Why Top Tasks & Readability Analysis Matter for the Canadian Government's Digital Strategy

A Readability Analysis of the Canadian Government's Top Tasks

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WHAT ARE TOP TASKS AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

Since 2013, the Canadian Government has adopted an approach to web design that focuses on the top tasks that web visitors need to complete when online. A top tasks strategy means you focus on what really matters (the top tasks), and defocus on what matters less (the tiny tasks). This forces web designers and content creators to look at website design and user experience from the visitor's perspective.

> "
>
> **focus on what really matters** (the top tasks), **and defocus on what matters less** (the tiny tasks).
>
> - Gerry McGovern, Top Tasks Pioneer

For governments and major brands, it makes content more findable and simplifies user journeys. From a whole of government digital transformation perspective, there are 3 core benefits to a top tasks strategy:

1 improves government-citizen engagement

2 increases citizen/business compliance levels

3 lowers costs (notably call centre costs)

Here's how Canada.ca describes the objective:

> "People come to our digital channels to accomplish a very wide range of tasks... people come to Canada.ca with a goal in mind and a task that they want to accomplish. If they are able to accomplish their task, their need has been met. If not, we have work to do."
>
> Read More

In this report we will focus on how to ensure each identified top task is easy to understand.

We will look at a sample of 6 of the Canadian Government's top tasks and see how they score for readability.
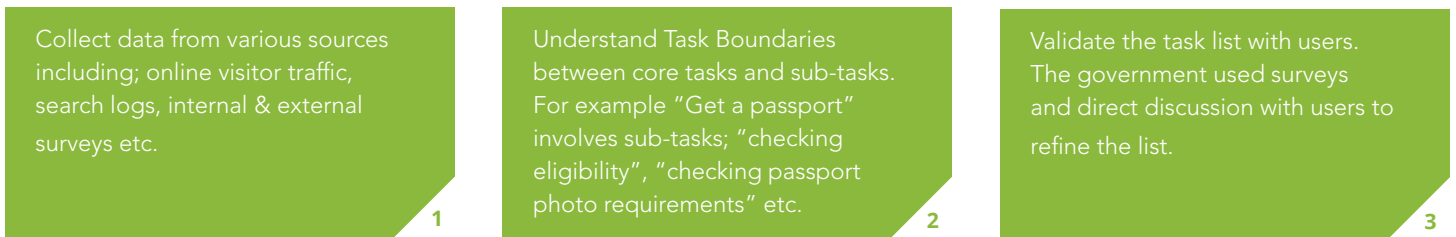
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How do you identify top tasks?

There are two central factors to consider when applying a Top Tasks approach:
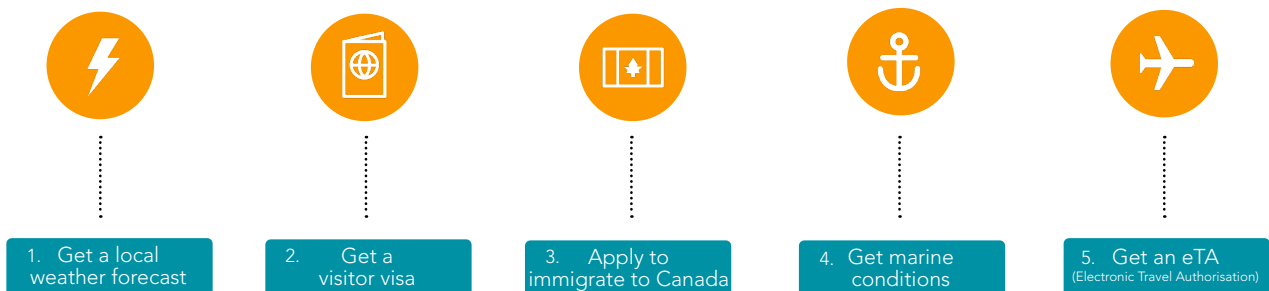
1 How do you identify the top tasks?

2 How do you ensure that each top task has an easy to understand user journey?

The Canadian Government identified the 100 top tasks by following this process

Collect data from various sources including; online visitor traffic, search logs, internal & external surveys etc.

1

Understand Task Boundaries between core tasks and sub-tasks. For example "Get a passport" involves sub-tasks; "checking eligibility", "checking passport photo requirements" etc.

2

Validate the task list with users. The government used surveys and direct discussion with users to refine the list.

3

You can find more detail on this process on the Canadian Government's website and you can see their full list of 100 top tasks here.

