the problem is that the reports try to serve both technical and public information purposes. Unfortunately, both purposes cannot be well served within the same report. Planning offices would do well to publish their plans in two reports, one for the technician, the other for the general public. Few planning offices, though find the time to do this.(19)

Dymsza's comment about lack of time is true, but planning staffs can address this problem by publishing different types of documents with different tones at various stages of a planning process. East Lansing publishes fairly technical updates to its 1980 Comprehensive Plan. But in 1978, when the planning staff was trying to generate public interest, the City published "Plan It Again, Sam," a well done brochure that explained the upcoming comprehensive planning effort in almost comic book terms.(20) But while it was an unusually casual approach, the humorous tone helped create interest in the process.

While it is important to organize the entire project, each section must also have an organizational framework. It helps if each section is organized along the same principles. In

some cases, every section of a comprehensive plan (land use, transportation, economic development, parks and recreation, etc.) is written by the staff member who specializes in a particular area. This leads to plans with wide variety between sections. This is what happened in East Lansing's plan, which was then re-written and will be examined in a later chapter.

When writing comprehensive plans, it is fairly easy for planners to organize within the sections, because the sections typically are divided into goals, objectives and policies. But in more everyday writing, the planner doesn't have this formula and has to use other organizing techniques. In a memo, for example, when comparing several possible options, the best internal organization is usually to repeat the same structure for every section. If several potential development sites for new fire stations are being considered, include land costs for all of the sites, not just for some.

When addressing the actual writing stage, technical writing researchers stress the need to "Organize for your audience."(21) Author Linda Flower calls for "Writing reader-based prose."(22) Many books on writing offer good suggestions that planners could use in their work, but Flower is one of the few who provides clear benchmarks that the reader can follow without having much writing experience. Flower suggests that a writer can create reader-based prose by following several strategies. The first is to set up a shared goal. Try to determine what you and your reader have in

common. Is there something that makes the reader want to read the paper and makes you want to write it? If there is a shared goal, persuasion is much easier. Once the shared goal is determined, it is easier to decide what approach to take, especially if the writer has decided how to convince the reader to read the piece and to follow its suggestions.

For example, consider a booklet promoting housing rehabilitation in older neighborhoods. One possible introduction would be, "This booklet will help you create civic pride and preserve our city's heritage." Another way to approach it would be to begin with, "If you own an older home, there are a number of ways you can preserve its beauty and historical value. At the same time, you can increase its market value and decrease its maintenance costs." The second approach is more reader-based because it identifies a shared goal – the city wants housing rehabilitation and the homeowners want increased value and decreased costs.

The second strategy is to develop a reader-based structure. The classic example of this is a job-hunting letter. Don't tell the reader this job would be the chance of your lifetime. Employers want to know what you can do for them. Always consider the needs of the reader. This is often difficult for planners, who must present the same comprehensive plan to homeowners associations and real estate speculators. But planners can at least try to consider the public point of

view (diverse though that may be) as opposed to their professional, technical point of view.

This is not an easy task. Researchers Charlotte Linde and William Labov found that 97 percent of their subjects respond to questions in a self-centered point of view, which they called a narrative point of view. When asked to describe their apartments, almost all responded by giving a verbal tour. "You go in the front door through a hallway into the living room, which is the biggest. Then there is a kitchen and bedroom." Only three percent gave an overview by saying something like, "The apartment is basically a square." But the overview, although seldom used, is usually more effective.(23) It is less important to give a blow-by-blow report than to summarize. Start with the main idea and then explain it. Flowers suggests three ways to develop this type of reader-based prose:

1. Organize your paper around a problem, a thesis, or a purpose you share with the reader - not around your own discovery process or the topic itself.

2. With a goal or thesis as the top level of the issue tree, organize your ideas in a hierarchy. Distinguish between major and minor ideas and make the relationship between them explicit to the reader. You can use this technique to organize not only an entire paper but sections and paragraphs.

3. If you are hoping that your reader will draw certain conclusions from your paper, or even from a portion of it,

make those conclusions explicit. Don't leave the work of drawing inferences and forming concepts up to your reader. He or she might draw a different set of conclusions.(24)

The next strategy is giving the reader cues. Cues help the reader see what is coming and how it will be organized. Cues can be problem/purpose statements such as, "This report will project the effects of various land uses in the northwestern section of the city." Some cues summarize. In a typical paragraph, the first sentence will summarize the main idea. The following sentences explain the point in more detail and the last sentence again summarizes the main point and often serves as a transition cue to the next paragraph.

The last strategy espoused by Flowers is to develop a persuasive argument.(25) The best way for planners to do this is not by engaging in debates, but by attempting to modify the other side's point of view through the communication process. The writer's goal, then, is to convince the reader to at least see the other side, to acknowledge that there might be more than one logical way of viewing the same situation. The best way to do this is first to demonstrate a firm understanding of the reader's position. This can be done by stressing shared goals and making an attempt to acknowledge the reader's point of view. It also helps not to categorize people or issues. If planners simply view all real estate developers as "villians," polarization will emerge. In public, planners usually act as though they respect the other point of view, but many office

meetings are filled with discussions of the inadequacies of aldermen, other city departments and the general public. By putting themselves in the readers' shoes while writing, planners can become much better problem-solvers.

