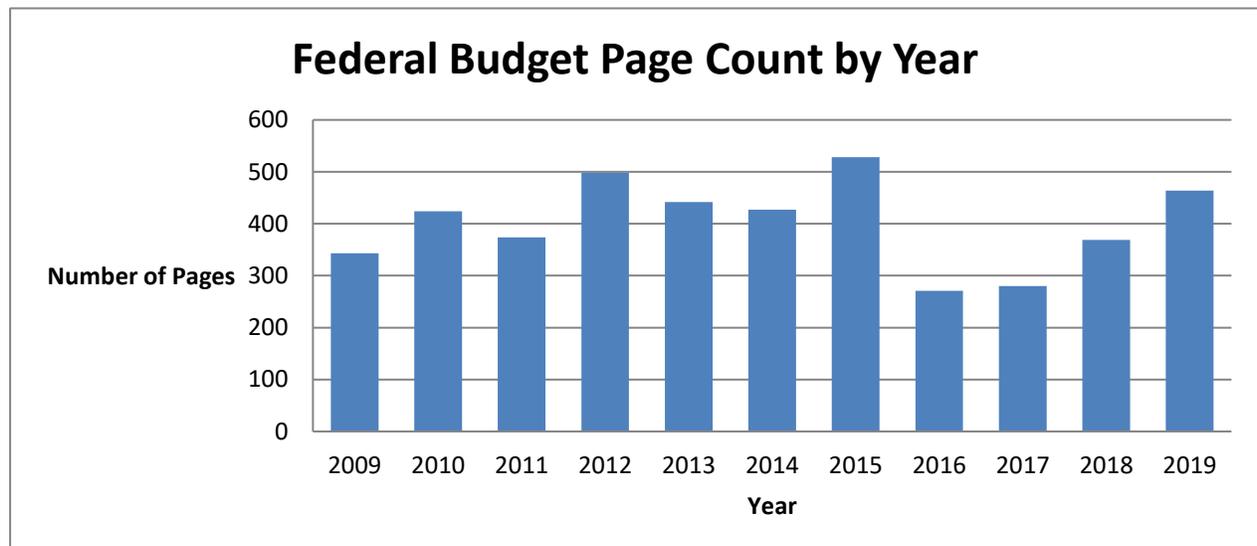


How to Read a Budget

(Continued from CHA Learning's [Blog Post](#))

Government budgets are mammoth documents, whose page counts vary considerably by year. The chart below depicts changes in the page count for federal Budgets over the past ten years (annexes included).



The average budget length over that period was 402 pages. There is no clear trend over time, though the pattern does weakly suggest that:

- Budgets under minority governments (2009-2011) might be shorter than Budgets under Majority governments (2009-2019);
- Conservative majority Budgets (2012-2015) might be longer than Liberal majority Budgets (2016-2019); and,
- Budgets may tend get longer before planned elections (e.g. 2015 and 2019).

On this last point, a cynic might argue that this represents an effort at window-dressing, and it might well be argued that the length and complexity of the Budget bears little relation to the volume or density of announcements contained within. All of this is to make the case that Budgets should be read strategically. You will get no more use out of reading all 402 pages of the average Budget than by carefully parsing the elements that matter most to you, your sector, or your organization.

On that note, here are some tips for how best to read a Budget to get the most accurate picture of what it means for your organization.

1. *Don't Neglect the Table of Contents*

Getting through the Table of Contents of a Budget is half the battle. The Table of Contents for Budget 2019 was eight pages in itself. What's more, the chapter headings for a budget are often not especially helpful. For instance, I would argue that only one of Budget 2019's four chapter titles really gave a sense of the chapter's subject matter ("Advancing Reconciliation"). The others ("Investing in the Middle Class", "Building a Better Canada" and "Delivering Real Change") read as more political than practical. That being said, the fact that an entire chapter was devoted to the subject of reconciliation with Indigenous people – even if that chapter was smaller than others – can be seen as a significant expression of the government's priorities, even if you read nothing of the chapter's contents.

Chapter subheadings and section titles are where the action is; however, and they are chronicled in the Table of Contents in scrupulous detail. Even if it hurts your eyes, it pays dividends to read every part of the Table of Contents. Navigating the Budget digitally has never been easier. Headings in the Table of Contents now link directly to the subject matter to which they refer. This was not always the case. The most grievous hassles of reading a Budget are now easily avoided by making the Table of Contents your point of entry.

2. *Abuse Ctrl + F (or Command + F if you prefer Apple computers)*

Yes, I know. Most of us know this already, but it really cannot be said enough. The 'Find' function really is your best friend for a long document like this one. Also – do yourself a favour and download the Budget Plan as a PDF document. Ctrl + F works if you are viewing the document on the Finance Canada website, of course; but your browser is not designed for this kind of thing and may prove sluggish, leading to a heaving, frustrated Budget-reading experience.

