



Keeping it simple: how to write so your readers will understand

Clear, simple language makes information easy to read, understand and use. In our diverse city, that's critical for reaching out to parents and the public, especially those who do not speak English as a first language.

The TDSB plain-language standard to aim for is a Grade 8 – 10 level of difficulty. That takes practice and even experienced writers may struggle. The guidelines below will help you keep it simple so your message is clear.

Before you begin

Clear written communication starts with asking yourself a few simple questions.

- **Who is my audience?** Put yourself in the place of the person who will be reading your document. Consider their education level, English skills, as well as cultural and socio-economic factors (e.g., attitudes and experiences with government officials, etc.).
- **What is my message?** Are you sharing general information that **might** interest your readers? Or is it something important that they need to know because it may affect them personally and directly?
- **What am I hoping to achieve?** Is your goal to inform, request, reassure or to persuade? Are you asking your reader to do something specific, such as respond or attend a meeting?

Organize your information

The next step is to frame your information logically, so here are a few things to keep in mind:

- **DO** put the most important information right up front, so your reader doesn't have to hunt for it.
- **DO** explain the purpose of the document in the first paragraph, especially if your document is long or detailed.
- **DO** stick to the point and avoid putting unrelated information in one document.
- **DO** describe processes in the sequence they are happening.
- **DON'T** leave obvious questions unanswered. For example, if you say a specific event will happen, include a place and time.
- **DON'T** assume your reader has background knowledge to fill in the blanks. Be sure to include all the information they need.

Readability plain and simple

Sticking to a few basic plain-language principles can make a big impact on readability.

- **Use familiar, everyday words and stay away from clichés. (See also *Some examples of plain language alternatives* below)**

Say this...	Instead of this...
"We are eager to get started with this exciting plan to make our school better."	"Moving forward, school administrators and staff are eagerly anticipating the opportunity presented by this initiative to improve infrastructure and enhance programming to better support student success."

- **Avoid jargon, acronyms and internal titles that have no meaning for your reader, even if it takes more words to be clear:**

Say this...	Instead of this...
"It will take about 9 months to examine all the high school programs offered in your neighbourhood right now, and to look at additions or changes that could improve them."	"The ARC process is expected to take approximately 9 months for completion and will affect secondary programming in this Family of Schools."

- **Write in short, simple sentences and use the active voice:**

Say this...	Instead of this...
"We will send information home with your child."	"Information will be sent home to parents/guardians via their children."

- **Address the reader directly as "you":**

Say this...	Instead of this...
"Your input is important to us."	"Schools value input from parents/guardians and community members."

Visual impact affects reading ease

How your document looks can be just as important as the words in it. A cluttered page or one filled with a lot of text can be very intimidating, and readers may overlook key information.

- Use headings to reinforce understanding and tell readers what to expect.
- Keep paragraphs and sections short. Long blocks of text can invite readers to skim and hide your key message.
- Use lists and bullets to organize and highlight information.
- Save all-caps and unusual fonts for headers or emphasis. A standard serif font like Times New Roman is the easiest for most adults to read.

When you're done

Consider your document from your reader's point of view and ask yourself:

- Is my key message obvious?
- Have I reworded any technical terminology or jargon into plain language? Have I spelled out acronyms?
- Is the information organized to suit my reader's needs? Would a different format make it easier to understand (e.g., chart, list, bullets, headings)?
- Would more (but shorter) sections be better?

The final test

Is your document written at a grade 8-10 level so your audience can easily understand it? Make sure by checking the reading ease and grade level in Microsoft Word.

1. On the **Tools** menu, click **Options**, and then click the **Spelling & Grammar** tab.
2. Select the **Check grammar with spelling** check box.
3. Select the **Show readability statistics** check box, and then click **OK**.
4. On the **Tools** menu, click **Spelling and Grammar**.
5. When the spelling and grammar check is complete, information about the reading level of your document is displayed automatically.

For more information about how these scores are derived, search "readability" in the Microsoft Office Word Help menu.

If the **Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level** of your document is higher than Grade 10.0, at least some of your audience will probably have trouble understanding it. Try to simplify the language and recheck the readability level. These suggestions may help.

- Divide long or complex sentences into several shorter ones.
- Break up long paragraphs.
- Replace multi-syllable words and technical terms with simpler alternatives

Some examples of plain language alternatives

Instead of Saying...

achieve integration of
accordingly
actively engaged in
and in addition to
arising from the fact that
as to whether
assistance
at this point in time
both of them will

Say...

integrate
so, therefore
engaged in
and, besides
because
whether
help
now
they will

Instead of Saying...

but rather
by virtue of, by means of
completely full
component
concerning
consensus of opinion
demonstrate
determine
discontinue
documentation
during the time that
endeavour
ensure
equivalent
evaluate
examine in detail
exhibits
for the purpose of
furthermore
has the ability to, is able to
have an effect on
have an understanding of
intend to
in cases in which
in order to, in order that
in that
in the event that
in the month of (October)
in the near future
in the region of
in view of the fact that
inasmuch as
include a description of
is reflective of
it goes without saying that
it is important to note that
it should be pointed out that
a large number (percentage) of
located in

Say...

but
by
full
part
about, on, for
consensus
show, prove
decide
stop, end
papers, documents
while
try
make sure
equal, same (as)
test, check
examine
shows, is...
for, to
also, and
can
affect
understand
will
when
to, for
because
if
in (October)
soon
near
because
because, although
describe
reflects
(cut)
(cut)
(cut)
many
in

Instead of Saying...

make changes
make some decisions about
numerous
objective
on a regular (or daily) basis
on account of
on request
optimum
previous
remain
request
require
residence
revised
so as not to
substantial
sufficient
supplementary
the reason for this is that
those people who
in (with) regard to
successfully met the standards
until such time as
upon
the use of
utilize
very unique
whether or not
with the exception of

Say...

change
decide
many
goal
regularly, daily
because
if you ask
best
last
stay
ask
need
home
new, changed
to avoid
great, large
enough
extra, more
the reason is that
those who
about, on, for
met the standards
until, when
on
using (or cut)
use
unique
whether
except