The writing model shown in Figure One offers a general process for effective written communication. This chapter has focused on writing as a process, much the way planning is viewed as a problem-solving process. Now that the general, broad-based guidelines for successful writing have been addressed, the next chapter will examine specific problems in planners' writing, such as cluttered sentences, improper grammar, and the unnecessary use of big words.

III

HOW TO DEVELOP GOOD WRITING HABITS

Writing Clearly

Now that we have examined the entire writing process, it is appropriate to discuss how planners can improve individual paragraphs and sentences. The research on this topic, although somewhat limited, identifies several problems that lead to unclear paragraphs and sentences. This chapter largely will be prescriptive in nature, identifying these problem areas and suggesting ways to improve.

Former MSU Planning Professor, Steven Orlick tells the story of a city planning department staff that wanted citizen reaction to a proposed revision in its comprehensive plan. So the staff published an announcement which read, in part:

> "...In prescribing urban land uses, the land use element
> defines population distribution, residential density
> standards and non-residential intensity or character for
> various categories of use which, collectively, determine
> land use capacity...Although the City, County and region
> are relatively rural and appear capable of providing ample
> room for new residents, commerce and industry, each is
> confronted with some known and several undefined finite
> resources...While additional water supplies, which may be
> partially available to the City, have been allocated to
> the County and region, these limited sources must be
> imported or redistributed to portions of the region and
> conserved considering competing demands and potential,
> adverse impacts still not fully defined."(1)

conserved considering competing demands and potential, adverse impacts still not fully defined."(1)

How did the readers react? Orlick reports that the planning staff received just one response, a note from a woman who wrote, "I have just read your report. What's it say?"(2)

That piece of writing, and the response, are all too typical. What causes the problem? The research indicates some common themes, Orlick says:

> The communication problem in planning can be traced to the following general sources: (1) The overuse of jargon; (2) verbosity; (3) illiteracy; (4) carelessness; and (5) a lack of planning skills or knowledge.(3)

APA researcher Duncan Erley cites the prime culprits as poor organization, mixing facts with subjective information, and redundancy.(4)   Planning consultant Richard Dymsza cites clutter, lack of specificity, and trying to say too much as the three worst problems.(5)   Dymsza considers clutter a broad category that includes excessive jargon and the use of complicated words when simple words will do the job.

But, however the problems are described, the important thing is to keep writing principles in mind, especially when writing for the general public. The remainder of this chapter consists of guidelines for writing more clearly, with a special emphasis on editing. Planners who follow these guidelines, and the organizational principles cited in the preceding chapter, will find that the public will understand better the messages they wish to convey.

Guidelines For Clarity

GUIDELINE 1: Keep Jargon to a Minimum. This suggestion comes up in almost everything written on technical writing, especially in research done for or by planners. As mentioned earlier, jargon is appropriate as a method of verbal shorthand used by people who can understand each other. But jargon is seldom kept in its place. Here is a classic example of the wrong way to write a planning report:

> The appropriate concepts of cost and gain depend on the level of optimization and the alternative policies that are admissible. The appropriate level of optimization and the alternatives that should be compared depend on a general acceptance of suitable criterion.(6)

The above passage could have read:

> The notion of an optimum cost-benefit ratio really depends on how one defines a benefit. The level of benefits from various alternatives depends on the standards accepted for use as a comparison.(7)

Planners can keep jargon to a minimum by having somebody from a non-planning background read their work. Spouses are great for this. But remember that, after several years, family members might pick up some of the lingo themselves. If you tell your children to stay on the "pedestrian-oriented facilities" and they know you mean the sidewalk, be careful. If family or friends can't help, try your organization's public information director, who probably is a generalist with a background in communications. But planners should teach themselves how to recognize jargon and translate it into plain English. Here are some examples:

A. Infrastructure = public facilities;

B. Facilitate = help;

C. Significantly severe topography = steep slopes, hills;

D. The subject parcel = this parcel;

E. Utilize = Use.(8)

GUIDELINE 2: Prune Unnecessary Words. This guideline is related to the first one, but employs a slightly different test. Jargon is professional shorthand. Unneeded words, on the other hand, are essentially longhand. By definition, there is never any place for them. The test for unnecessary words is whether the sentence makes as much sense without a particular word as it does with it. If it does, the word is unnecessary. Often, entire expressions, such as, "This is to inform you that..." or "It may be necessary to..." can be eliminated. Many of these are just cliches, such as, "forward the same," or "favor of an early reply."(9) If writers can simply recognize these cliches, they can eliminate them without too much difficulty.

The key to eliminating needless words is practice. _Planning_ magazine editor Sylvia Lewis has developed a simple exercise, which consists of reading wordy sentences and then re-writing them. One of her sample sentences is: "One major area, however, is notably devoid of easy, short-distance access to recreational facilities; that is the area immediately north of the Eisenhower Expressway and immediately west of Harlem Avenue."(10) This sentence could be re-written into: "Only

the area immediately north of the Eisenhower Expressway and Harlem Avenue lacks nearby parks and playgrounds."

