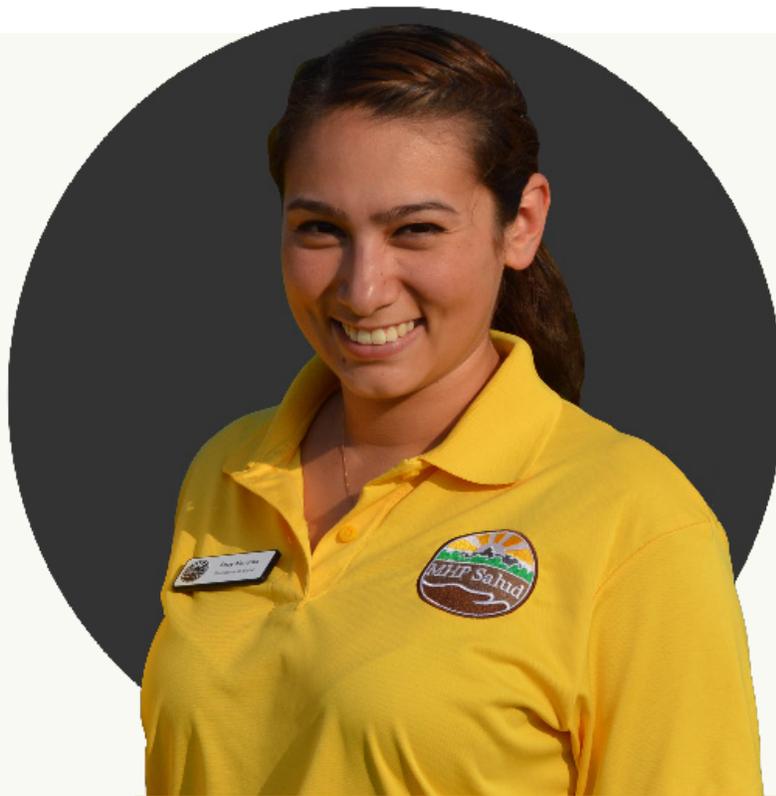




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**A GUIDE TO DEVELOPING EASY TO UNDERSTAND
MATERIALS FOR ANY AUDIENCE**

ASSESSMENT TOOL



HRSA Disclaimer

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Introduction

This guide provides organizations with an overview of practical tools used to create and/or improve written materials. It includes information, tips, and resources on readability, writing style, layout and design, and how to adapt writing documents to different audiences.

The main purpose of this resource is to improve the quality of informational written materials, therefore increasing the understanding from a broader and diverse audience of readers.



For organizations, creating “easy-to-read” materials is important as they act as the link between the organization’s source of knowledge and their target audience



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Readability

Readability is generally defined as the ease with which a written document can be understood.

First, let us begin by understanding the relationship between the reader and written materials.

How a reader understands a document is determined by:

- Prior knowledge
- Literacy/Reading skills
- Motivation
- Interest

A document in itself can determine the reading ease based on its:

- Content
- Design
- Style
- Organization
- Words, sentences, and paragraphs structure

Why is it important?

For organizations, creating “easy-to-read” materials is important as they act as the link between the organization’s source of knowledge and their target audience. When considering readability, the goal should be to identify what the audience needs to know and how to provide that information in a **clear, simple, and concise** manner.

Many organizations’ aim to reach low-income, underserved audiences, and among these individuals low-literacy is very common. Providing these individuals with materials that are difficult to read and understand could decrease the usefulness of the information provided.

It is important to note, that many audiences would benefit from easy to read materials beyond those that are low income or have low literacy levels. In fact, the average American usually reads at a 7th or 8th grade level. ¹

In general, assessing the readability of written materials is in the best interest of organizations, as they aim to deliver information effectively to different audiences.

How to Assess Readability?

The first step is to review your organization’s materials and answer the following two basic questions:

1. Who is your target audience?
2. What is the purpose of the material?



Once these two factors are defined in your writing, you can use **online readability tools** to determine the reading level.

Online readability tools take a sample of your writing and calculate the number of sentences, words, syllables, and characters. A good sample size usually consists of 4-5 full-sentences; approximately 200-600 words total. Most of these tools allow you to simply copy-and-paste your writing sample. Usually, these online software tools calculate readability using all or some of the following methods: *Flesch Kincaid Reading Ease*, *Flesch Kincaid Grade level*, *Gunning Fox Index*, *Coleman Liau Index*, *Smog Index*, and *Automated Readability Index*. Generally, these methods penalize polysyllabic words, and long, complex sentences. Alternatively, they grant a better score to simpler and shorter sentences. Additionally, some of these tools will also provide suggestions for complicated words that will help improve its readability. ²

