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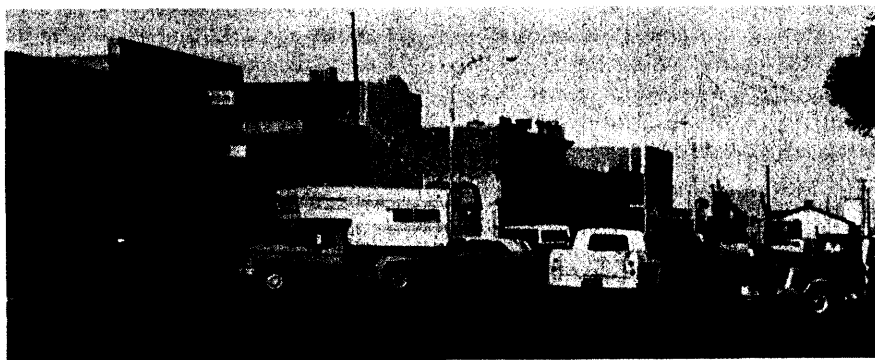
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Cover photo by Richard Hedman.

Winner of the Planning Quiz (May) is Richard W. Winters, AICP, a consultant in Tallahassee, Florida.



Richard V. Francaviglia

Chances are the people who hold title to much of Cochise County aren't hanging around Railroad Avenue in downtown Willcox (page 19).



David Sessions

Legions of report readers will thank you (page 23).

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"Let us beware of the plight of our colleagues, the behavioral scientists, who by use of a proliferating jargon have painted themselves into a corner—or isolation ward—of unintelligibility. They know what they mean, but no one else does. . . . Their condition might be pitied if one did not suspect it was deliberate."

Barbara Tuchman

Tuchman, a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, could have been talking about those of us who are practicing planners. Indeed, our plight might be more serious than that of behavioral scientists. 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.

Tuchman suggests that the behavioral scientist's unintelligibility might be deliberate. Some planners, too, might choose to make their writing obscure to give it an aura of expertise and to conceal the simplicity of their concepts. But most practicing planners, I believe, make an honest effort to write for broad public understanding. They simply are not sure how to go about it and can find few good

examples to follow within the profession.

To make planning reports more readable, three guidelines must be followed:

- Guideline 1: Get rid of clutter.
- Guideline 2: Be concrete.
- Guideline 3: Do not try to say too much.

Journalists interpret these guidelines very restrictively when they write for the general public. But planners write for a more narrowly defined and better educated public, and their reports must often convey technical information. Planners, therefore, need not apply these guidelines as restrictively as a journalist would, but they should adopt some of the qualities of a journalistic style to make their reports more readable.

Get rid of clutter

A planning report that I recently read begins like this: "The most significant and important innovations. . . ." This is clutter. The writer has used two words where one would have done as well. Perhaps the subtle distinctions between "significant" and "important" are important (or is it significant?) to the writer, but they are not to most readers.

Two words instead of one may appear to be a small matter. But in so many planning reports the small matters, like bricks, get piled up until an impenetrable wall is built

between the planner and the reader.

Clutter is not only the use of two words where one would do as well. It is also the long, loosely constructed sentence that bewilders the reader, and it is the use of a long word where a short one will serve. Clutter is contagious; it spreads into all of our writing—even when we try our best to keep it out.

Here are a few of the problems to watch out for in the fight against clutter.

Long paragraphs. You were probably taught that paragraphs must be constructed around a given topic or idea. But if, in meeting this rule, a paragraph gets too long, break it down anyway. A paragraph is probably too long for the lay reader if it goes beyond 10 typewritten lines.

Long sentences. Write short sentences rather than long sentences, but do not overreact by using only short sentences. Good style requires sentences of varying lengths to create rhythm and flow.

If you must use a long sentence, make sure that it is under very tight grammatical control. Here's an example of one that's not: "Considering the high volume of traffic on north-south arterials such as Lamont Highway, which have been obstructed by unrestricted access to abutting land uses and have resulted not only in congestion but also major traffic hazards, improvements to these must be given a high priority

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When in doubt, see . . .

