7 Steps to Better Written Policies and Procedures

Stephen Page. 2001. Westerville, Ohio: Process Improvement Publishing. [ISBN 1929065-24-8. 125 pages. $19.95 USD (softcover).]

Individuals and organizations developing policies and procedures (P&P) documents according to a traditional format and style, referred to as an *extrinsic* approach to information development, will find Stephen Page's book a welcome addition to their P&P bookshelf. They will find his book especially useful for establishing, improving, or training novices in using an extrinsic P&P format in their documents. Although other books present extrinsic approaches to P&P development, this book is solely about an extrinsic approach. Conversely, individuals seeking or trained in schools of documentation using approaches that are intrinsic, performance-based, task-oriented, and involve research-based human factors in information design will get a different perspective on presenting P&P documentation.

An extrinsic approach to P&P documentation typically creates predetermined and pre-titled *sections*. Page also refers to these sections as "buckets" to fill with information (p. 11). Page calls his series of sections his "Writing Format."

In contrast, an intrinsic approach to P&P documentation creates topics, sections, and subsections around the nature, purpose, and amount of information needed by the reader or user. Done properly, an intrinsic approach creates a document that is structured to the user's needs for information, not the information that is required for a predetermined structure.

Another characteristic of Page's approach (typically found in extrinsic-designed P&P documents) is a contractual-like format and tone of the content. These types of P&P documents are typically found in organizations within industries that are highly regulated and audited. These documents, like the ones presented by Page, typically have a masthead at the top of each of their pages. Some writers argue that mastheads limit the space on a page for presenting P&P information effectively and that mastheads distract readers from focusing on the content. Where appropriate in his P&P documents, Page applies a decimal-numbering outline (in some instances with as many as four indentures), thereby making it appear as a specification or contractual agreement. When revising such P&P documents, writers may need to verify the numbering throughout the document. The writing style in Page's P&P documents makes plentiful use of the passive voice and future tense, which again yield a tone that is more contractual and authoritative rather than user-friendly. Therefore, these P&P documents communicate more as compliance-based than performance-based information.

The book has three parts. In Part 1, Page briefly describes five steps of the writing process. Although the book is entitled *7 steps to better written policies and procedures*, it really conveys Page's rules for communicating his seven recommended sections for all P&P documents within his five-step writing process. Therefore, the book serves as a format and style guide rather than a step-by-step, development process guide. In describing his writing process, Page recommends having "would-be" procedures writers "fill in specific buckets and return the information to you [the writer]." One benefit is that the writer "will have the luxury of picking and choosing which material [information] is most relevant"(p. 11). Writers using formal

performance-based methods for documentation will probably take strong exception to this advice for creating P&P information. They will argue for first working with the user to identify the specific tasks and knowledge needed to perform a job and, second, to solicit only the relevant information.

Part 2 presents a case study, exercises, and suggested answers for communicating each of Page's seven recommended sections of a P&P document. Page writes Part 2 clearly, conversationally, and consistently in an instructor-like manner. He uses a simple-to-moderate-level case study concerning a purchasing process that could apply to many organizations. All the exercises build upon each other within the context of the case study. Page not only provides suggested "good" and "not-so good" answers to his exercises, but also effectively explains the two sets of answers. Part 2 concludes with a checklist to help you ensure the recommended rules are met for each of the seven sections of a document.

Part 3 contains three sample policies and procedures documents. These samples clearly illustrate the application of Page's Writing Format.

Page states that he has "been using the same Writing Format for the past 30 years" (p. 3). Each chapter within Parts 1 and 2 ends with a section called "References." The references listed are other books (no page or chapter citations are indicated), which makes for more of a bibliography to the chapter. Most of the chapters' "references" repeat the same book titles (including Page's other two books). As such, Page's book is based largely upon his own experience of writing P&P and not directly on other sources.

Page says the "goal of this book is for you to improve your writing skills for policies and procedures and to write policies and procedures that are consistent, well written, and easily applied by your readers" (p. 3). Writers who create extrinsic P&P documents will definitely find that following Page's Writing Format will produce consistently written documents.

Writers looking for improving their writing skills through the various techniques of presenting policy, procedure, and process type information will not find the book particularly useful. For example, the book does not define, teach, or illustrate such popular procedure writing or presentation techniques as the traditional playscript style, step-action list, decision table, or flowchart. Further, the book does not teach (it only illustrates) how to write in a grammatical style suitable for a policy versus procedural type of information. And writers who are seeking or who are already trained in principles of performance-based communication will likely argue that Page's illustrated language style and techniques are not the most effective for users to learn from.

Page's approach, however, may be preferred by users accustomed to this traditional approach. An individual or organization new to writing policies and procedures documentation is likely to find the book very useful and effective in getting started quickly. However, a novice might be eagerly surprised and glad to know that other major approaches to writing P&P exist and are worthy of consideration.

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