A Quick Guide to Readability

Readability is how easy it is for a reader to understand your material. Educational materials like fact sheets or brochures deliver a message and ask readers to take some action in response. Word choice, sentence structure, and layout each play a role in helping readers navigate the material.

You're going to want to read this!

Why worry about readability? We are all busy!

You can assume your reader will make a very quick decision about whether to pay attention to your message.
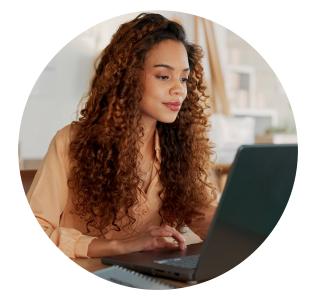
Make it easy to access and understand and you will increase the chance people will read all the way through.

How to measure readability

Online readability formulas are one kind of tool that can be helpful to use when developing your material. There is no single "best formula" – they each use algorithms to measure various aspects of the text, such as:

+ **Word length:** Longer words may be harder to read.
+ **Sentence length:** Shorter sentences are easier to understand.
+ **Syllables:** Text with fewer syllables per word are usually easier to read.
+ **Vocabulary complexity:** Simple, familiar words are easier to read.

These formulas are not perfect indicators of readability—they are guides for you to use.

Common readability formulas:

SMOG (Simple Measure of Gobbledygook): This is one of the most reliable formulas and it estimates a grade level for readability. You can find a free calculator online at: **online-utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp**.

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: This formula estimates grade level and is available in word processing programs such as Microsoft Word.

Flesch Reading Ease: This formula uses a readability scale of 0-100 and is available in word processing programs such as Microsoft Word.

Free readability calculators are available at readabilityformulas.com.

Examples of Different Reading Levels

5th grade:
Children who breathe secondhand smoke are more likely to get sick.

8th grade:
Breathing secondhand smoke increases the risk of health problems in children.

10th grade:
Exposure to secondhand smoke contributes to adverse health effects in children.

Prepare your text.

To use any of these formulas, you need to prepare or "clean" the text you copy and paste into the calculator to get a more accurate result.

1. Delete any sentence fragments (e.g., headings and subheadings).
2. Delete periods that do not mark the end of sentences (e.g., those in a numbered list or abbreviations).
3. Replace website URLs with the word "website" (e.g., truthinitiative.org becomes "website").

After you analyze the text, you can replace everything you deleted.

Aim for an **8th grade reading level or lower** for the general public.

How to improve readability

Readability formulas are just one tool in your toolkit. They cannot assess user-friendly design or cultural appropriateness.

Use the formulas as guides and rely on your own best judgment to improve clarity and readability.

1. **Have a clear point** and deliver it simply without too many examples or statistics.
2. **Use simple language and avoid jargon** to get to the point quickly and efficiently.
3. **Guide readers with a clear design** that uses visual elements to help them navigate the material.

Reach out to your readers

There is only so much you can do on your own to assess readability. That is why it is important to consumer-test your materials with your intended audience and ask them for feedback.

Improving readability may take several rounds of feedback and editing, but it will ensure that your material has the greatest possible impact in your community.

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