

Editorial Graphics and Publishing Services

Effective Writing for a Target Audience

It is important to write and design your publication so your target reader can understand the information you present, take action on it, and even pass it on to someone else who can use the information. Comprehension is the difference between **reader ability** and **text readability**.

Reading grade levels are calculated (using an assessment tool) based on—

- number of syllables in a word
- number of words in a sentence

Readability is governed largely by the familiarity of the words and the complexity of the syntax used in constructing the message. When reader ability far exceeds text readability, this leads to maximum comprehension. When text readability far exceeds reader ability, this leads to only minimal comprehension.

Reading Assessment Tools

The following are only some of the tools available for assessing readability of your publications.

Most word processing programs include a feature that assesses readability to some extent. Microsoft Word contains the *Flesch Reading Ease* tool and the *Flesch-Kincaid Reading Level* tool to measure the reading ability of a document composed in Word.

The Lexile Framework for Reading measures a common unit (called Lexiles). Lexiles (L) measure the traits of reader ability and text readability. A simple children's book could have a score of 200L. A complex and specialized work could have a Lexile score of 1700L or more. *Harry Potter* has text readability of 800L. The Lexile analyzer is available free at www.Lexile.com.

How to get the best results from any reading assessment tool

- Save your document in a separate file just for assessment purposes.
- Clean up your text.
- Do not include headings and bulleted lists in the document.
- Delete extraneous period (in decimals, abbreviations, etc.) to avoid inaccurate assessment.
- Focus on information the reader “needs to know.”
- Organize information in ways that make sense to the reader.

Designing Information for Adults

Many assessment tools were designed about 50 years ago to determine which textbooks to give to school children, not to assess information for adults. Few adults read at their grade level of education. Most read three to five grade levels below their last completed year of school. However, most adults will read at a higher level if the information is of personal relevance (e.g., parents of special education students will understand multisyllabic words like *dyslexia* and people with cancer will comprehend words like *chemotherapy*, regardless of their reading level). It should be noted that short words does not necessarily mean readers will find the text informative, appealing, or understandable.

The key is to include readers in the materials review process. It is best practices to get their feedback on the first draft and consider making the changes they suggest.

Pursuing Effective Feedback on the Effectiveness of Your Publication

- Assemble a focus group of people of similar age and familiarity with subject.
- Plan your questions ahead of time and focus on key messages and use of pictures/illustrations. Ask neutral questions (e.g., “Tell me in your own words what this document is about?” “What do you think of the pictures?” “Why did you skip over X?”).

Formula for Effective Communication

Sensitivity to Word Choice and Sentence Length + Use of Reading Assessment Tool +
Graphic Layout + Focus Group Feedback = Effective Communication.

Sources: *Does the reader comprehend the text because the reader is able, or because the text is easy?* A. Jackson Steener, et al., Presented at International Reading Association, Nevada, May 2004. *Readability formulas and writing for the Web.* Bob Bailey. July 2004. Health Literacy Consulting, www.healthliteracy.com.