Another related problem is the complicated word. A thesaurus can prove helpful here. Sometimes a complicated word is needed to say what the writer means. But there is very little difference between the words "aggregate" and "total" or between "effectuate" and "carry out." Figure Five comes from a book written for all technical writers, but planners will see many familiar words and phrases under the column headlined "Difficult."

FIGURE FIVE: REPLACING WORDY WORDS

The list below contains unnecessarily difficult words that writers commonly use and simple words that you can use to replace them. The list is by no means complete. Its purpose is to give you an idea of what unnecessarily difficult words look like. Notice that some of these words are legal terms.

DIFFICULT	SIMPLE
administer	manage
aggregate	total
allocate	give, divide
constitute	make up
deem	consider
effectuate	carry out
enter (on a form)	write
for the duration of	during
herein	here
heretofore	until now
implement	carry out
indicate	show
initiate	begin
in lieu of	instead of
in the event that	if
issue	give
on behalf of	for
per annum	a year
prior to	before
proceed	go ahead
procure	get
promulgate	make, issue
provided that	if (or change sentence)
pursuant to	under
render	make, give
represents	is
said, same, such	the, this, that
solely	only
submit	send
subsequent to	after
terminate	end
to the extent that	if, when
utilize	use
with regard/respect to	for

Source: Writing in the Professions, by the Document Design Center

GUIDELINE 3: Do Not Put Too Much Information Into a Sentence. Sentences become too difficult for the reader when the writer tries to cram too much information into them. The problem usually is caused by inserting too much explanation between the subject, verb, and object of a sentence. Another cause can be too much introduction before the main parts of the sentence (the subject, verb, and object) or too much explanation at the end of the sentence. Here is a sentence with too much information between the subject and the verb: "All the procedural steps from the first to the last, as well as the policies, resources, structure, personnel, and organizational factors, which also impinge on the proposed system, must be evaluated in terms of their effects on each other."(11) The subject clause is "All the procedural steps" and the predicate clause is "must be evaluated." There is much too much information between them. Sentences like this are hard to read and will discourage readers.

The best idea is to use just one idea per sentence. Explanations and modifying statements, if more than a few words, can be divided into sentences of their own. Sylvia Lewis has also developed an exercise to help writers learn to use just one major idea in any sentence. One of her examples is: "The planning director, long in favor of growth management, who risked public censure for opposing a large subdivision, privately conceded that the development was well designed."(12)

She says this could be re-written to say: "The planning director privately conceded that the development was well designed. Long an advocate of growth management, he had risked public censure for opposing a large subdivision."

GUIDELINE 4: Don't Try To Say Too Much. Planners work so hard on research that they often cannot resist bombarding the reader with too much information. One way to address this problem is to write the text of the report in general terms, if the public will be reading it. The report then can conclude with appendices that provide more technical information. This guideline is closely related to the preceding one, but addresses entire reports, not just sentences. If your report consists of simple, one-idea sentences but still contains too much detail, the writing project has not succeeded. Planners often provide the same level of detail regardless of the audience. This gets back to the concept of gauging your audience, which was discussed in the previous chapter. As Duncan Erley, the author of "Writing Better Zoning Reports," wrote, "The amount of detail required also depends on the type and scale of each case. Particularly complex cases often require not only more kinds of information, but also a greater depth of information."(13)

GUIDELINE 5: Don't Mix Facts With Opinion. Planners should keep their facts separate from their analysis and recommendations.(14) Often, in a staff report, information on location and adjacent land is will not separated from such

opinions as what effect the staff thinks the project will have
or what the planning commission should recommend. Not only is
this bad writing, but it is bad politics, particularly if
opponents figure out what is happening. In the following staff
report, fact and opinion have become blurred. The underlined
sentence is opinion, and should be identified as such and
separated from the information section:

> Adjacent Land Use. To the north is agricultural land. To
> the south, east, and west are single-family homes. There
> are a barn and three smaller out-buildings on the agricul-
> tural land to the north. The applicant should be required
> to remove all four structures upon completion of the new
> facility.(15)

GUIDELINE 6: Be Concrete. Planning is a very abstract
field. Planners don't fight fires, build roads, or perform any
of the other easily comprehensible governmental functions.
Instead, planners study, recommend, promote, and expedite. But
that is all the more reason why planners, of all people, should
make sure their prose is not loaded with abstractions. Here is
an example of a paragraph that does not use concrete,
easy-to-understand language:

> There are three basic dimensions to the housing problem:
> (1) inadequate conditions, (2) affordability, and (3)
> locational concentration due to price discrimination.
> These dimensions combine to make housing one of the most
> significant problems in our metropolitan area.

> This isn't terrible, but it could be re-written to say:

> In this county many people live in dilapidated,
> overcrowded housing. They live there not by choice, but
> by necessity; they cannot afford housing that meets
> acceptable standards. Further, they are denied the
> opportunity to live in most areas of the county because
> these areas offer no low-cost housing.(16)

Both paragraphs explain the same three housing problems: bad conditions, affordability and location concentration. But the second is easier to understand because it uses specific terms.