To give a sense, here are the Canadian Government's current top 5 tasks:

1. Get a local weather forecast

2. Get a visitor visa

3. Apply to immigrate to Canada

4. Get marine conditions

5. Get an eTA (Electronic Travel Authorisation)

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How do you ensure that each top task has an easy to understand user journey?

The Canadian Government believes that plain language and good readability is a critical success factor for completing Top Tasks. In fact, the use of plain language is a requirement of the Directive on the Management of Communications. For example, the Canada.ca style guide states:

Use active voice over passive voice (section 2.3)

1

Use short sentences and paragraphs (section 2.7)

2

Check the reading level of your content (section 2.9)

3

Avoid jargon, idioms and expressions (section 2.5)

4

Both the Canadian Government and the [Province of Ontario](#) instruct that their content should be at grade level 8 and 7 respectively.

We wanted to find out how the various government agencies are performing against this plain language goal, so we analysed task content.

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Our Scoring Methodology

We chose 6 tasks spread across multiple government agencies. We measured high ranking tasks and ones further down Canada's list.

Here are the 6 Top Tasks we analysed:

#2 Get a visitor visa	#3 Apply to immigrate to Canada	#8 Get recalls and safety alerts
Canada Border Services Agency & Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada	*Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada*	*Health Canada; Transport Canada; Canadian Food Inspection Agency*

#16 Apply for Employment Insurance	#24 Get info about diseases	#37 File a GST/HST return
Employment and Social Development Canada	*Public Health Agency of Canada*	*Canada Revenue Agency*

We included English and French-language content. After running the web pages through our analysis, we benchmarked clarity across these three dimensions:

Long Sentence Density
What proportion of all sentences are too long?

Passive Language Density
Can passive language be replaced with more clear active language?

Readability Score
How simple is the content to read?

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KEY
FINDINGS

Although our research revealed some encouraging results, there are clear areas where the Canadian Government can improve.

Summary of results for the English-language pages:

	Readability (Flesch) Score	Grade Level	Long Sentence %	Passive %
Get a Visitor Visa - #2	31	6.8	8.0	8.6
Apply to immigrate to Canada - #3	34	7.3	4.9	5.5
Get recalls and safety alerts - #8	38	8.5	13.1	15.0
Apply for Employment Insurance - #16	39	8.4	12.5	14.2
Get information about diseases = #24	41	8.7	7.5	7.6
File a GST HST return - #37	39	8.0	8.9	9.6

Best ——————————→ Worst
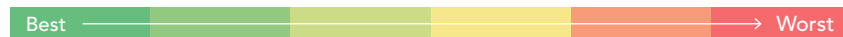
Summary of results for the French-language pages:

	Readability (LIX) Score	Grade Level	Long Sentence %
Get a Visitor Visa - #2	42	7.5	9.2
Apply to immigrate to Canada - #3	44	7.9	8.8
Get recalls and safety alerts - #8	46	8.6	15.3
Apply for Employment Insurance - #16	46	9.0	13.0
Get information about diseases = #24	47	9.0	9.5
File a GST HST return - #37	45	8.4	12.5

Best ——————————→ Worst

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Here's an overview of what we found

Content across pages is not always easy to understand.

Although there are some positive results indicated by patches of green across the charts, orange and red colour-coding shows us where one or two specific scores indicate that users will find the content difficult to digest. For example, the task associated with "Getting information about diseases" across the French-language pages is particularly challenging for users to understand. They are also pitched on average at 9th-grade, which is above the recommended level.

English content achieves recommended readability levels

Canada.ca recommends that you write content at an 8th-grade level or lower. It is good to see that, for the most part, the English-language pages are pitched at an average 8th-grade level.

French-language content is generally harder to read than English content

Using the **LIX Readability Formula**, French-language content has a larger clarity gap without exception.

The higher the rank of the task, the more time and attention it receives. In theory, higher ranked task content should have better readability scores. This was generally true for five of the tasks we selected. However, the "File a GST HST return" task (ranked the lowest of our example tasks at #37) did not correlate with this theory as it performed better than some of the tasks ranked above it.

