

# Government publications often so dense they're unintelligible

*That's bad news for parents if there's a change to family allowance benefits. But it's also bad news for politicians if voters can't understand propaganda explaining why the government wants to change a policy.*

Most government publications can't be easily read or understood by the average Canadian.

The result, say literacy experts, is that many Canadians aren't warned about dangers such as workplace hazards and can't benefit from government programs they're entitled to.

York University education professor Gary Bunch tested more than 30 publications for "readability" using two standard formulas. The publications were selected at random from pamphlets and booklets issued to the public by Ontario, B.C., Newfoundland and the federal government.

Nearly half of the material required university-level education to read, although two-thirds of Canadian adults never got beyond high school. A mere four publications rated as readable by someone with only Grade 8 education — the level of 3.7 million adults.

The results indicate little change since a 1970 task force condemned the "sheer unintelligibility" of most federal publications.

Official surveys in the late '70s and '80s also gave a failing grade to provincial health and safety publications.

"It's not maliciousness; it's ignorance," says Bunch.

"I'd guess that the people who write these don't even talk to a factory worker or someone who hasn't had a solid basic education." While some experts criticize readability formula as misleading, Bunch's findings are supported by the Southam Literacy Survey. One-quarter of all 2,398 adults interviewed said they need help reading publications from governments and business and four out of 10 functional illiterates volunteered they had difficulty.

Even among fully literate Canadians, more than one in five reported needing help with such written materials.

Income tax tables are the toughest. Seven out of 10 Canadians couldn't use the tax chart to pick the right amount of federal taxes to pay on

taxable income of \$13,990.

Little has been done in Canada to make government materials more readable — a sharp contrast to other western nations. The federal government has focused on research rather than reform.

For five years, the Legal Services Society in Vancouver has produced citizen's guides to the law that are easily read. But both the guides and the approach have been slow to catch on in Canada.

"It's a huge fight to try to get some people to understand that the world isn't filled with print junkies all with PhDs," says Carol Pfeifer, the society's director of public legal education.

A survey of how small claims courts are explained showed improvement in the readability of pamphlets, says Pfeifer. But too often the material was written from the viewpoint of the legal system rather than for the person who needed the information.

"The people who most often need the advice often can't understand the publications," agrees Bill Shallow, a Newfoundland government expert in adult education.

As U.S. President Jimmy Carter said in 1978, when he ordered American government regulations written in Plain English: "The federal government has become like a foreign country, complete with its own interests and its own language." These judgments are borne out by the York University survey that found many essential pieces of information are written well over the heads of the intended audience.

A federal pamphlet on how to apply for a Social Insurance Number, for instance, rated at a senior high school or university reading level. So did five pamphlets by the B.C. ministry of human resources explaining benefits and rights.

By contrast, the Ontario minister of justice tried to explain divorce and separation to children by writing at the Grade 8 or 9 level and another Ontario pamphlet aimed at babysitters

managed Grade 7 prose.

"A lot of care was taken with the writing of these. You can see the difference," says Bunch.

The York professor used two formulas, named after their inventors Fry and Dale-Chall, to determine a range for the reading level. The formulas look at such things as sentence length,

the federal government once knew how to write for ordinary Canadians about an urgent national issue.

In 1931, a 30-page pamphlet from the Department of Pensions and National Health tried to calm fears about a terrible disease called Infantile Paralysis, later known as polio. It

Readability of government publications	
Document	Years of school required to read
<u>Federal</u>	
1931 polio pamphlet	5-7
1987 free trade publicity kit	13-17
How to look for a job	5-6
How to apply for Social Insurance Number	13-17+
National Defence recruiting pamphlet	13-17+
Family Allowance inserts	10-12
<u>British Columbia</u>	
Information on workers' rights, benefits	13-15
<u>Newfoundland</u>	
Nutrition and farm pamphlets	13-15
<u>Ontario</u>	
Workers' Compensation Board guide	16-17+
Legal advice for layman	7-9
Senior citizen's guide	11-12
Babysitters' pamphlet	7-8
Drug abuse information	9-10

Source: Prof. Gary Bunch, York University  
Southam Graphics: Rob Ludlow

numbers of syllables per word and the familiarity of words. Short sentences and short words always score best.

Worst among the publications was the federal government's free trade promotion kit, a glossy collection of fact and fiction that flooded supermarkets in May, 1987, as part of a \$12-million advertising campaign.

By checking random 100-word blocks, Bunch rated the main booklet, "Securing Canada's Future," and four other inserts from the 200,000 kits. All came out at between second- and fourth-year university level.

"It's as if they weren't talking to the ordinary people, but only to the uppermost slice — politicians, business leaders and editors." Yet

managed this technical subject with prose no higher than a Grade 7 reading level.

"If they could do it 50 years ago, you'd think there would be more of it today. Anything important can be written so that people with only basic information can understand it. Once they managed with simplicity and grace. Now they have to dazzle us with their complexity," complains Bunch.

The reading barriers created by big words, jargon and wandering sentences aren't limited to government publications. Other surveys have found most trade union newspapers are too difficult for their intended readers, staff manuals baffle retail workers and even materials for adult literacy students lack consistency.

And newspapers, popular magazines and school textbooks are constantly being surveyed to see if they're shooting wide of their readers.

The whole mess is further complicated by continuing controversy over the readability formulas themselves. Supporters concede that the formulas don't distinguish between sense and nonsense, take no account of graphics or typography and can't know whether the intended audience has special knowledge.