GUIDELINE 7: Use Personal Pronouns. This one is often very hard for planners to accept, but you can do it. I largely have avoided using the first person singular pronoun because I felt it might bother some of my readers. But personal pronouns clarify who does what in a sentence and are especially helpful for prescriptive, how-to-do-it writing projects such as this thesis. That is why the word "you" has been used so often, as in the sentence, "What message do you wish to convey?" from the preceding chapter. Personal pronouns are especially helpful in giving instructions. Here is a sentence in the impersonal, nominal style: "A zoning variance will not be granted until evidence is submitted to show that the request will not negatively impact adjacent land uses." Using personal pronouns, you can write: "We will not grant a zoning variance until you prove that the request will not harm your neighbors." If "we" is too casual, substitute the name of the municipality or the words "Planning Department."

GUIDELINE 8: Use the Active Voice. Planners often avoid the active voice in the quest for impersonality. But active sentences help make it clear to the reader exactly who did what to whom.(17) The voice of the sentence explains the relationship between the subject and the verb. When the

subject does the action described by the verb, the sentence is active. When the action is done to the subject, the sentence is passive. "A $50 fee is to be paid by the applicant for a zoning variance" is a passive sentence, while "The applicant for a zoning variance must pay a $50 fee" is active. The active voice is more action-oriented and usually makes for better reading. For variety, in some sentences, the passive voice is appropriate.

GUIDELINE 9: Unstring Noun Strings. Noun strings are long sequences of nouns in which the first ones modify later ones. They are hard for readers to understand, but they do give documents a bureaucratic tone. It is another example of a writer choosing between sounding important or being understood. Here are some noun strings, along with translations:

-- Citizen information seeking behavior (Consumers' behavior in seeking information);

-- land use impaction analysis (analysis of land use effect).

Notice that in noun strings the connecting words, such as "in" or "of," are missing. These connecting words clarify how the nouns relate to each other. Most readers, researchers say, can handle two-noun strings (planning office) without much problem. But the longer they get, the harder it is for noun strings to be understood.(18)

GUIDELINE 10: Avoid "Whiz Deletions." One of the most basic writing guidelines is to avoid unnecessary words. But this guideline calls for the writer to insert some words that

might have been omitted. Many subordinate clauses are introduced by the words "who are," "which is," "that are," etc. These words help the reader understand how the subordinate clauses relate to the rest of the sentence. Removing these words is called a "whiz deletion."(19) This makes a sentence harder to read by making it unclear. For example, consider the sentence, "The Mayor wants the land-use plan written by the Community Development Department." Does this mean that he wants the Community Development Department (as opposed to somebody else) to write a land use plan? Or does the mayor want somebody to bring him a land-use plan that the Community Development department has already written? The sentence should read either, "The Mayor wants the land-use plan, that was written by the Community Development Department," or "The Mayor wants the Community Development Department to write a land-use plan."

Restore the missing connecting words to increase readability and to avoid ambiguity.

Editing

The writing process does not end with the first draft. Many technical writing researchers advocate "turning off the internal editor" during the first draft in order to avoid writer's block.(20) If you follow this strategy, there is even more reason for serious editing after the first draft. Many basic editing principles, such as eliminating needless words

and unstringing noun strings, were discussed above in the ten guidelines. But to write effectively, planners need at least a basic understanding of editing.

Editing is really just another form of feedback, such as the feedback a planner gets when the planning director says, "Don't smirk when the aldermen ask inane questions." All good employees evaluate their own work constantly, searching for ways to improve. They should do the same thing when they write.

Researchers at the Document Design Center offer the following suggestions for writers who must edit their own work, which is harder than editing another's writing:

1. Put aside what you have written for a day, or at least a few hours. This will help bring a fresh perspective.

2. Read the document aloud, noting instances where you stumble or are forced to pause because you can't follow what you have written. This will give a good clue as to where the audience will have problems;

3. Write a plan for revision before starting a second list. This does not have to be anything elaborate--a simple checklist of possible improvements will help a great deal.

4. Use a checklist, such as the one shown in Figure Six, to focus on specific problems.(21)

FIGURE SIX

CHECKLIST FOR LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

Yes
(Faulty)   A.   Paragraphs and Sentences

1. Document is impersonal (doesn't use "you")
2. Paragraphs are too long
3. Paragraphs cover unrelated topics
4. Main idea of paragraph is buried
5. Writer changes focus within paragraph
6. Transitions between paragraphs are unclear
7. Passive is overused--sentences have no actors
8. Sentences are too complex to understand easily (too many embedded or relative clauses)
9. Negative sentences could be stated positively
10. Sentences are ambiguous
11. Lists lack parallelism
12. Uses nominalizations instead of action verbs
13. Uses nouns to modify nouns when they should be possessives or prepositional phrases
14. Uses jargon without defining it
15. Uses two words where one would do (redundant)
16. Uses unnecessary legalisms (herein, said)
17. Uses more than one name for the same object
18. Uses the same name for more than one object

Makes grammatical errors:

19. dangling participles
20. misplaced modifiers
21. sentence fragments

Other language (style) problems:

Source: Writing in the Professions, by the Document Design Project

Another editing technique is Key-word Editing,(22) which can be used in place of or in addition to the above suggestions. This method has five steps:

1. Divide the sentence into meaningful units;

2. Identify the key words or phrases in each unit;

3. Cut out unnecessary words, and build your statement around the key terms;

4. Pack in more concrete words when possible;

5. Let the actors act.

Consider this sentence:

The condition of excessive redundancy that exists to such a great degree in the writing assignments produced by members of the planning profession should be eliminated by stricter standards and the example-setting capabilities that lie at the disposal of those who supervise such planners.