A small collection of well-chosen references is an absolute necessity in a planning agency. The basis of a good collection is a good dictionary. We use *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*. The eighth edition is in print, although the seventh edition works very well. We back it up with *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*. If you are writing and editing and do not use a dictionary several times a day, you are either a phenomenal speller or somebody else should be cleaning up your copy. For hyphenation and quick checks of spelling, keep handy a copy of *The Word Book* by Gilbert Kahn and Donald J. D. Mulkerne (Glencoe Press, 1975).

Then you need a guide to answer style questions: Does the comma go before or after quotation marks? How do you handle a quotation within a quotation? How do you cite newspaper articles? How do you set up the tables in a report? When do you use three dots for omissions and when four? Our bible is the *Manual of Style* published by the University of Chicago Press (12th edition, revised, 1969).

The next most useful reference is any book written by the late Theodore M. Bernstein of the *New York Times*. He had a great ear for the nuances of language, and his books, collectively, will answer most questions you will have on usage. They also are a joy to read. Start with *The Careful Writer: A Modern Guide to English Usage*, published by Atheneum in 1973.

This excerpt shows Bernstein's ability to clarify confusing usages.

"Like and as are not interchangeable. For instance, *as* usually cannot be used in place of *like* in constructions in which the verb is suppressed or its implied presence is not strong. Attempts to use it in that way are occasionally made by writers who apparently were frightened in infancy by the word *like*. . . . Example: 'A crowd of young adults raced up and down a Bronx street yesterday carrying marbles in spoons, jumping in potato sacks, and generally behaving as children.' *As* is improper; . . . Moreover, it sounds as hell."

Another useful book is the *New York Times Manual of Style and Usage* (Times Books, 1976). How do you handle street and highway names in print? Is it West Coast or west coast? OSHA or O.S.H.A.? What does Fannie Mae stand for? When is it south and when South? Is it National Institute or Institutes of Health?

We also use *Commonsense Grammar and Style* by Robert E. Morsberger (Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1975); *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr., as revised by E. B. White (Macmillan Co., 1959); and *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* by H. W. Fowler (second edition, Oxford University Press, 1965). And there ought to be a Roger's *Thesaurus* around the office somewhere, too.

Marjorie Adams

Marjorie Adams is copy editor of *Planning* and other APA publications.

can be conveyed through the use of appropriate adverbs (e.g., "probably," "certainly") in the main clause of the sentence.

Jargon. Some jargon cannot be reduced. It conveys in a few words meanings that might take several paragraphs to put into lay language. Most planning jargon, however, is just the opposite: It conveys in many complex words no more than what can be said in a few simple words. There is no reason to use such jargon.

Below are a few examples of swollen language and their simpler, more graceful, and more forthright equivalents:

Decision-making process. "Our purpose is to facilitate the legislative decision-making process." Translation: "Our purpose is to help legislators in making decisions."

Ecosystem. "Environment," or a more specific term like "plant and animal life" or "water quality."

Educational facilities, transportation facilities, sewerage facilities. "Schools," "highways," "sewers."

In close proximity to. "Near."

Infrastructure. "Streets," "sewers," "water mains." If you must use a general term, "public facilities" would be an improvement.

Input. Borrowed from the argot of computer programming. Instead of calling for the public to provide input into your plan, you can call for the public to comment on it or to take part in its preparation.

Interface with. "Meet with," "work with."

Optimize. "Make the most of."

Pedestrian-oriented facilities. "Sidewalks," usually.

Prioritize. Until the dictionary recognizes this word, say "assigning priorities to" or "rank in order of priority."

Residential land uses, commercial land uses, institutional land uses. . . . These tedious constructions are needed on occasion, but more often they are not. They can be replaced by simple words like "housing," "shopping areas," and "schools"

in the county capital program along with similar highways within the city limits."