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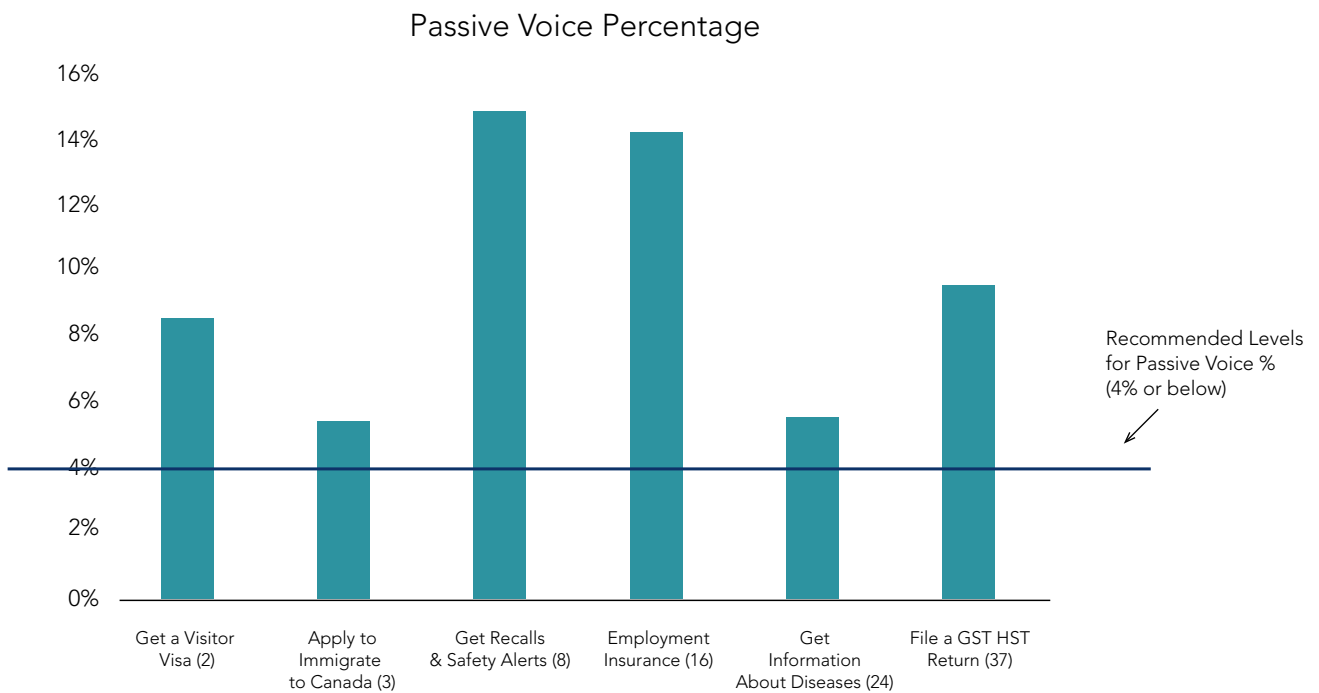
Readability levels generally align to Top Tasks rankings

Comparison of English & French Language Content (LIX Readability Scores)

Recommended LIX Readability Level (or below)

Legend:
- LIX Score (English)
- LIX Score (French)