The first step is to divide the sentence into its natural units. The next step is to identify the key words or phrases in each. Here is the same sentence, with the units divided by slashes and the key words underlined:

The condition of excessive <u>redundancy</u> / that exists in such a great degree in the <u>writing</u> assignments / produced by members of the <u>planning</u> profession / should be eliminated by stricter <u>standards</u> and the <u>example</u>-setting capabilities / that lie at the disposal of those who <u>supervise</u> such planners.

The next step is to eliminate the unnecessary words and write a sentence dominated by the key words;

Redundancy in planner's writing should be eliminated by stricter standards and the example set by supervisors.

This is much better, but the fourth step is to insert concrete information, replacing abstractions with more specific words. What does "redundancy" mean? This sentence is more specific if it reads:

> Wordiness and repetition in planners' writing should be eliminated by stricter standards and the example set by the instructor.

The final step is to let the actors act, which means the person or thing that carries out the action of the sentence should also be the grammatical subject. So the sample sentence can be improved again by writing:

> Supervisors should use strict standards and their own examples to eliminate wordiness and repetition in planners' writing.

The key-word editing system and the checklists are helpful, but they won't mean much without the most important prerequisite for successful editing: determination. Editing is very hard work, especially for people re-reading their own prose. By the time writers are through with the first draft, they are tired and find it hard to critique their own work. That is why it is such a good idea to wait a while before editing. When editing, it is also a good idea to consider the final step in the writing process outlined by the Document Design Center: Evaluation. Does the writing project achieve its purpose for its audience? Have you met your original planning goals and objectives?

In many planning efforts, circumstances and time make it difficult to keep the original goal in mind. The same thing can happen with a writing project. But if writers consider their original goals as they edit, they can see where they got sidetracked and make the necessary changes. By working hard to write clearly and edit carefully and keeping the original project goals in mind, planners can make great strides towards improving their writing products.

This chapter has offered specific proposals for how planners can write more clearly. The next chapter will describe how one city tried to follow these guidelines in its comprehensive plan.

IV

AN EXAMPLE: EAST LANSING

The Background

Bob Owen was not happy. He had brought home a copy of
what he thought was the final draft of his city's new com-
prehensive plan. The East Lansing planning administrator
and his staff had been working on the new plan since early
1978. It was now November of 1980. Over the weekend, Owen
had asked his wife to read the plan to give him the opinion
of a layperson. She had told him that the plan was hard to
understand, that parts of it were not written clearly. But
that wasn't what made Owen upset. Owen was mad because he
knew, after reviewing the plan again, that his wife was
correct.

Owen had just hired a former newspaper editor as a part-
time planner. Me. One Monday, a note from Owen was on my
desk. It said, "Review this from an editor's point of view."
The note was clipped to a copy of the new comprehensive plan,
which I had never seen before. When Owen was asked to ela-
borate on these rather terse orders, he said, "You know, words

that work." That conversation led to the beginning of three amazing weeks for a neophyte planner. Owen had put a newcomer in the role of reviewing and revising work done by talented planners who had worked together for several years. The situation was awkward, but the plan clearly needed editing. The challenge was to simplify the language without changing the content.

East Lansing's Department of Planning, Housing and Community Development had gone to a great deal of effort to produce a plan that was bold but diplomatic, action-oriented but politically feasible. Unlike many communities, the people and elected officials of East Lansing understand planning and accept it as good for the community. But the community is highly educated and has an extremely active electorate, which is organized into neighborhood groups quick to express their opinions on anything. The planning staff, on the other hand, is very pro-active and not content to wait for orders from the city manager or city council. So, while the staff had many ideas for the plan, they also went through an elaborate citizen participation process, which produced many worthwhile suggestions. But when the staff had to gather all these divergent opinions into one cohesive document, they had trouble communicating their ideas clearly. Owen realized that in a city as literate as East Lansing, the plan needed to be well-written.

The Editing Process

Owen and his boss, department head Brad Pryce, wanted the planning commissioners and council members to have the new plan before Christmas, which meant any revisions would have to be made in approximately three weeks. Upon first reading, the plan's writing quality seemed quite inconsistent. Some sections, such as the one on Neighborhoods, were quite well written. Others were very awkward. Unlike some plans, which are full of vague generalities, this one was packed with solid ideas. Most plans begin with goals and objectives and then propose policies. East Lansing went one step further by listing recommended actions for every proposed objective. Every action also estimated how much it would cost to implement and when it would get done.

In short, the plan was full of good ideas, and in the final draft there weren't many changes in the Objectives, Policies and Recommended Actions sections. But each group of objectives, policies and actions was preceded by background sections that the plan labeled "Strategies." These needed work, as did the introductory sections. The plan began with a summary of its goals. This was followed by an introduction that explained the reason for a new plan and some constraints the city faced in the comprehensive planning process. This section also explained the planning process undertaken by the city, with its heavy emphasis on citizen involvement.