Strung-together nouns. These are series of nouns used as adjectives. Some planners think that the longer the series, the better the writing. The planner who wrote this designation for a transportation planning project thought so: "Northwest corridor transportation improve-

ments alternatives feasibility study project."

Indirect expressions. "It is felt that," "it should be noted that," "it must be emphasized that," "it is safe to say that"—indirect expressions like these are epidemic in planning reports. Most of them should be wiped out. Usually the indirect expressions are not needed for meaning, or if they are, the same idea often

when their more general meanings are not needed.

Significantly severe topography. "Steep slopes," "hills."

Subject. Do not use as an adjective, as in "the subject parcel." Say "this parcel."

Sufficient. "Enough" is enough.

Urban scatteration. "Urban sprawl"

has been worn threadbare, but it still is the better way to say it.

Utilize. "Use."

Viability. If you work at it, you will find a more lively way to express this idea.

Be concrete

A published housing report for a metropolitan county starts this way:

"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."

Loading a paragraph with abstractions is not the way to capture the interest of the reader.

A champion of plain talk

"Anything that can be said in planning can also be said in English." So said Dennis O'Harrow, the director of the American Society of Planning Officials from 1954 until his death in 1967. O'Harrow was a champion of "plain talk," as opposed to "plan talk," and a firm enemy of gobbledygook. His writings, on language and numerous other subjects will be published this fall by APA Planners Press. Until then, here's a sampling from Dennis O'Harrow: Plan Talk and Plain Talk.

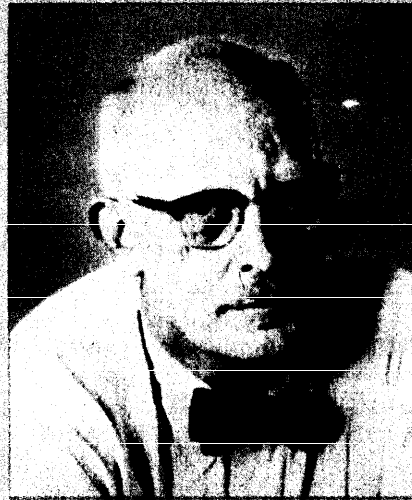
No hocus-pocus

A city plan is a collection of ideas, and these ideas are presented symbolically in words, charts, maps. These ideas—when they are worth anything—are the results of investigations and calculations, of tight logical thinking and inspired dreaming. First and most important, there must be ideas—honest ideas, honestly arrived at. When you put them into the symbols of language and pictures, present them honestly. Don't try hocus-pocus, don't pretend that you have something you don't have, don't try to impress people.

Note for Webster

Concept. The word *concept* is used as a substitute for "thought" or "idea," and is highly favored in planning jargon. It is a word remarkable for its propensity to expand by accretion. . . .

From *concept* we went to *conceptual*, which apparently means



Dennis O'Harrow

something that really does not exist except in someone's mind. Next, we had *conceptualize*, which probably means to think about things that really do not exist except in your mind as you think about them. From this we naturally got *conceptualization*, which could mean the act (mental) of thinking about things that do not really exist except in the act of thinking about these things. . . .

The next step, of course, is to form the verb *conceptualize* from the noun *conceptualization*. From this it is only a short step to the *conceptualizator*, one who *conceptualizes*. . . .

Other good planning words that appear ready for expansion are *implement/implementator*, *viable/viabalate*, and *thrust/thrustization*.

At the top of the list

I believe that the success, or lack of it, that a planning director has will have less relation to his technical training than to certain other abilities which are rarely mentioned when a city seeks to employ planners. At the top of this list I would put, approximately equal in importance, the ability to write and the ability to speak in public. . . .

You don't have to write like John Steinbeck or Red Smith, and you don't have to be able to speak as well as Adlai Stevenson II. But unless you can do a better than passable job in both of these, you aren't going to function very well as a planner. And I will say unequivocally that the graduates of city planning schools that I have seen recently have had this part of their training shamefully neglected.