Some of the most popular **Online Readability Tools** are:

<i>Online Readability Tool</i>	<i>Web Address</i>
Readability Calculator	https://www.online-utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp
Readability Test Tool	https://www.webfx.com/tools/read-able/
Readability Analyzer	https://datayze.com/readability-analyzer.php
Gunning Fog Index	http://gunning-fog-index.com/fog.cgi
Clarity Grader Tool	http://www.claritygrader.com/
Readability Checker	https://essaytools.com/service/readability-checker/
Text Content Analysis Tool	https://www.usingenglish.com/resources/text-statistics.php
Text Analyzer	https://www.lexicool.com/text_analyzer.asp



Understanding the Methods Used in Online Readability Tools

Automated Readability Index: A mathematical formula that has two variables: characters per word and words per sentence. Its scores correspond to U.S. grade levels. If you get a score result with a decimal, round up to the next whole number. The recommended writing level should be 7th -8th depending on your audience.

Coleman Liau Index: Relies on number of characters instead of syllables per word for its calculation. It returns a U.S. grade-level score from 1-12. The recommended writing level should be 7th -8th depending on your audience.

Flesch Kincaid Grade level: A mathematical formula that measures syllables and sentence length. However, the results are given as an academic grade level, from 0-12. Negative results are rated at 0, and any grade level over 12 is listed as 12. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score was developed after the Reading Ease score to make it easier for parents, librarians and others to make decisions about reading content for children. Depending on your audience, but 7th-8th grade is a good standard—that captures more than 80% of U.S. adults.

Flesch Kincaid Reading Ease: Is the result of a mathematical formula that incorporates the average number of syllables per word and the average number of words per sentence for a 100-word block of text. Results are measured on a scale of 1-100. On the 1-100 scale, 1 is very complicated to read and 100 is very easy to read. Most readability resources recommend writing to the 60-70 range.

Gunning Fox Index: Analyzes “complex” words, those with three or more syllables, as part of its mathematical formula for readability. It also omits proper nouns, jargon and compound words; resulting in a grade-level score from 1-unlimited. Typically, technical documentation has a Fog Index between 10 and 15, and professional prose almost never exceeds 18. The ideal score is between 7 and 8, depending on your audience.

Smog Index: Takes 30 sentences (10 from the beginning, middle and end of your writing/paragraph), then count every word with three or more syllables in each group of sentences, then calculate the square root of that number and round it to the nearest 10, then add 3 to that number. Resulting in the U.S. grade level that should be able to read that writing. The recommended writing level should be 7th -8th depending on your audience.³

Source: <https://raventools.com/blog/ultimate-list-of-online-content-readability-tests/>



Key Terms

Assess: evaluate the qualities or abilities of someone or something

Educational attainment: highest level of education completed

Low-income status: Individuals earning less than twice the federal poverty line

Polysyllabic: a word having more than one syllable

Target audience: The group that will be reading or using your materials

References:

1. *The New Social Worker: The Social Work Careers Magazine (2015). What is Readability and Why Should It Matter to Social Workers?*
Available at: <http://www.socialworker.com/feature-articles/practice/what-is-readability-and-why-should-it-matter-to-social-workers/> (Accessed September 3, 2018)
2. *Online Utility (2009). Tests Document Readability.* Available at: https://www.online-utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp (Accessed September 3, 2018)
3. *Raven (2012). Ultimate List of Online Content Readability Tests.* Available at: <https://raventools.com/blog/ultimate-list-of-online-content-readability-tests/> (Accessed September 3, 2018)



Writing Style

*Writing style is the way in which something is written, as opposed to the meaning of what is written. Nonetheless, both are very closely linked. Style influences the reader's impression of the information itself. Style includes **diction**- word choice, including grammar, and **tone**- the attitude of the writing. The main goal in considering style is to present your information in a manner appropriate for both the audience and the purpose of the writing. While there are multiple writing styles, consistency is vital, as switching styles can distract the reader and diminish their understanding and comprehension.¹*

Writing in Plain Language Style is Key...

Plain language is writing so that everyone understands the meaning; it is written for the average reader and organized to serve the readers' needs.

