

Plain Language Policy

Summary:

The Ralph Thornton Community Centre (RTCC) is committed to using plain language for all governance and administrative policies and communications to ensure that the information RTCC provides to Board Members, Centre members, staff and the public is easy to read, easy to understand and, if necessary, easy to act on. This policy sets out the RTCC's intentions and proposed actions to establish use of plain language in its policies and communications.

Policy:

[1] Starting in January, 2017, all governance and administrative policies, and public communication, will be prepared using plain language practices and procedures.

[2] Whenever policies developed before January 2017 are reviewed, a plain language examination will be undertaken by the reviewers and, if required and appropriate, the wording of the policy will be amended to foster clarity without changing or losing the intent of the policy by:

- Using simple, more familiar words and phrases;
- Using concise sentences and paragraphs;
- Reducing or eliminating jargon and unfamiliar acronyms or expressions;
- Defining key terms or words and explaining complicated ideas; and
- Convey message(s) positively, where it is possible and appropriate.

[3] All policies will include a "summary" overview of the matter being addressed.

As required, the policy will also include the Board's authority to create the policy; significant related policies, regulations or legislation; and a brief history if the policy is replacing a prior policy.

[4] The template instructions for all new RTCC policies is revised as follows:

Policy Template

- Standard type: Verdana 12 pt. regular; Policy Title: Verdana Bold, 12 pt., underlined, centred
- L & R margins: 2.54 on all sides (as set in template)
- The first page will include a footer which identifies the (a) Review Cycle; (b) the Approval Date; (c) the date when the policy was last reviewed; (d) the date when the policy was last revised; and (e) the authority reviewing the policy – e.g., Board of Management, board committee or Centre’s Executive Director.
- Each following page will include:
 - A Header – which states the name of the policy located against the right margin; and
 - A Footer – identifying the current page number and the total number of pages (i.e., Page 1 of 2) in Verdana 10 pt. at bottom right of text on each page

Administrative Appendix: Plain Language Practices and Procedures

This administrative appendix provides guidance on using plain language practices in developing policies.

Plain language is the key to ensuring that the information RTCC provides to Board Members, Centre members, staff and the public is easy to read, easy to understand and, if necessary, easy to act on.

1. Focussing on the reader

- The starting point of any writing project should be to identify the intended readership, the purpose of the material and the desired impact. Before you start writing, ask yourself the following questions:
 - Who are the intended readers?
 - Are you writing for specialists, young people, the general public, or a group whose first language is not English?
 - What do the readers need to know?
 - Do they need the details or just an overview, the historical context and the reasons behind the decision or merely an explanation of the decision’s impact on them? What needs to be emphasized?
 - How will the readers use the information?

- Will they use it to make a decision, to determine whether they are eligible for something, to carry out a procedure? Will they need to read the entire document or concentrate on one or two sections?
- Use a personal tone in your writing. Address your readers directly and include examples, where appropriate, to illustrate important points.

2. Vocabulary

- Use simple, familiar words and phrases for clarity.
- Choose verbs over verb-noun phrases to make your sentences clear and concise. Rather than “carry out an examination of...”, use “examine”.
- Concise writing is generally clearer. Cut out unnecessary words to shorten sentences.
- Avoid jargon and unfamiliar acronyms or expressions, especially when writing for the public. Even for internal documents, consider using an alternative expression if some of your readers may not know the specialized term.

Expressions such as *roll out*, *stakeholder* and *re-engineering* may be unclear except to a specialized audience and tend to be overused. Sometimes an unfamiliar term is best omitted altogether.

For example, use of the term— *ultra vires* (which is a Latin phrase meaning “exceeding authority or jurisdiction”) — in the following sentence can confuse many readers and may add little if any meaning: “...*the committee’s decision was ‘ultra vires’ and therefore not allowed.* Instead, consider “... *the committee’s decision exceeded its authority and was therefore not allowed*”.