When revising a document, two issues must be addressed. One is the overall organization of the document, discussed in Chapter Two. The other is the clarity of the language. East Lansing's plan had minor organizational problems but some sections had serious clarity problems. We addressed the language first. In retrospect, it would have better to look at the format first, then worry about the words.

The East Lansing Comprehensive Plan went through the following revision process:

1. Entire plan was edited for minor grammatical and clarity problems by two journalists, me and my wife, who at that time was a magazine editor;

2. The first sections, titled Summary, Introduction, and The Plan Format were re-written by me and edited by my wife. The lengthy Introduction section was divided into three sections - Introduction, The Planning Process and Assumptions. Some of the Assessment sections, which began each section of the plan, also were re-written.

3. At this stage, the plan was in its most simply worded form, but it didn't stay that way. Before turning in my suggested revisions, I read the revised version once more and eliminated some changes that significantly altered the meaning. The revisions were then further edited by Bob Owen and Brad Pryce. Pryce made more changes than Owen, because he felt that we had lost some content in our quest for clarity. Here is an example of the changes one sentence encountered:

Original: "A larger proportion of public capital investment will be devoted to the maintenance of existing city infrastructure (utilities, streets, parks) and a smaller proportion will be devoted to support new development."(1)

Editor's Version: "More money will be devoted to existing city public facilities such as parks and streets and less money will be spent on new development."

Final Version: "More public funds will be used to maintain existing city infrastructure (utilities, streets, parks) and less money will be spent to support new development."(2)

In most cases, the two administrators did not change the revised version as much as they did the above sentence. Here is an example of a revision they did not change:

Original: "Second, the recommendations in the plan should be formulated with sufficient specificity so that their costs would be clearly understood."(3)

Final Version: "The second (goal) was to make the Plan's recommendations specific enough so that costs would be clearly understood."(4)

As the editing process continued, it became clear why some sections were so much better than others. Different planners had written different sections. While they are all excellent planners, there is a wide range in their writing abilities. There didn't appear to be any correlation between writing ability and overall talent. In fact, one of the brightest,

verbally articulate staff members turned out to be the worst writer.

Since this thesis is being written by an economic development planner, let us examine how one paragraph was revised in the City Center & Commercial chapter of the plan. This is the original version of the third paragraph of the Strategy section:

> The most visible and pronounced commercial area of the city is the Central Business District. Long regarded as the center, or focal point for the community, the CBD has been able to maintain its position as the predominant commercial center for the City. Maintaining this posture has been difficult, however, as the downtown has endured many changes over the years. Both the array of businesses and the clientele they serve have changed. Where there were once grocery and hardware stores, there are now restaurants and specialty shops. Where there once was a community shopping focus, there is now a more general orientation towards restaurants, entertainment, and the student shopper. Thus, while it is true that the CBD remains dominant in the community, its overall character has changed significantly.(5)

This is certainly not terrible writing, but here is how it was changed:

> The city's most visible commercial area is the Central Business District. Long regarded as the center of the community, the CBD is still the city's dominant commercial area. But the downtown has gone through many changes over the years, as both the types of businesses and the clientele they serve have changed. Where there were once grocery and hardware stores, there now are restaurants and specialty shops. Where there was once a community shopping focus, there is now a more general orientation towards food service, entertainment, and the student consumer. The overall character of the CBD has changed significantly.(6)

Several principles mentioned in earlier chapters were applied in the revision of this paragraph. One guideline is to

prune unnecessary words. In the original paragraph, the first sentence is 15 words long. The revised version has 11 words. The paragraph originally had 129 words, but was edited down to 100 words without any discernable loss in content. This was done partially by eliminating unnecessary phrases. For example, the second sentence of the original paragraph quoted above describes the downtown as "Long regarded as the center, or focal point for the community." In the revised version, the words "or the focal point" are eliminated because "center" and "focal point" mean the same thing, at least in this context.

In her Key-Word Editing technique, Linda Flowers encourages writers to "Let the actors act."(7) One way to do this is to get the important words up front, starting with the subject of the sentence. Consider the first sentence of the quoted paragraph. The original is "The most visible and pronounced area of the City is the Central Business District." The modifiers come before the important words, namely "City" and "Central Business District." The revised version, "The City's most visible commercial area is the Central Business District," is somewhat better. But the main "actor" in this sentence is "Central Business District." This sentence could be improved further by putting the subject up front: "The Central Business District is the City's most visible commercial area."

In conclusion it would be nice to report that everyone thought the last-minute revisions were a big success, but that was not the case. Brad Pryce, the department head, felt that

some subtle points and shades of meaning got lost in the translation. My position was that subleties don't mean much if the reader is confused or bored. In an interview in fall of 1984, Bob Owen said, "Looking back, I feel very good about the writing quality of the plan, all things considered. After all, I didn't have forever to edit it.

"I don't think that most people understand most of the document, but many people understand a good deal of it. I think we communicated a great deal of information. You always have to ask yourself, 'How will this be interpreted?' People see what they want to see. They ask how the plan will affect their neighborhood--that's the level of concern that you need to write to."(8)

V.

