

A quick primer on readability  
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### Why do readability analysis?

The goal of readability analysis is to make copy be understandable by the largest audience possible.

- Aim for the lowest reading grade level possible to get the greatest number of people to be able to read it.
  - Flesch-Kincaid 5<sup>th</sup> grade reading level is readable by ~80% of the US public
  - Flesch-Kincaid 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading level is readable by ~50% of the US public
  - Flesch-Kincaid 12<sup>th</sup> grade reading level is readable by ~10% of the US public
- Aim for a high reading ease
  - Flesch reading ease of 70.0 and above is a minimum goal. 80.0 and above is better.
  - Flesch reading ease of 50.0 and below is readable by college students, 30.0 and below by college graduates. Don't even get me started on copy with a reading ease of 10.0 or below.

### Okay, I get it. I want people to be able to read what I write. So how to I do it?

*Consistency* in grade level/reading ease is more important than the *average* grade level/reading ease

- *The lower a person's literacy level the lower the friction needed for them to stop reading.* A page that has sentences at the 1st grade level and at the 12th grade level might average at the 6th grade reading level, but a 6th grade-level reader would stop the first time they hit a 12th grade reading level sentence.
- Another way of saying it is that *it is more important that a copy chunk read at a consistent reading level than at a lower average reading level.* Imagine that you are aiming for a 5th grade reading level as best case and middle school (up to 8th grade) as a fall back. You are not hitting the target if your copy that has an average 5th grade reading level because of a bunch of 1st grade sentences mixed in with 10th grade sentences.

### The nitty gritty:

- Ideally, you would check readability sentence-by-sentence. When faced with a mountain of copy, it is okay to check readability by paragraph or small section provided you don't cheat:
  - If you have a couple of short, easy sentences in a paragraph they can artificially drive down the grade level/drive up the readability of the paragraph. In paragraphs like this, you may need to go sentence by sentence.

- Do not include headers or question prompts to which the content is responding – again this can *artificially* drive down the grade level/drive up the readability of the paragraph.
- Check it out. Within MS Word you can measure
  - Flesch-Kincaid Grade level (you want this low – see stats above)
  - Flesch Reading ease (you want this high – see stats above)
  - Passive sentences (you want this low, like 0%)
    - Use the active voice whenever possible unless you are making a specific point that requires the passive voice... which happens... never?
    - Use direct, declarative sentences whenever possible
  - Words per sentence (Fewer is better. Avoid 15 or more)
  - Sentences per paragraph (5 is a good goal. Fewer is great. More is not.)
- Good to know: Some readability programs (like those baked into MS Word) do not include sentences that are not finished properly (by a period, question mark, etc.), so if you have a bulleted list and do not punctuate each line, your stats will be off.

### **What if someone gives you copy? What then?**

- Very few people write naturally for a low literacy audience. Tell your content authors it is because of their years of advanced education (which it is). Then get out your red pen.
- Ask yourself: what are they trying to say?
  - Distill down to core concepts.
  - Stick to what is essential.
  - Address one idea per sentence.
- Restructure the copy sentence-by-sentence and paragraph-by-paragraph based on core concepts. You may find it easier to start fresh rather than working directly off the content provided.
- Present back to content authors couching your work in the “we want more people to be able to know about your awesome thing.” For example, “I have restructured your copy to make it accessible to 80% of Americans. Have I captured all of your key concepts in this restructure?”

### **Resources**

The CDC’s health literacy resource website: <https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/>

Simply Put, CDC’s guide to creating easy-to-understand materials:  
[https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/pdf/simply\\_put.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/pdf/simply_put.pdf)

The 2003 assessment of adult health literacy in the US (2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy) U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics.  
<https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/2006483.pdf>