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The City of Calgary Plain Language Review 2015

Wordsmith's summary report

This report has five sections:

Summary of results with recommendations

The documents we reviewed continue to have some obstacles to easy understanding. We found these common patterns:

1. **Long sentences**
   These continue to be the primary obstacle. There's a reason sentence length is the basis for readability grade levels—long sentences really affect clarity. Grade levels for these documents are high because there are many 30-50 word sentences.

2. **More complex style**
   In general, these documents do not use many acronyms or heavy technical jargon. This is a significant win. However, there is some wording getting in the way of a clear message:
   - insider wording—by this we mean language that reflects how the writer sees or names things, in a way that is not familiar to the reader. It may not exactly be technical, but it can be quite confusing. For example, a document may use wording that applies to an internal process the reader may not know or may not need to know. However, there's lots of insider language.
   - unnecessarily complex wording—across the board, wording is often much more complex than it needs to be. A natural, direct style is more effective, but not as common as the complex style. To give a couple of very simple examples:
     - due to the fact that → because

o can utilize the following sources for learning → can learn from these sources

3. **Documents are missing a few plain-language basics**
   There are many passive voice verbs and verbs turned into nouns (not just in these documents but in all workplace writing). These have an obscuring effect. Neither is wrong, but they should be used only when they're essential. This is a passive voice verb turned into the active voice (which is usually the better option):

   forms must be received by the deadline → XYZ office must receive forms by the deadline

   This is an example of turning a noun back into the verb form (which is typically shorter, clearer and has more energy)

   we held a consultation with stakeholders → we consulted stakeholders

4. **Some design elements that were harder to read**
   This was less frequent than the first three things we've listed, but long paragraphs and all capital letters appeared in a number of places. Small font, very narrow margins, and crowded text came up occasionally.

5. **Some documents use "we" and "you" but they're still underused**
   Pronouns like we and you often make documents much more efficient and clearer. There's room to use them more often where they are appropriate.

Important positive findings
Interestingly, acronyms are infrequent and almost always spelled out the first time they appear. This marks a change from the previous audit. It's also worth noting that, based on our experience with a wide range of writing, City documents are better than average.

Key recommendations from our review
Continue to emphasize shorter sentences
Encourage a more direct, natural style with less insider and complex wording
Use fewer passive voice verbs and verbs turned into nouns
Consider minor design changes
Use we and you more often where appropriate
Our approach to this review

It's interesting that really good writing is not that common in the working world. We believe this is because:

- we are not trained to write efficiently, which is the heart of good business writing (in fact, we learn to write to a word count, which encourages some odd habits).

- writers often focus on what they know, rather than on what the reader needs to know.

- because there isn't a lot of really good writing, and people learn by imitation, we write the way people around us write. This reinforces the problem.

- we are trained in school to write to impress, and this continues to influence our writing.

- there's an odd and commonly held idea that being professional means using complex or difficult language.

We believe that good writing communicates clearly and efficiently. The measure of success for any document is whether it works for the *reader,* not just the writer. This forms the basis of our thinking in this audit.

What our review includes

You asked us to continue using the approach from the 2012 audit, so you would be able to compare data between the two audits. As a result, we used the same checklists and statistics from the 2012 form. We also:

- added five new criteria to the checklist. These are separated so they're not confusing when you're comparing to the previous form.

- felt the checklists and statistics were too limited a lens through which to look at the writing.

- believed there was a missing educational component. We wanted to give writers our analysis and tools to make changes, not just "complies" or "does not comply" categories. We added a text box where we could give more detailed, thoughtful feedback.

- assessed each document relative to all the writing we see. We assigned one of five levels, which ranged from *Hard to read* to *Outstanding*.

How we handled the Flesch-Kincaid and other statistics generated by Microsoft Word

Microsoft Word generates some statistics that are useful, but it's not a perfect tool. We kept in mind and compensated for some of its limitations:

- Short headings and subheadings change the grade level in a document, so we removed them to get a more accurate reading of the body text. We don't know how the previous audit handled these statistics, so it's not clear if our data is exactly comparable.

- Word reads bulleted or numbered text inconsistently. For example, if the bulleted section doesn't use periods or hard returns after each item, Word sometimes counts them all as one long sentence. This gives an inaccurately high grade level reading. Where necessary, we ensured that Word read bullets as separate lines to get more accurate grade level readings.

- Word creates grade levels using an algorithm that counts syllables and words per sentence. This is incomplete picture of the quality of a document, so we didn't want to rely on grade level alone.

- Averages can be misleading, because a document could have a 100-word sentence and 50 ten-word sentences. So the average would look very reasonable, but the long sentence would still be a problem.

- Word can't identify many passive voice verbs, so its numbers are always low.

We focused on giving writers useful, encouraging information

We reviewed the documents and gave feedback in a way we find produces the best results. We:

- wrote our comments in the spirit of cooperating with the writers to make the document better. We always try to avoid anything that sounds like finger wagging.

- considered two or three key things to comment on in each document instead of listing every possible problem or improvement.

- gave examples that modeled the changes we were suggesting.

Conclusion

For an organization or a person to change how they write is a significant cultural shift.

We have found:

- The tone of feedback is almost more important than the feedback itself, at least for a while at the beginning of a plain-language project. Writers can become really excited and engaged if they see the value in the changes. But it's easy to set off resistance, which slows the process down.

- People change the way they write in steps, not all at once. Even if they accept a new, clearer writing style in principle, they learn and apply one or two elements of it at a time.

- To be most useful, feedback should focus on the document, not the writer.

We have tried to apply the principles above in our review. We hope our work contributes to The City's plain-language initiative.