

***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.”

# Address the reader directly as “you”:

**Say this…**

“Your input is important to us.”

 **Instead of this…**“Information will be sent home to parents/guardians via their children.”

**Instead of this…**

“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… Say…**

achieve integration of integrate

accordingly so, therefore

actively engaged in engaged in

and in addition to and, besides

arising from the fact that because

as to whether whether

assistance help

at this point in time now

both of them will they will

but rather but

by virtue of, by means of by

completely full full

component part

concerning about, on, for

consensus of opinion consensus

demonstrate show, prove

determine decide

discontinue stop, end

documentation papers, documents

during the time that while

endeavour try

ensure make sure

equivalent equal, same (as)

evaluate test, check

examine in detail examine

exhibits shows, is…

for the purpose of for, to

furthermore also, and

has the ability to, is able to can

have an effect on affect

have an understanding of understand

intend to will

in cases in which when

in order to, in order that to, for

in that because

in the event that if

in the month of (October) in (October)

in the near future soon

in the region of near

in view of the fact that because

inasmuch as because, although

include a description of describe

is reflective of reflects

it goes without saying that (cut)

it is important to note that (cut)

it should be pointed out that (cut)

a large number (percentage) of many

located in in

make changes change

make some decisions about decide

numerous many

objective goal

on a regular (or daily) basis regularly, daily

on account of because

on request if you ask

optimum best

previous last

remain stay

request ask

require need

residence home

revised new, changed

so as not to to avoid

substantial great, large

sufficient enough

supplementary extra, more

the reason for this is that the reason is that

those people who those who

in (with) regard to about, on, for

successfully met the standards met the standards

until such time as until, when

upon on

the use of using (or cut)

utilize use

very unique unique

whether or not whether

with the exception of except