

# 1 Enhancing reading ease

## The Problem:

When media specialists reviewed an environmental agency's science and biodiversity literature for readability, they came to some worrying conclusions. They found that the style of writing in this sector is poor. Even text deliberately written for non-science audiences was too academic, bureaucratic, long-winded, poorly formatted, and confusing. Even worse, they concluded that some of the authors had not written to communicate at all – they had written to impress or even intimidate with excessive scientific language and an academic tone.

## The solution

To avoid these problems, the solution is to work on the reading ease of any text. This not about 'dumbing down' but about writing in a clear and assessable way that helps people grasp the key points clearly and easily. (In fact, research shows that if text has a low 'reading ease' it is so difficult to read that people won't bother to read it at all!).

## Key Advice

### Write to communicate

- Always aim to be as clear as you can be – write to communicate not impress.

### Avoid jargon

- Avoid 'academic styles' or 'corporate speak'
- Minimise acronyms - put the full words where possible. In longer documents, putting the acronym against the first use of the term is insufficient so include an acronym list.

### Think of your audience

- Think of the people you are writing for, and as you write, imagine you like them and are writing to help them.
- Imagine how much time they will be able to give to your text and aim to provide the information in less time than that.

### Remember some simple rules

- Use everyday words wherever possible
- Use active voice /verbs (not passive)
- Use a good 'readable' average sentence length of no more than 15 – 20 words. Any longer and you are trying to put too many ideas in one sentence and it is hard to read or comprehend.
- Keep paragraphs to a readable length. Three sentences is about right. Anymore and you are putting too many ideas in one paragraph which makes it hard to read.

### Formatting

- Set out the text in a logical order and format it to help the reader navigate
- Use lists and bullets rather than long sentences

### Use the reading ease scores on your computer with the following steps:

1. Click the File tab, and then click Options.
2. Click Proofing.
3. When correcting spelling and grammar in Word, make sure Check grammar with spelling is selected.
4. Select Show readability statistics.
5. After you enable this feature, open a file that you want to check, and check the spelling.
6. When Word finishes checking the spelling and grammar, it displays information about the reading level of the document.
7. To check the meaning of scores compare them to the table below.

**Summary of stats:**

<b>What</b>	<b>• Aim</b>	<b>Target</b>
<b>Readability stats – in same order as word stats</b>		
Sentences per paragraph	Keep paragraphs concise – too long and you lose the key point. Aim to make one main point per paragraph	Average 3 sentences
Words per sentence	If there are too many words per sentence, it loses meaning. This is in part because it is linking too many ideas together. Aim for one idea per sentence	15 – 20 words 25 tops
Characters per word	Too many long words makes it difficult to understand	Average about 5
Passive Sentences	Keep percentage low	Keep score well under 20 %
Flesch Reading ease	Low numbers mean reading is difficult. So higher numbers = easier to read. You may as well not bother to write at all if numbers fall below 30 - it is too difficult to read and people won't bother!	70 + where English is not the first language 60 – 70 for standard documents 55 - 60 for more technical language
Flesch Kincaid Grade level score	The score is about the years of education required to comprehend the document. So a score of '13' requires 13 years of formal education ie someone of 19 and at university. The New Scientist aims for 12 and the Times for 10.	Aim for 7 for text for general public & lower for when English is 2 <sup>nd</sup> language.
<b>Format</b>		
Readable line length	This is based on the width the eyes find it comfortable to scan backwards and forwards. 8- 12 words per line Characters 40 – 70 Any longer and eyes weary quickly	Arial 4 ½ inches T Roman 4 ¼ inches
Easy reading fonts	Use fonts that are best for that format – seraphs make text easier to read though tend to look old fashioned. Some new fonts are contemporary looking and have small seraphs.	Arial on screen Times New Roman on text or more modern font with seraphs
Format text	Ensure document is well ordered, well titled and as easy to navigate as possible Use bullet lists and tables to display information clearly	