

Plain Language Overview of Findings 2015

I. City of Calgary Plain Language Review 2015 – Wordsmith Associates

Improvements found since the 2012 City of Calgary Plain Language Review audit

- Overall, an absence of jargon
- Acronyms are infrequent and are almost always spelled out the first time they appear
- Based on their experience with a wide range of writing, Wordsmith found that City documents are better than average

Ongoing challenges

- The use of long sentences, up to 50 words in length
 - The use of insider wording, which is language that reflects how the writer sees or names things. It is language that is not familiar to the reader. It is not technical, but can still be confusing. These are examples of City insider language:
 - “Records that have been migrated from these ELMS pages will no longer have the associated meeting video available”
 - “Transportation mobility choice”
 - “Improved demonstration of spending efficiencies in municipal service delivery”
 - Unnecessarily complex wording
 - For example, we write, “due to the fact that...”, instead of using the simpler, “because”
 - The use of passive voice verbs and verbs turned into nouns
 - For example, we write, “we held a consultation with stakeholders”, instead of using the simpler, “we consulted stakeholders”
 - The underuse of pronouns
 - We should use more of pronouns like “we” and “you”, as they have a friendlier tone

Key recommendations from the Review

- Continue to emphasize the use of shorter sentences
- Encourage a more direct, natural style with less complex and insider wording
- Write in the first person and use active verbs
- Consider minor design changes such as larger font, broader margins, and uncrowded text

II. City of Calgary’s Citizens’ View Online Research Panel – Ipsos Reid

Citizens’ View is an online panel that encourages citizens to participate in shaping City of Calgary programs and services through surveys, discussions and engagement activities.

We asked the Panel to review a variety of City content, and to let us know whether they found the content easy to understand. They were able to highlight words or phrases that they found difficult to understand. We received input about:

- our use of plain language

- clarity and perception of our messages
- ease of understanding
- our communications channels
- ideas for improving our communications. .

In general, panel participants feel that information from The City is easy to understand. The one piece of information identified as “difficult to understand” was a “Notice of Public Hearing of Calgary City Council Planning Matters.”

A sizeable minority (26%) reported that in the past 12 months, they had seen or read information from The City that was difficult to understand. When asked to detail what specifically was difficult to understand, the most frequent comments were about planning/development information or documents, tax/tax assessment information, and bylaws.

Two hundred and thirty three of the 772 panellists completed the survey. The panel does not yet fully reflect Calgary’s diverse population; therefore, the results are qualitative. The results should not be projected to the larger population without further quantitative research.

III. Organizations serving seniors survey results

We surveyed representatives of nine social service organizations in Calgary that serve seniors. All of the organizations reported that their clients prefer information in plain language, and that they believe that their clients benefit from the use of plain language. The majority reported that information from The City is sometimes easy to understand, and that The City sometimes seems to use plain language in its communications.

When asked to name one thing The City could do to improve communications with seniors, responses included a request for simple, clear messages, the use of large font, and plain language.

IV. Government plain language practice research

We researched the adoption of plain language standards by the three levels of government. We scanned government web content for information about plain language use and standards, contacted government representatives for information and clarification.

Municipalities

- Through a combination of web searches, email and telephone calls, we discovered that of 17 Canadian municipalities:
 - None of the municipalities have a plain language policy
 - Three have a policy that includes information about the use of plain language
 - Four have an internal reference document with information about the use of plain language
 - Two have no internal reference document, but report that they try to use plain language

Provinces and Territories

- Through a combination of web searches, email and telephone calls, we discovered that of the 12 provincial and territorial governments, none appear to have a plain language policy
- One is in the process of developing a plain language policy, or a policy that will include a section about the use of plain language
- Three have a policy that includes information about the use of plain language

The Communications Policy of the Government of Canada contains a section about plain language. The section cites the need for clear, relevant, objective, and easy to understand information. The Policy applies to internal and external communications.

The Government of the United States has the Plain Writing Act of 2010. The Act requires that federal agencies use “clear Government communication that the public can understand and use.”