Use the checklists below to make sure you are implementing plain language techniques:

Word Choice/ Grammar:

- Omit excess words
- Use concrete familiar words (i.e. Use **doctor** instead of physician)
- Use imagery words (i.e. Use **runny nose** instead of excess mucus)
- Use positive language
- Avoid “hidden verbs” or verbs that have been converted into a noun (i.e. Use **apply** instead of application)
- Avoid jargon
- Avoid clichés
- Avoid double negative expressions
- Use inclusive vocabulary
- See appendices for word substitutions and vocabulary help
- Aim for active voice over passive voice (i.e. Use “**you must take your medicine later**” instead of “medicine must be taken daily”)
- Use pronouns (i.e. Use “**you must take your medicine daily**” instead of “one must take one's medicine daily”)
- Use the simplest tense possible: present tense is best (i.e. “**we serve the Tri-City area**” instead of “we have served the Tri-City area”)
- Always check for correct grammar

Writing Structure:

- Put the context before the new information (i.e. Use “**to relieve pain, put heat on the sore spot**” instead of “put heat on sore spot to relieve pain”)



- Place the most important information first
- Put the subject, verb, and object close together, not separated by extra information
- Vary the length of your sentences. Use short sentences to emphasize ideas. Use longer sentences to explain, define, or illustrate ideas.

Organization:

- Use headings and titles
- Make use of topic statements
- Use no more than 2-3 topic statements within a section
- Easy reading flow from paragraph to paragraph
- Use logical order organization

Key Terms

Active voice: structure of a sentence that shows that the subject is performing the action (i.e. you write the book)

Cliché: a phrase or opinion that is overused and betrays a lack of original thought

Consistency: orderly presentation of a set of linked/associated elements in the text

Diction: the choice and use of words and phrases in speech or writing

Hidden verbs: words that are formed from a verb; the verb is “hidden” within the word (i.e. “application” comes from “apply”)

Imagery words: visually descriptive or figurative language

Jargon: words used by a certain profession or group that outsiders may not understand

Passive voice: structure of a sentence that shows that the subject of the sentence is acted on by the verb (i.e. the book was written by you)

Tone: the general character or attitude of a piece of writing

References:

1. *Wheaton College (2009). Style, Diction, Tone, and Voice. Available at: <https://www.wheaton.edu/academics/services/writing-center/writing-resources/style-diction-tone-and-voice/> (Accessed September 4, 2018).*
2. *English Oxford Living Dictionaries (2009). Top Tips for Word Choice. Available at: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/writing-help/top-tips-for-word-choice> (Accessed September 4, 2018).*



Layout/Design

The *layout* and *design* of a written document could make reading easier or more difficult. Therefore, it is important to pay close attention to the way your document is organized to ensure the reader's understanding. **Use the following checklists to double check that your text is organized well.**

Graphics:

- Use a cover graphic related to the material
- Are familiar and easily recognizable by target audience
- Should support the document not distract from it
- Use a graphic text that visualizes the material
- Use captions for any illustrations
- Avoid distracting details (i.e. backgrounds, elaborate borders, unneeded color, etc.)

Placement:

- Place graphics next to the related text, or direct readers in the text to see graphics.
- Use visual cues to create predictable flow of information (i.e. arrows, shading, boxes, etc.)

Font/Type

- Use both upper and lower case, not solely uppercase
- Attempt to use at least 12-point font, 10-point font the minimum
- Do not mix more than two font types or sizes
- Use color changes of font only if it is necessary
- Use a font that is easy to read

Key Terms

Cover Graphic: the picture or design you use on the cover or first page of your materials

Font: the size of the letters used in your materials

Graphic: visual art, such as a picture, table, drawing, or other sort of design

References:

1. *Plain English Campaign (2018). Guide to Design and Layout Available at: <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/design-and-layout.html> (Accessed September 4, 2018).*



Adapting Writing to Reach Your Audience

Adapting your writing to meet your audience’s preferences helps to ensure their understanding. It is always important to define who your target audience is to determine how to approach the **topic, tone, content, and language.**¹

Before you start writing, it is important to ask yourself these questions to define your audience:

- What type of audience are you addressing (age, sex, education, economic status, language, culture, location, political/social/religious beliefs)?
- What level of information they have about the subject (novice, general readers, expert)?
- What do I want them to know, believe, or do?
- How can I present the information in a way that will best convey my ideas?
- Where, when, why, and how will they be reading?

Answering these questions will help you determine the appropriateness of your writing.

Generally, **cultural and linguistic appropriateness** tend to be the most common factors influencing a reader’s understanding and interest.

Cultural Appropriateness

A culturally appropriate written document that includes the audience’s cultural traditions and beliefs is more likely to be accepted and understood.

It is important that you analyze what your audience already knows about the topic presented- particularly about their current knowledge, experience, and beliefs- this will help you in word choice selection and explanation measures.

For instances, when your writing is targeting different audiences, it is important that you format your writing in ways that are “culturally neutral” to be accepted and understood for a broader and diverse range of readers.²

When writing culturally appropriate materials take into consideration the following points:

- Use of culturally relevant concepts in the content of materials
- Use of experiences or examples related to the audience’s culture
- Use of graphics that reflect cultural preferences³



Linguistic Appropriateness

When writing, using language that is accurate and appropriate is important to ensure the audience's acceptance and understanding.

