

Writing for impact

Why readability matters in your marketing messages

Marketing
Insights
from 5MetaCom

Imagine working with an outside firm to fill jobs at your company and they describe their process like this:

"Once the candidate's goals are established, one or more potential employers are identified. A preliminary proposal for presentation to the employer is developed. The proposal is presented to an employer who agrees to negotiate an individualized job that meets the employment needs of the applicant and real business needs of the employer."¹

Would you hire this firm? Do you know what you'd be buying? Perhaps not. Why? This passage does not read well. Rudolf Flesch explored this concept in his books *The Art of Readable Writing* and *The Art of Plain Talk*. Flesch's theory focuses on simple writing that's clear to the audience.

Marketers strive to create interest in what they sell. Flesch found readers tune out when writing gets hard to understand. If you know what makes writing more readable, you can craft better messages.

What is the Flesch readability formula?

Flesch based his formula on the number of words, syllables, passive verbs, sentences and paragraphs in a piece of writing. When these are few, writing is easier to read. Most word processing programs score this for you. Scores of 70 or more mean easier reading. Scores of 60 or less mean difficult reading. A score of 30 or less means "very difficult."

Counts	
Words	165
Characters	784
Paragraphs	4
Sentences	16
Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	5.3
Words per Sentence	9.1
Characters per Word	4.5
Readability	
Passive Sentences	0%
Flesch Reading Ease	80.5
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	4.2

In Microsoft Word®, the Readability Statistics window shows word count, sentence count, Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. You can see this box after running spell check. Scores at left reflect the readability of the body copy (in black type only) above.

Executive Summary

- Readability helps create interest, connecting the audience to your message.
- Rudolf Flesch developed standards and formulas for readability that measure how easy it is to read and understand your writing.
- Using shorter words, shorter sentences, dialogue and informal language all make writing more readable.

Turn to the back for tips on how to improve the readability of your marketing copy.

Won't "easy" material insult the intelligence of educated readers?

Making content readable is not the same as "dumbing it down." Just because a customer *can* read complicated writing doesn't mean they *want* to. Studies show that most Americans—even the highly educated—prefer to read at a grade level of 10 or below.²

How can you improve readability?

Don't

- ⊗ Use passive voice like is, are, was, were.
- ⊗ Write long paragraphs. They are more difficult to read. Focus on one idea per paragraph.
- ⊗ Use long or unfamiliar words.
- ⊗ Write long sentences. Flesch says, "All you need to do is stop being stuffy and talk like a human being."
- ⊗ Write headlines in all caps.
- ⊗ Use a lot of industry jargon and acronyms—this forces the reader to decipher your meaning.

Do

- ✓ Focus on the reader, not on yourself.
- ✓ Use good verbal illustrations, like direct quotations, stories and case studies.
- ✓ Use contractions. (You'd be wrong if you don't.)
- ✓ Use personal words (you, we, I, he, she).
- ✓ Write like you talk, using informal language and dialogue.
- ✓ Choose words with fewer syllables (such as "complex" instead of "complicated").
- ✓ Use clean and familiar typefaces, at least 10 point in size.

Readability in practice

NOT written for "readability"

Becoming a baseball aficionado

Baseball is known for being the great American pastime. In that it uses a bat and ball, it is somewhat similar to the British games of cricket and rounders, yet baseball's distinctive rules and traditions make it indisputably unique. If one has never been a fan of the game, the intricacies can be **daunting to comprehend**. **Enthusiasts** of the sport like to track detailed statistics and keep score cards during games that may be incomprehensible to the casual observer. However, the novice need not delve into this level of complexity to derive some enjoyment from the game. An understanding of the basic rules, patience for the sometimes slow pace (as baseball uses no time clock, like many other sports) and a willingness to join in singing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" **are all that's needed to engender** an appreciation for this uniquely American sport.

Average of 24 words per sentence
9-point type

Too many ideas
in a paragraph

Complicated words
Simple words

Personal words

Passive voice
Active voice

Flesch Reading Ease Score: 48.6 (difficult)

Written for "readability"

Learning to appreciate baseball

Baseball is the great American pastime. But if you are new to the sport, it can seem **hard to understand** the game. Baseball does have a lot of rules and nuances. **Experienced fans** like to track player statistics and keep score cards during games. **If you** are new to baseball, **don't worry**. **You** don't need to know all those details. To enjoy a good game of baseball, **you just need to know** the basic rules of the game, have patience (since the game uses no clock), and be willing to sing along to "Take Me Out to the Ballgame."

Average of 14 words per sentence
12-point type

Flesch Reading Ease Score: 83.0 (easy)

The passage on the right reads more easily and it holds your interest. If better readability can make baseball sound simple, think what it could do for the products you market. Better comprehension of your message may be just the encouragement your customers need.

¹ Excerpted from *Federal Plain Language Guidelines*. 2011. Available: www.plainlanguage.gov. Accessed Nov. 19, 2012.

² LaRocque, P. *The Book on Writing: The Ultimate Guide to Writing Well*. Marion Street Press, 2003.