CONCLUSION

Planners truly concerned about communicating more effectively must establish clarity as an important goal. Since effective communication is a goal that everyone professes to favor, it should be fairly easy to sell politically. Imagine the Mayor telling an approving audience, "We're going to make sure those bureaucrats quit writing in gobbledygook." If planning directors truly want to improve writing quality, it should be possible for them to get support, and perhaps additional funding from elected officials.

But success begins at the top. A planning agency can improve the quality of its writing only if the director or another top administrator conveys to the staff that this is an important goal, one which should permeate everything they do.

The place for this to begin is in the hiring process. The phrase, "excellent oral and writing skills a must," is a cliche in help wanted ads for planners. But when the time comes to make a decision, many organizations don't give writing tests. Senior staff members will spend many hours on interviews, which in effect are long, high-pressure verbal presentations. Most people who come across well in a stressful situation like a job

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interview will be able to conduct themselves well in public.
But that doesn't prove they can write, as is evidenced by the
many planners who write poor staff reports but give lucid
public presentations. Some cities give written tests for
planning positions the same day as the interview. This
guarantees that applicants can't bring the test home and have
somebody help them. Some agencies require applicants to present
written work samples. This is much better than nothing, but
the work sample might have been edited heavily by the
applicant's supervisor. If an agency is going to require
written work samples, it would be helpful to examine something
short, like a letter, as well as a major project. On the job,
planners will write more short letters and memos than they will
long reports. If an applicant can't produce an acceptable
letter or memo, he or she is going to have problems with all
types of writing. The on-the-spot writing test seems like the
best solution.

Two-Part Process

If clear writing is to be an important agency goal, the
implementation process should be divided into two parts,
improvement of existing writing abilities and monitoring of
written materials. To encourage improvement among existing
staff, directors might encourage the staff to read E.B.
White's The Elements of Style. It is one of the best books on
writing and is very short. The agency also could establish

writing guidelines such as those described in Chapters Two and Three. The need for identifying the audience and for pre-writing planning should be re-emphasized in this publication. Such a booklet also could address questions of style, such as whether the term "low-to-mod-housing" should be hyphenated and whether "moderate" should be spelled out or abbreviated. The stylebook also could include a list of jargon words which should be avoided in publications for the general public. Computers also can be programmed to flag jargon, as was done by former Secretary of Commerce Malcolm Baldridge, who developed a list of forbidden jargon words which were never to appear in departmental writing products.

When work begins on a new subject, the staff discusses what they want to accomplish and how they will meet their goals. Usually, they don't think much about how the project will be presented until the work nears completion. This is a mistake. When work begins, discussion should include how the written part of the project will be approached. You can always change your mind later, but discussing it early will produce a better report. Once the data have been gathered, the goals defined, and the recommendations developed, it is again time to discuss how the written report should be handled. The staff members writing the final report would meet with their supervisor to discuss how the report will be written, using the guidelines in the department stylebook as the basis for their discussion.

Before this meeting, the lead writer should write an abstract of not more than 100 words. Abstracts usually are written at the last minute after the writing project is done. Writing the abstract beforehand forces the writer to look at the project in a very straightforward manner. No matter how complicated the project, it can be condensed into a few words. The City of Aurora, Illinois has a 14 page ordinance which established the City's historic preservation commission. It is considered an excellent framework for local preservation and has been used as a model by other communities and regional preservation organizations. But the former director of the preservation commission says that this detailed piece of writing can be summarized in these 24 words, "We want to establish a commission which will control and limit the alteration and demolition of historically and architecturally significant buildings in this area."(1) Making this drill a part of every writing project will help planners focus on their major goals and avoid needless tangents. For truly major projects, summaries for each section could also be developed before writing begins.

Training efforts will be much less effective if the system for promoting clarity does not include a monitoring component. Somebody in a position of authority has to be in charge of promoting effective writing. Personal work habits must be changed. In many agencies, the planning director is in charge of quality control on documents. But planning directors are

not necessarily the best writers on the staff. A better idea
is to choose the best-qualified person on the staff to monitor
writing quality and give that person the authority needed to
enforce their standards. In East Lansing, it was difficult for
a new staff member to revise the work of experienced planners,
and the situation would have been worse if there had been any
prima donnas on the staff. Putting a staff editor in charge
earlier would have helped solve the problem of several
different writing styles in the plan.

This staff editor would be involved in staff meetings for
new projects and help decide how the final report would be
written. This person could also monitor how staff reports are
received by the media and the public. Planners who want to
know what the public considers important should look to
newspaper coverage. The press, which represents the public,
often focuses on something completely different than what the
planner thought was important. The staff editor could help the
other planners learn to communicate more effectively.

Newspaper and magazine editors spend a great deal of time
looking back, critiquing their work. At many papers, an editor
spends a large amount of time reviewing each day's stories and
suggesting ways to write better. But this rarely takes place
in a planning department. Certainly, there are other projects
to move on to, but that's not a good enough reason to skip the
review process. An important part of the staff editor's job
would be to look at finished writing projects and determine

what recurring problems show up in the writing done by
different staff members.