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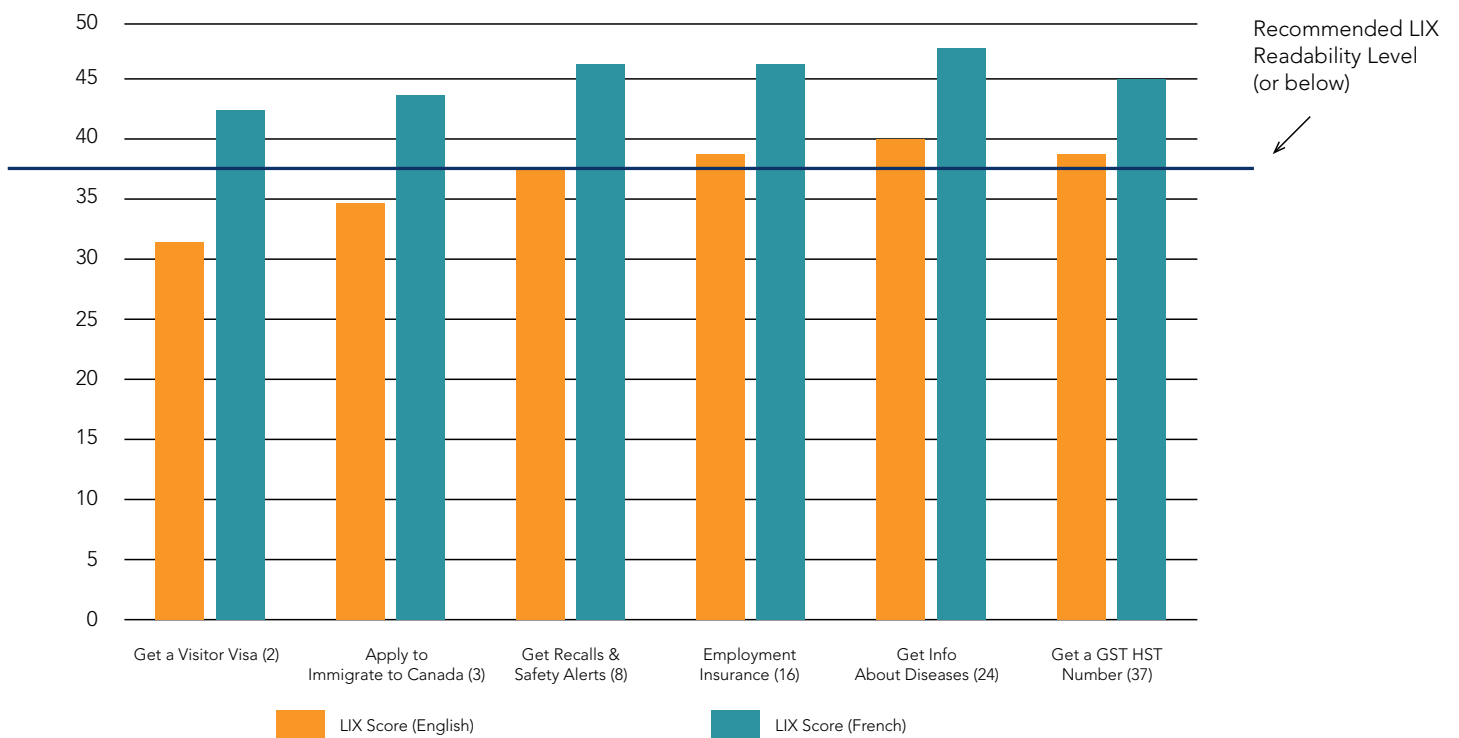
Passive voice levels in Canada's content are high

As previously mentioned in this report, the Canada.ca style guide states that content should be written in the active voice because it communicates more clearly than passive voice. The active voice promotes simple, straightforward writing. As such, most scientific journals encourage the use of the active voice over the passive voice.

Unfortunately, the average level found in Canada's content was 10%, so more than twice the recommended percentage of 4%.[2] Only the citizenship-oriented content (the task "Apply to immigrate to Canada") came close to meeting recommended levels at 5.5%.

Passive Voice Percentage

Recommended Levels
for Passive Voice %
(4% or below)

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Sentences are unnecessarily wordy

Long, convoluted sentences make content harder to read. In general, we should aim for 5%[3] long sentence use or less. Research shows that, in the vast majority of Canada's content, long sentences are rampant.

In fact, only content related to the "Apply to immigrate to Canada" task (and only across English-language pages) met these recommended levels.

It is worth noting that, once again, Canada's French-language content performs less favourably in this measure across the board.

Long Sentence Use in Top Tasks Content

Recommended Levels for Long Sentence Use (5% or below)