If you are reading the Budget at all, chances are you have some sense of what you are looking to find there. If you are reading this blog entry, chances are good that the items you are most interested are related to health and healthcare. But it is well worthwhile to take time upfront to decide what matters to you so that you can deploy search terms and subterms that might lead to some real results. "Health" doesn't cut it in a 400-page document written in Budgetese. In Budget 2019, the word 'Health' occurred 283 times. There are too many occurrences of "healthy Canadians", "healthy communities" "healthy competition" and "fiscal health" for this to be an enjoyable experience for you.

Here is an abridged list of terms that HealthCareCAN used in assessing Budget 2019 based on a small sample of our policy and advocacy priorities in that year. Note that the goal of the exercise was to find items that had not already been revealed by a rigorous review of the Table of Contents.

Topic Area	Search Terms
Antimicrobial Resistance	“antimicrobial” “resistance” “pathogen” “bacteria” “virus”
Digital Health and Cyber Security	“cyber” “digital” “hospital”
Indigenous Health	“reconciliation” “Jordan’s Principle” “drinking water”
Opioids	“opioid use” “overdose”
Pharmacare	“formulary” “coverage”
Research and Innovation in Healthcare	“Canadian Institutes of Health Research” “Research Support Fund”

3. Allocation Timelines

Typical text in a budget might read “...for this reason, the Government of Canada is allocating \$60 million over four years, starting in 2019, to fund the XYZ program.” But the devil is in the details. Invoking a figure of \$60 million over 4 years does not imply that \$15 million has been allocated for each year. Governments have been known to backload funding announcements (i.e. to allocate the lion’s share to later years) in order to avoid short-term budget difficulties and inflate the number of dollars attributable to a given announcement. And in any case, remember: there is no legal requirement that the budget be a true statement of the government’s spending. A government eager to be re-elected could backload an announcement with substantial funding, and renege after being re-elected.

In such matters, it pays to have a sense of exactly what the government is committing to. Budget allocation timelines are charted at the end of each chapter. These charts are immensely helpful in deciphering a budget, since they tell you not only how much the government intends to spend, but when they intend to spend it. When you see an allocation that interests you, navigate to the end of the chapter and find the relevant chart to get a sense of the level of the government’s investment.

4. Big things can come in small packages

As noted, Budgets contain not only funding announcements, which are refined in the Estimates and presented as a money bill, but also announcements on legislation or policy. To the extent that these require that the law be changed, they are typically compiled into a Budget Implementation Act and voted on in Parliament as a group. If you have ever heard politicians, editorials, or scholars decry the use of ‘omnibus bills’ that avoid robust scrutiny from Parliament, this is what they are talking about.

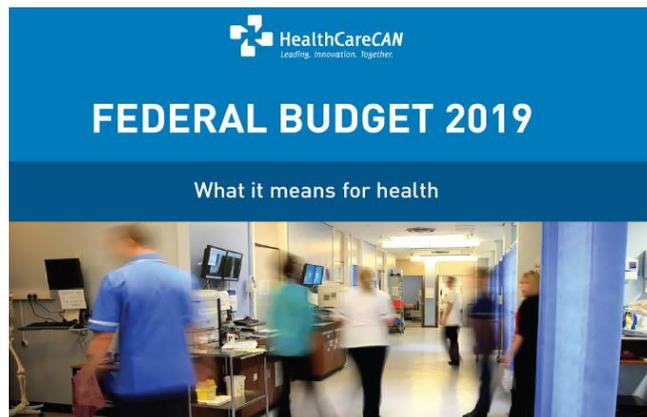
Provisions that are only vaguely or briefly described in the Budget can have massive ramifications when they are enacted into law via a Budget Implementation Act. For instance: the most attention-

grabbing public issue of the day (at the time of writing) revolves around the possibility of undue pressure on the Attorney General to misuse a Deferred Prosecution Agreement; a legal arrangement that had only been authorized in a Budget Implementation Act the previous year. Public gossip around the use or misuse of this measure has dominated political discussions in the pre-election period. Yet the measure is only described in a scant three sentences on page 204 of the 2018 Budget under the heading 'Addressing Corporate Integrity'. The measure received almost no media attention at the time, but has become one of the most sensational topics Canadian politics in 2019.

All of this is to say that it pays to be attentive to details, and to follow-up. You never know which small and seemingly offhand Budget measure may bloom into the next big thing.

5. *And if all else fails...*

If all of this seems like a lot of effort, you might consider letting someone else do the heavy lifting for you. Every year HealthCareCAN produces a summary and analysis of the federal budget which is sent to HealthCareCAN members the day following the release of the Budget. This is only one of several benefits of HealthCareCAN membership, including discounts on CHA Learning Courses for employees of member organizations. You can learn more about HealthCareCAN and the benefits of membership [here](#).



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