However, be aware that some Latin phrases, such as “*in camera*” (meaning “in private or secret”), are “terms of art” with specific legal meanings, which may have to be used in some situations. For example, “...the Board met *in camera* to discuss personnel matters”. In this case, the term addresses a specific session of the board for which specific criteria must be met.

- Explain complicated ideas. Make sure that complex notions or subtle distinctions are clarified. The following sentence requires specialized knowledge on the reader’s part:

Example: “*The contingency funds held by the organization in trust, currently only released through a resolution passed by a general meeting, can now, due to an amendment in the by-laws, be used through a motion supported by 2/3rds of the Board membership.*”

Is it clear to the reader how 'contingency funds held in trust' differ from other kinds of contingency funds and why 2/3rds of the Board membership differs from other motions requiring 2/3rd majority? If not, explain these notions before going on.

- Avoid chains of nouns. Nouns can modify other nouns in English, but three or more nouns in a row can obscure the meaning; the reader has to differentiate between the concepts and decide how the nouns are interrelated.

3. Sentences

Sentences are the basic building blocks of any written material and must be designed to convey the message effectively.

- To achieve this objective, keep them relatively short, avoid verbiage, link your ideas logically and use the active voice. The same principles apply to paragraphs.
- Keep sentences concise. Limit your sentences to one idea and avoid information overload.

Sentences such as the two that follow are difficult to understand on first reading because they contain too much information and some information is not relevant:

Example 1: *"The amendment provides for pension benefits to be fully funded as they are earned by employees and for the basic pension accounts to be combined with the portion of the Supplementary Retirement Benefits Account that relates to each plan so that all future benefits, including all indexing payments, can be charged to the appropriate accounts."*

The points could be more effectively expressed in two or three sentences:

"Under the amended policy, employees' pension benefits will be fully funded as they are earned. Moreover, the basic pension account for each plan will absorb the portion of the Supplementary Retirement Benefits Account that applies to that plan. In this way, all future benefits, including indexing payments, can be charged to the appropriate accounts".

Example 2: *"First of all, in a general sense, what is interesting is that in addition to the initial objective which was to restart the learning process, it was found that this literacy training would enable individuals, who are totally inhibited, to once again discover at least a minimum of self-confidence."*

Almost all of the first line is unnecessary and there are no fewer than four subordinate clauses. Eliminate the filler material and recast the sentence to highlight the main idea:

"The literacy training met the initial objective of restarting the learning process. It also helped participants, who were very inhibited, to begin acquiring self-confidence."

- Paragraphs, too, should be limited to one point or to a series of related points, if the information is not complicated.

Make your point clearly. Avoid empty introductory phrases and padding that obscure the meaning of a sentence. These include expressions such as *"I would like to begin by indicating clearly to you that..."* and *"If this step, which may be necessary in some but not all cases, is deemed appropriate..."*

- Say what you need to say concisely and clearly. Link ideas within sentences and paragraphs by giving your readers "signposts."

Cohesion can be achieved in various ways, including the use of linking words (*moreover, however* and so on) and references to the topic at hand (*"The new policy on..."* or *"This policy,"* or *"It"*).

- Use the active voice. While the passive voice is useful in moderation and is common in administrative writing, it tends to be wordy and impersonal. Give preference to the active voice, in which the subject conveys the action and is generally near the beginning of the sentence, making it easier for the reader to understand the message

- Convey your message positively. Where possible, use positive words to make your point.

Readers may miss or misinterpret short negatives such as *no, not, none* and *never*, and negative words beginning with *in-, non-* and *un-*, particularly if several of them occur in the same paragraph. Such misreadings could have a serious effect on users' decisions and actions. So if you cannot reword positively, consider highlighting the negative by using boldface or italics.

4. Testing

- It is important to test and revise a document before it is distributed or published.
- It is a good idea to check the readability and transparency of your document before it is released for distribution. A trial run with a potential reader or colleague who has knowledge of the target readership could be a useful test. Surveys, focus groups or field tests would provide an even

more thorough indication as to whether your document will get the message across simply and clearly to the intended readership.

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