■ Long Sentence Percentage (English)　　■ Long Sentence Percentage (French)
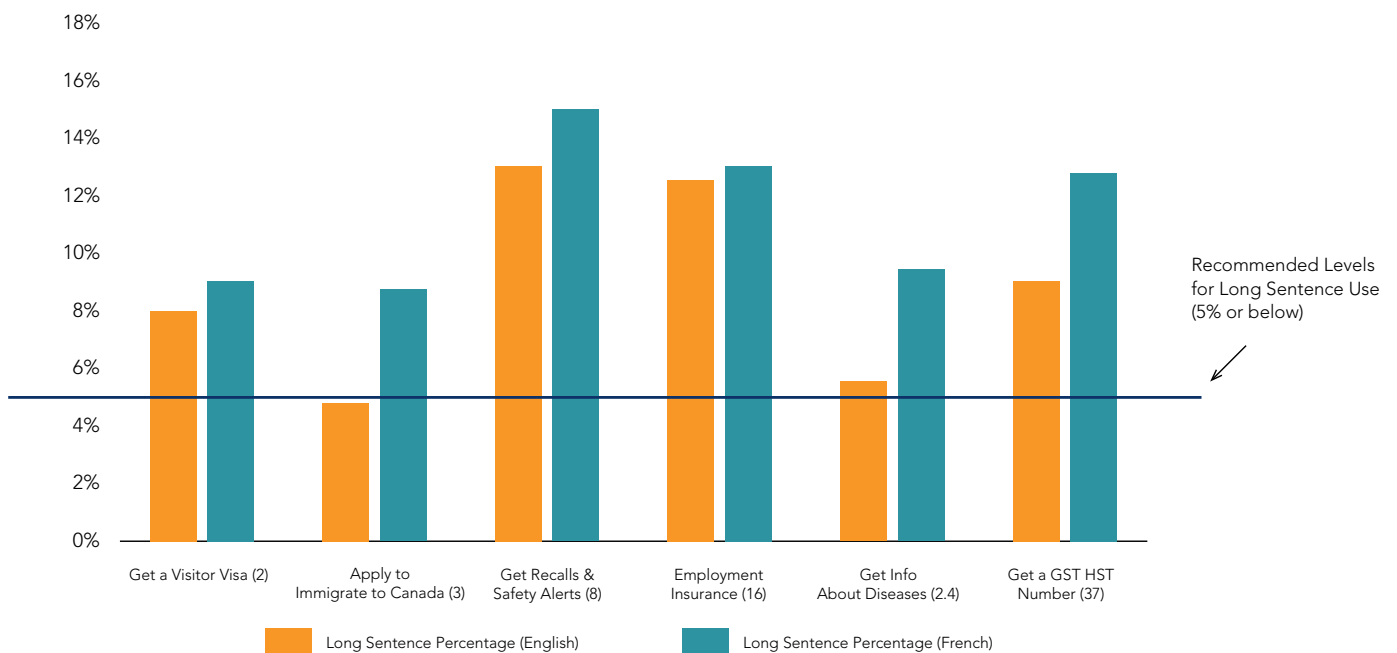
Content readability varies greatly between agencies

Writing is a personal expression, even when writing professionally. Every individual has style preferences and in large organisations it can be difficult to merge content and make sure it is consistent. This is why we see a lack of coherence across our sample task pages.

3 In 2017, we analysed anonymised data from 120 organisations that use VisibleThread readability solutions. These organisations configure the threshold level for what they consider to be good levels of long sentences. The average threshold setting across those brands was 5%.

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Visualising the User's Path Across One Task

We have taken task 8 as an example of how the user's journey moves across the sub-task pages. Across the journey, there are different points at which individual pages are performing well or badly, showing that each page presents its own unique challenges to be tackled.

Task #8: Get Recalls and Safety Alerts

Search Recalls & Safety Alerts

....

Grade Level: 6.7
Long sentence: 11.1%
Passive: 22%

Unauthorised Products

....

Grade Level: 8.7
Long sentence: 6.1%
Passive: 9.5%

Mobile App

....

Grade Level: 7.7
Long sentence: 16.2%
Passive: 2.7%

Widget

....

Grade Level: 8.6
Long sentence: 17.2%
Passive: 7.8%

Report a Health & Safety Concern

....

Grade Level: 9.2
Long sentence: 7.9%
Passive: 5.3%

Learn About Safety Alerts

....

Grade Level: 11.8
Long sentence: 16.7%
Passive: 23.8%

When A Product is Recalled

....

Grade Level: 6.9
Long sentence: 16.7%
Passive: 33.3%

CONCLUSION

The Canadian Government believes that plain language and good readability are critical success factors for completing Top Tasks, as these are indicators to predict how well people will understand your content.

Our research shows a mixed picture, with some encouraging examples of where readability across task pages is clear, as well as opportunities for improvements. For example, task pages are often failing website users due to complex content, a high percentage of long sentences, or over-use of the passive voice. In some cases, a couple of low scores combine across the categories to give an overall poor score and low readability. This situation creates confused and frustrated users, and must be addressed.

Managing content across multiple agencies and individuals is challenging, and so the right tools must be used to make sure that users are given a consistent web experience. VisibleThread offers an efficient way to assess the readability of your content before it is published, leading to a more seamless and satisfying user experience. By applying VisibleThread's solutions to each of the pages within Canada's priority list of Top Tasks, the content within these pages will be consistently clear and coherent.

GET YOUR READABILITY SCORE

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For a specific agency or bureau index
email: info@visiblethread.com**

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About VisibleThread

VisibleThread gives you back control of your content by helping you analyse and optimise 1000's of documents and webpages quickly and accurately.