On form

The first purpose of any published material is to get itself read. The publication must, by its form and appearance, make me want to read it.

But form includes more than physical appearance; it includes also the organization of the work and the style and level of writing. I may be drawn into the examination of a booklet by its layout only to bog down for lack of a table of contents or readable English.

Ideas that are not clearly communicated are not worth the psychoelectric energy that generated them.

Here's an example of a more readable opening paragraph: "In (name of 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. Furthermore, they are denied the opportunity to live in most areas of the county because these areas offer no low-cost housing."

If you compare this paragraph with the original, you will see that it conveys the same three basic dimensions of the housing problem: the inadequate conditions, the affordability, and the locational concentration. But it conveys them in specific terms that are more easily understood.

Don't say too much

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.

Where planning material must be confined to a single report, a compromise must be reached between the technical and the public information requirements. Unfortunately, the impulse is to err in the direction of meeting technical requirements, resulting in a report that is too long and complicated for most readers.

Challenge everything you intend to write. Is it important? If it is not, omit the material or relegate it to an appendix. Appendices help to meet technical requirements and to keep the body of the report readable. They should be used more often.

Another example, this one from an agricultural preservation report by a regional planning board: "The process of urban expansion results in disinvestment in agricultural capital and the premature withdrawal of land from the production of agricultural goods. Urbanization creates within the agricultural community excessive speculation arising from

The facts, please

The title page of every report should include:

- The name of the issuing agency;
- Address, complete with zip code;
- Date of publication;

This advice may seem superfluous. Yet APA's Planners Library staff, which sees hundreds of planning agency reports a year, says a surprising number of them lack some or even all of these elements.

unrealistic expectations on the potential for capital gains in a transitional land market. Such expectations lead to less than optimal agricultural investment decisions."

The more concrete rewrite: "As an urban area expands, farm investments decline and land is retired from farming long before it is needed for urban use. The development of new housing nearby awakens farmers' interest in speculating on their land. Often, they expect to get a much higher price for their land than it is worth, and they would be better off investing in their farms than looking for a windfall in the land market."

Beware, also, of the packed paragraph, in which too many ideas are crammed into too small a space. The paragraph below, taken from a published planning report, is an example:

"Urban sprawl has resulted in excessive energy use. With the spatial arrangement of existing activities to a large extent fixed, the potential of achieving greater efficiency in energy use through land-use planning is limited, but still significant. The energy efficiency of existing development and activities can be improved in some ways through land-use planning. The principal opportunities, however, lie in the development of policies related to the type, location, and number of future facilities and structures and the ways in which they are used; and in the

implementation of those policies through land-use controls and infrastructural investments. . . ."

A more readable style would require a number of paragraphs to impress these concerns on the reader. For this reason, the more readable style sometimes requires more space than highly condensed technical writing. If the report gets too long, though, there is a simple alternative: Eliminate the extraneous material.

Finally, be on your guard against unneeded qualifiers. These two examples were found in published planning reports: "Although there are many exceptions, communities are coming to recognize the need for somewhat more flexible ways to control land use than through traditional zoning." And: "It can be logically argued that many of the problems facing our metropolitan community today have their roots in the largely unbridled growth of the past three decades."

The first sentence has two qualifiers that are not needed: the clause "although there are many exceptions" and the word "somewhat." The writer who cannot resist the urge to qualify the statement should begin by simply saying "Many communities. . . ."

In the second sentence, the word "largely" and the initial construction "It can be logically argued that" should be deleted. Guideline 1 calls for deleting the initial construction because it is an indirect expression, a form of clutter. Guideline 3 calls for deleting it because it qualifies a statement that is almost self-evident and would not be contested.

A final word

It will not be easy for planners to change their writing to a more readable style. The change will require planners to work outside their acquired idiom.

But the more readable style will come over time, if planners work at it. And the payoff of having planning reports read and understood by more people will make the effort worthwhile.

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