The following tips will help you define the correct language for your written document:

- Assess the language preference for your audience. If it is more than one language, provide your information effectively and correct in each language.
- Assess if your intended audience uses a particular dialect that is specific to their region or social group.
- Be careful with easily confused words such as “affect” and “effect” or “allusion” and “illusion”, these words may confuse readers. (See appendix 2)
- Avoid jargon or slang. Remember that these types of phrases are only known or relevant to specific audiences and may not be understood by the intended general audience.
- Try writing in a straightforward way avoiding “too complicated” or “flowery” language. Remember, just like in-person, conversations of too many words make individuals lose focus and/or interest. (See appendix 3)
- Present your information in a language that demonstrates an appropriate level of formality depending on your reading audience.⁴

Overall, to maximize the effectiveness of your writing it is important to be aware of your audience's specific communication preferences and reflect these in your writing. Failing to do so, can result in confusion, misunderstanding, or lack of interest.

References:

1. *The Speaking & Writing Center (2010). Audience Adaptation. Available at: https://www.usm.edu/gulfcoast/sites/usm.edu.gulfcoast/files/groups/learning-commons/pdf/audience_adaptation_web.pdf (Accessed September 5, 2018).*
2. *Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (2018). Tips on Writing a Quality Report. Available at: <https://www.ahrq.gov/professionals/quality-patient-safety/talkingquality/resources/writing/tip5.html> (Accessed September 5, 2018).*
3. *Center for Medicare Education (2001). Developing Culturally Appropriate Medicare Education Materials. Available at: https://medicine.osu.edu/sitetool/sites/pdfs/ahecpublic/Developing_Culturally_Appropriate_Medicare_Ed_Materials.pdf (Accessed September 5, 2018).*
4. *Saylor Academy (2012). Using Appropriate Language. Available at: https://saylordotorg.github.io/text_handbook-for-writers/s21-02-using-appropriate-language.html (Accessed September 5, 2018).*



Appendix 1

Quick Tips for Writing Low Literacy Materials

For additional quick tips for writing low literacy materials please click [here](#).

1. Keep writing style simple.
2. Use active voice and conversational style.
3. Sequence main points in a logical manner.
4. Make your sub-points clearly correspond to the main point.
5. Use short words and sentences.
6. Avoid double negative expressions.
7. Use the same word consistently rather than synonyms to avoid confusion.
8. For lengthy materials, use a table of contents to point the way.
9. Write short summaries at the end of long sections.
10. Use a larger font of 12 points for the text.
11. Enlarge or bold the type in headings and subheadings.
12. Use extra white space to separate sections.
13. Use age appropriate illustrations.
14. Place illustrations close to the related text.
15. Use simple grids, site maps, and other visuals to ease the reading of text.

Reference:

Journal of Extension. How to Write Low Literacy Materials. Available at:
<https://joe.org/joe/2001february/tt2.php> (Accessed September 5, 2018)



Appendix 2

Commonly Confused Words

Selecting the right words to include in a document could be a difficult task. Many words in the English language may sound or be written very similarly but have different meanings. Therefore, it is important to double check that your word choice aligns with the purpose of your document. Refer to a dictionary for complete definitions and examples of word use.

For a list of commonly confused words please click [here](#).

Appendix 3

Simplifying Your Words (Online Tools)

1. **Rewordify** is a powerful, free, online software that improves reading, learning, and teaching. This site can:

- Intelligently simplify difficult English, for faster comprehension
- Effectively teach words, for building a better vocabulary
- Help teachers save time and produce engaging lessons
- Help improve learning outcome

Link: <https://rewordify.com/>

2. **Simplish** is a multi-use tool able to improve reading, learning, and teaching by intelligently simplifying difficult English or any major language.

Link: <https://www.simplish.org/>

3. **Article Simplifier** is a tool that gives people a platform where they can easily convert their content into a very simple and easy article or writing in a couple of seconds. This tool is useful for:

- Converting any text to simple English
- Simplifying tough words
- Easiness in understanding
- Avoiding consulting the dictionary
- Quickly translating any text

Link: <http://seotoolzz.com/article-simplifier.php>



Additional References

Brians, Paul (1997). Common Errors in English Usage. Retrieved from <http://public.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/nonerrors.html>

Jones and Bartlett Learning, LLC. (n.d.). Assessing Readability with Grade Level Formulas. 15-21. Retrieved from http://samples.jbpub.com/9781449600532/00532_CH03_Pass02SEC.pdf

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Wright, Nick. (n.d.). Made-up Words. Plain Language. Retrieved from <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/wordsuggestions/madeup.cfm>