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Using Readability Tools

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Using Readability Tools

By William H. DuBay

The use of readability formulas is best understood in the context of creating considerate texts. A text is easy-to-read when it matches the reader's reading ability, interest, motivation, and prior knowledge. We create considerate texts by keeping those features of the reader in mind.

Reading ability is usually determined by the level of one's education and reading habits. We should not think that all seventh graders can read a seventh-grade text. The reading skills of students in an actual seventh-grade classroom can go from the second to the 12th grade. Many college graduates are not able to read at the 12th-grade level.

The larger the audience, the less we know about its reading ability. When we look at the reading ability of adult population of the U.S., we find that the average person reads at the ninth-grade level. This means that many adults read at less than this level. When we have to reach the maximum audience, we have to write at two or three grades below that.

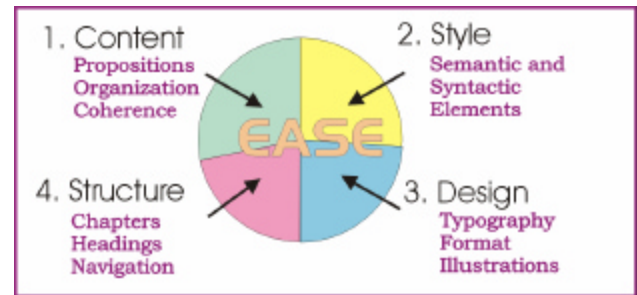
Comics are written at the fourth-grade level or lower. Most popular fiction is written at the sixth-grade level. *Reader's Digest* is written at the ninth-grade level, the *New Yorker* at the 10th-grade level and newspapers at the 12th-grade level. The target reading level for large, public audiences is the seventh grade.

What are the factors that determine one's reading level? The two most important factors are skills in understanding vocabulary and sentence structure. We improve our reading skills by learning to understand words that are more difficult and sentences that are more complex.

Educators use these two factors in testing the reading ability of students. We also use them to assess the reading difficulty of texts. Reading formulas (such as the Flesch Reading Ease formula) predict the difficulty of texts by measuring the average length of words and sentences.

Besides using a formula to test readability, you can also test your document with cloze tests on actual members of your audience.

The following figure illustrates the four factors of reading ease that correspond to reading ability, prior knowledge, motivation, and interest of the reader:



While the ability to handle words and sentences determines the reading ability of readers, their prior knowledge determines their **interest** and **motivation**. If the content does not appeal to the interest or motivation of the readers, they most likely will not read it, no matter how easy it is to read. On the other hand, if they are highly interested or motivated, they will find some way to master the text, no matter how difficult it is for them.

In appealing to the readers' interest, first impressions are very important. Use visual features such as the layout, pictures, sidebars, graphs, and captions to draw them into reading the text.

It is in the **organization** of the content that we sustain their interest and lead them from one item to the next. People learn in the terms of what they already know. Use connective terms such as "while," "although," "however," and "not only...but also" to make those relationships clear. Poor readers especially need connectives and clear visual markers such as chapter headings, subheadings, and paragraphs to make obvious the internal structure of the text.

The final judges, of course, of a document's reading ease, are the readers themselves. Take whatever measures you can to test a document on sample members of your audience before publication.

Attention to the reading skills, interest, motivation, and prior knowledge of readers goes a long way in creating texts that are considerate and easy to read. //

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