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Words That Work: How City Planners Can Write More Clearly

By Joseph J. McElroy

Maria possessed a diminutive pollard
Its pelage was lactescent as crystallized precipitation
And to every destination that Maria oriented
The pollard was reliable to motivate.

Planner's Nursery Rhyme
by Dennis O'Harrow

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

> In prescribing urban land uses, the land-use element defines population distribution, residential density standards, and nonresidential 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.

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?"

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

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

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

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 *Memo* consists of guidelines for writing more clearly, with a special emphasis on editing. A bibliography is included at the end of the *Memo*.

Guideline 1. Keep Jargon to a Minimum

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.[1]

1. This was cited as bad writing in Warren W. Jones and Albert Solnit, *What Do I Do Next?* (Chicago: American Planning Association, 1980), 37.

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	DIFFICULT	SIMPLE
administer	manage	procure	get
allocate	give, divide	promulgate	make, issue
deem	consider	pursuant to	under
enter (on a form)	write	render	make, give
for the duration of	during	represents	is
herein	here	said, same, such	the, this, that
heretofore	until now	submit	send
implement	carry out	subsequent to	after
indicate	show	to the extent that	if, when
in the event that	if	utilize	use
on behalf of	for	with regard to/respect to	for

Source: Dixie Goswami et al., *Writing in the Professions* (Washington, D.C.: American Institute for Research, 1981).

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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.

Planners can keep jargon to a minimum by having somebody with a nonplanning background read their work. A spouse or close friend is great for this. But remember that, after several years, this family member or friend might pick up some of the lingo. 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:

infrastructure = public facilities

facilitate = help

significantly severe topography = steep slope or hill

the subject parcel = this parcel

utilize = use[2]

Guideline 2. Prune Unnecessary Words

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. If writers 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 that consists of reading wordy sentences and then rewriting 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." This sentence could be rewritten as "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." The boxed material comes from a book written for all technical writers, but planners will see many familiar words and phrases under the column headlined "Difficult."

Guideline 3. Don't Put Too Much Information in 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 the sentence. Another cause can be too much introduction before the main parts of the sentence 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 organization factors, which also impinge on the proposed system, must be evaluated in terms of their effects on each other.[3]

The subject clause is "All the procedural steps," and the verb clause is "must be evaluated." There is much too much information between them. Sentences like this are hard to read and will discourage readers.

It is best 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 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." She points out that this could be rewritten as: "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 can conclude with appendixes 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. The writer must know the audience—how much detail will it want or need? Of course, the subject matter may dictate the details that *must* appear in the report. As Duncan Erley 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."

Guideline 5. Don't Mix Facts with Opinions

Planners should keep their facts separate from their analyses and recommendations. Often, in a staff report, information on location and adjacent land will not be separated from opinions, such 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—an example offered in Duncan Erley's report—fact and opinion have become blurred. The sentence in italics 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 agricultural land to the north. *The applicant should be required to remove all four structures upon completion of the new facility.*

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. Richard Dymsza offers an example of a paragraph that does not use concrete, easy-to-understand language:

2. *Ibid.*, 40.

3. This example was offered in Daniel B. Felker, et al., eds., *Guidelines for Document Designers* (Washington, D.C.: American Institute for Research, 1981), 45.

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.

That isn't terrible, but it could be rewritten:

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.

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. 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 *Memo*. That is why the word "you" has been used so often. 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. 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" is a passive sentence, while "The applicant 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 is a noun string, along with a translation: land-use impact analysis (an analysis of the effect of a land use).

In most 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 (e.g., planning office) without much problem. But the longer they get, the harder it is for noun strings to be understood.

Guideline 10. Avoid "Whiz Deletions"
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 has been called "whiz deletion."[4] 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 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 department has already written? The sentence should read either "The mayor wants the land-use plan that the Community Development Department wrote" or "The mayor wants the Community Development Department to write a land-use plan." Putting in the missing words increases readability and avoids 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.[5] 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 10 guidelines. But to write effectively, planners need at least a basic understanding of editing.

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 to your reading and editing.
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 Table 1, to focus on specific problems.[6]

Another editing technique is key-word editing,[7] 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 writing assignments produced by members of the

4. Ibid., 39.

5. Linda Flowers, *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 72.

6. Dixie Goswami et al., *Writing in the Professions* (Washington, D.C.: American Institute for Research, 1981), 164.

7. Flowers, *Problem-Solving Strategies*, 175.

Table 1. Checklist for Language Problems

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.

Grammatical Errors

11. Dangling participles.
12. Misplaced modifiers.
13. Sentence fragments.

Source: Dixie Goswami et al., *Writing in the Professions* (Washington, D.C.: American Institute for Research, 1981).

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 in italics:

> The condition of excessive *redundancy* / that exists in 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 next step is to eliminate the unnecessary words and write a sentence dominated by the key words:

> Redundancy in planners' 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 supervisor.

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 rereading 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 such a good idea to consider the final step in the writing process—evaluation. Does the writing project do what it is supposed to do for its intended 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.

Incidentally, the planner's nursery rhyme is a jargon version of "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

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