Another problem is that planners usually are not in a
position to get steady public feedback. When newspaper
reporters write stories, they usually talk with their sources
soon after the stories are printed. The reporter covering City
Hall should talk with local officials regularly. This gives
the sources ample opportunity to tell the reporters what was
wrong with their last story. Newspapers also print letters to
the editor, another source of feedback. But planners, who
spend much of their time doing research, have little time to
ask if the public is getting the message. It doesn't have to
be that way. Planning staffs could use written questionnaires
or telephone surveys to determine what people think about local
planning issues. Cities that publish newsletters, such as East
Lansing, could encourage letters to the editor. This
combination of staff education and monitoring eventually will
lead to higher quality in written reports.

Future Research

Communication, as a component of the planning process,
clearly needs to be researched more thoroughly. This becomes
increasingly obvious every time a financially-strapped city
decides to lay off a large number of its planners. There are
many avenues for future research. For example, this thesis has
barely touched on the necessity of effective publication
design, which is extremely important in presenting written

material. Another subject mentioned briefly is the use of computers to foster effective communication. Many organizations now have software programs which check writing for grammar, excessive jargon and other problems. There is a need for such a program for planning offices.

Future research is also needed to quantify the benefits of clear writing in the planning profession. How could this be done? Obviously, East Lansing could not send the original version of its comprehensive plan to half the city council members and the more a poorly-written revision to the other half. But it is possible to find a group of people with approximately the same background (college planning students, for example) and divide them into two groups. One group could read the first written version of a plan while the other half reads a well-written version. Both groups could then take the same test to find out how well they understood what they had read. It would also be interesting to see which version they considered the most "professional" and esoteric.

In the era of tax revolts and public intolerance of government, it is more important than ever for planners to get their message across. Clearly written documents can help accomplish this. When clear writing becomes a specific goal within the planning process, planners will have taken the first step towards producing better public documents. The public deserves no less. The result can only be an increased understanding of what planners do.

NOTES

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(2) Richard B. Dymsza, "Say It In English," _Planning,_ August 1981, p. 23.

(3) Steven Orlick, "Promoting the Three Cs of Effective Communication," _Practicing Planner,_ December 1978, p. 6.

(4) Gerald Luedtke, "Why Should Master Plans Make Dull Reading?" _Practicing Planner,_ March 1978, p. 17.

(5) Interview with Robert Owen, East Lansing, Michigan, September 5, 1984.

(6) Ibid.

(7) Linda Flower, _Problem-Solving Strategies For Writing,_ (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p. 173.

(8) Rosemary Hake and Joseph Williams, "Style and Its Consequences: Do As I Do, Not As I Say," _College English_ (September 1981): 434.

(9) Ibid., p. 437.

(10) Ibid.

(11) Ibid., p. 440.

(12) Ibid., p. 446.

(13) Robbin Battison, ed., _Simply Stated,_ (Washington , D.C.: American Insitute For Research, 1981), p. 1.

(14) Hake and Williams, p. 445.

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(1) W.B. Yeats as quoted by Jacques Barzun, _Simple & Direct- A Rhetoric For Writers,_ (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. ix.

(2)Clifford Baker, A Guide to Technical Writing, (New York: Pitman Publishing, 1961), p. 229.

(3)Flower, p. 3.

(4)Dixie Goswami et al., Writing In the Professions, (Washington, D.C.: American Institute For Research, 1981) p. 7.

(5)Ibid., p. 39.

(6)Ibid., p. 49.

(7)Warren Jones and Albert Solnit, What Do I Do Next? (Chicago: American Planning Association, 1980), p. 37.

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(9)Goswami, p. 52.

(10)Flower, p. 123.

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(12)Ibid., p. 62.

(13)Ibid., p. 99.

(14)Ibid., p. 87.

(15)Goswami, p. 87.

(16)Barzun, p. 90.

(17)Ibid.

(18)Goswami, p. 84.

(19)Dymsza, p. 26.

(20)City of East Lansing Department of Planning, Housing and Community Development, "Plan It Again, Sam," (East Lansing, Michigan: City of East Lansing, 1978).

(21)Goswami, p. 40.

(22)Flower, 143.

(23)Charlotte Linde and William Labov, "Spatial Networks as a Site for the Study of Language," Language 51 (1975): PP. 924-939.

(24)Flower, pp. 157-158.

(25)Ibid., p. 162.

Chapter III

(1)Orlick, p. 6.

(2)Ibid.

(3)Ibid.

(4)Duncan Erley, Writing Better Zoning Reports (Chicago: American Society of Planning Officials, 1976), p. 1.

(5)Dymsza, p. 23.

(6)Jones and Solnit, p. 37.

(7)Ibid.

(8)Ibid., p. 40.

(9)Baker, p. 48.

(10)Sylvia Lewis, "Writing Well- The Basics and Beyond," a presentation at Michigan State University, June 15, 1982.

(11)Daniel Felker, et all., Guidelines For Document Designers, (Washington, D.C.: American Insitute For Research, 1981), p.45.

(12)Lewis, "Writing Well- The Basics and Beyond."

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(17)Joseph N. Ulman and Jay R. Gould, Technical Reporting, (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1965), p. 131.

(18)Felker, et all., p. 63.

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Chapter V

(1) Interview with Community Development Director Patricia Casler, July 18, 1985.

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