Our solutions allow customers to:

| Scan documents & websites in minutes | Identify risky & complex language | Benchmark websites against sector peers | Flag compliance issues |

Corporate teams, government agencies and nonprofits benefit from our solutions. These ensure review teams are **40% more efficient** as well as increase sales and marketing conversions.

Interpreting Readability Scores

Readability standards help us know if our audience will understand our content. If you know an audience's education level, you can set standards for readability. For example, the United States Navy developed the Flesch-Kincaid grade level test in the 1970s.

Its goal was to improve the quality of technical documents, such as training manuals. The Navy simplified training materials written above the reading-level of the intended audience.
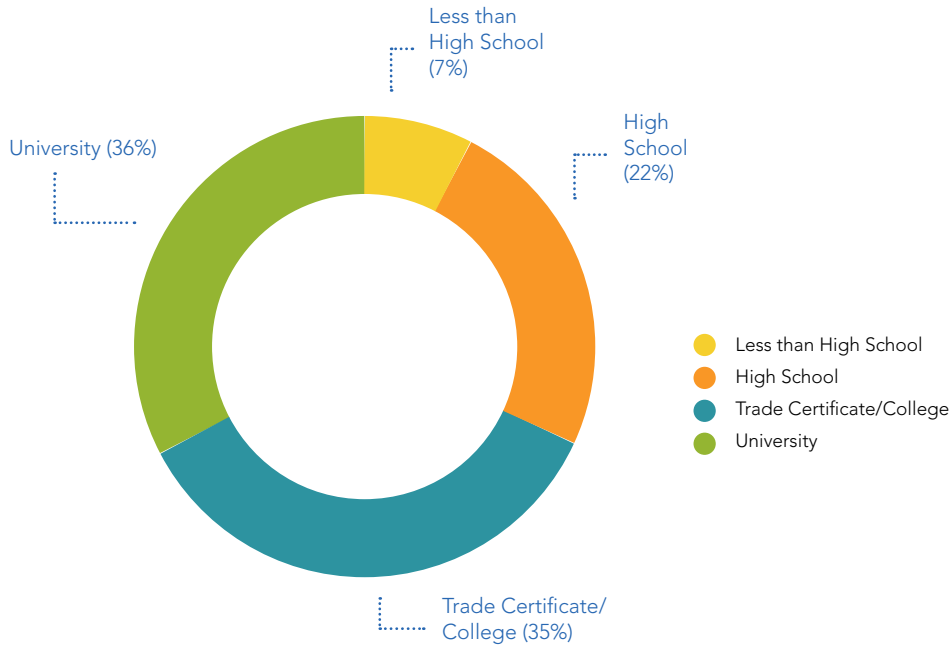
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Flesch-Kincaid

One of the early readability measurement systems, Flesch-Kincaid measures English texts. It scores the text based on the level of education required for the reader to easily understand the text.

Content that scores at grade 8 or below is appropriate for at least 80% of the population in Canada.

Style	Flesch Reading Ease Score	Avg Sentence Length in Words	Avg No. of Syll. Per 100 Words	Type of Magazine	Estimated School Grade Completed	Estimated Percent of U.S Adults
Very Easy	90 to 100	8 or less	123 or less	Comics	4th Grade	93
Easy	80 to 90	11	131	Pulp Fiction	5th Grade	91
Fairly Easy	70 to 80	14	139	Slick Fiction	6th Grade	88
Standard	60 to 70	17	147	Digests	7th or 8th Grades	83
Fairly Difficult	50 to 60	21	155	Quality	Some High School	54
Difficult	30 to 50	25	167	Academic	High School or some College	33
Very Difficult	0 to 30	29 or more	192 or more	Scientific	College	4.5

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Canadian Literacy Chart

Less than
High School
(7%)

High
School
(22%)

University (36%)

- Less than High School
- High School
- Trade Certificate/College
- University

Trade Certificate/
College (35%)

LIX Readability

LIX is a readability measure developed in Sweden. It calculates the difficulty of reading non-English texts and applies to English for comparison also.

LIX can be correlated to grade-level scores. This makes it extremely effective for comparing the readability of source (typically English content) versus translated content.

Text Difficulty	LIX Score
Very Easy	20 - 27.5
Easy	27.6 - 37.5
Medium	37.6 - 47.5
Difficult	47.6 - 57.5
Very Difficult	67.6 - 77.5

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