"I might have a motorcycle repair manual which tests out as first-year university level. Yet if I gave it to someone who reads at the Grade 9 level but also happens to maintain his own motorcycle, he'd manage with no problems," says Andrew Manning, an education professor

at Halifax's Mount Saint Vincent University.

In 1980 under a federal Justice Department contract, Manning did the most comprehensive readability survey yet in Canada — 300,000 words, three formulas and 59 documents from the federal government, eight provincial governments and the Reader's Digest.

All the documents attempted to explain some aspect of the law to the public. Manning's conclusion: only a half-dozen would be useful to the people who most needed the information.

"It's not malice; it's egocentric writing by lawyers who never consider who the intended audience is." One U.S. expert isn't so positive that poor readability is an accident.

Michael Fox, director of a Washington,

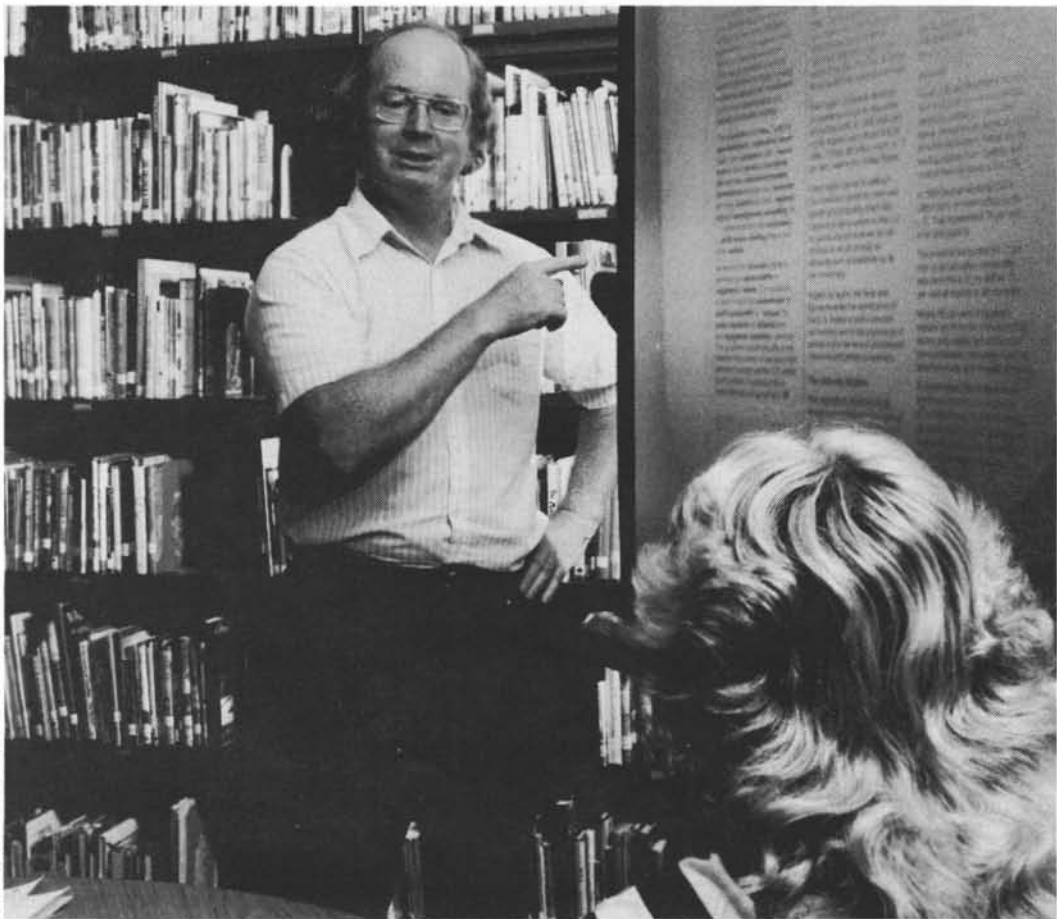


Photo by John Dawson, York University.

**York University education professor Gary Bunch shows a student how he does his word count and readability assessment.**

D.C., literacy group, says the dense prose of many official forms is one way of making sure that too many people don't apply for benefits.

"It's OK to rewrite computer manuals, it's OK to have a Plain English law for well-off people to understand their mortgages, but when I want the food stamp applications written more simply, I'm accused of wanting to 'dummy down' things," says Fox.

In Canada, the experts don't like Fox's theories but they haven't got any better explanations for the lack of official action.

Despite pages of suggested changes in Manning's 1980 study, few of the unreadable legal publications have been revised. And Ontario, which discovered in 1985 that most health and safety material couldn't be read by workers, still hands out many of the same unintelligible pamphlets. The ministry of citizenship and culture, however, last year issued a Plain English guide to government services for immigrants.

Mostly, when governments do try, the attempts appear half-hearted.

Ruth Baldwin, a Plain English consultant based in Ottawa, advised a group of federal officials who prepare sheets inserted with family allowance cheques. It took six months to reduce a change-of-address form from two pages to one, says Baldwin.

"I don't think those people were really convinced about what they were doing; they haven't had us back," she says.

They should. The readability survey rated three family allowance inserts at Grade 10 to 12 reading levels, higher than the education of at least five million Canadians.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *York University's Gary Bunch was asked to rate this article by Peter Calamai. Using the Fry and Dale-Chall standards, it was marked as between a Grade 11 and first-year university level.*