Using Microsoft Word's Readability Program

By Norman Otto Stockmeyer

Readability should be a goal of all careful writers. Lawyers, in particular, need to exercise care so that their readers can understand their writing.

Readability tests are one way to evaluate how understandable your writing is. They are the product of some 80 years of research and are widely used in education, the military, health care, the courts, and government.

Today's word-processing programs have made it almost as easy to assess the readability of a document as it is to check its spelling. Microsoft Word's word-processing software, for instance, can perform several readability calculations in the blink of an eye.

Word's readability statistics are a useful final check on several factors affecting the clarity of a document. They include average sentence length, the percentage of passive-voice sentences, overall readability, and grade level.

If your document scores low in readability, consider revising and retesting it. (WordPerfect, WordPro, and Google Docs offer similar readability programs. This article focuses on Word's program.)

To enable Word's readability program, using Microsoft Office Word 2003 as an example, click on **Tools**, then **Spelling and Grammar**, then **Options**, and then check **Show readability statistics**. Now Word will display readability statistics whenever you spell-check a document. (You do spell-check, don't you?)

Be aware that, although helpful, some of Word's readability scores are not completely trustworthy. This article explains what the scores mean and how to work around the flaws.

"Plain Language" is a regular feature of the *Michigan Bar Journal,* edited by Joseph Kimble for the Plain English Subcommittee of the Publications and Website Advisory Committee. Contact Prof. Kimble at kimblej@cooley.edu. For a list of previous articles, go to www.michbar.org/generalinfo/plainenglish/columns.cfm. 2009 is a notable year for the column.

Readability Scores

Word's Flesch Reading Ease score is based on a formula developed in 1949 by Rudolf Flesch. It is computed using the average number of syllables per word and words per sentence. Syllables-per-word is a measure of word difficulty. Words-per-sentence is an indicator of syntactic complexity.

The Flesch Reading Ease scale ranges from zero to 100. Zero to 40 is very difficult to difficult reading. Eighty and above is easy to very easy. Some states require that insurance policies score at least 40 on the Flesch Reading Ease scale. Flesch himself set the minimum score for plain English at 60. Microsoft's documentation encourages authors of standard documents to aim for a score of 60 to 70.

Word's other readability score is the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. That score is based on research conducted by J. Peter Kincaid in the mid-1970s. He reformulated the Flesch test to produce a formula for computing a text's reading grade level.

The Flesch-Kincaid score has the advantage of measuring the readability of a document based on the minimum education level required for a reader to understand it. Some federal agencies require that written materials meet a specific grade level based on the Flesch-Kincaid formula.

Microsoft recommends aiming for a Flesch-Kincaid score of 7.0 to 8.0 for most documents. According to a 1993 study, the average adult in the U.S. reads at the seventh-grade level.

Controversy

Critics of readability tests claim they are designed for children's books and do not reflect adult reading comprehension. In fact, the Flesch and Kincaid formulas were designed specifically for adult material and tested on adult readers.

While not 100 percent reliable, readability tests are as reliable as other common psychological tests, such as reading tests. They work well because they use simple word-length and sentence-length factors, which are among the primary causes of reading difficulty.

Another criticism has more validity. Some readability experts reject Microsoft's Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level scoring as seriously flawed. This is because Microsoft's version of the Flesch-Kincaid test has been artificially capped at grade-level 12. Kincaid's original formula went to grade 17, equivalent to one year of graduate school. Most versions of Word report any document written at a college or graduate-school level as grade-level 12.

This grade-level flaw should not concern careful writers. Grade-level 12, whether artificially capped or not, is too difficult for many readers. You should revise any document scoring that high. Even college graduates prefer to read general materials written at the 10th-grade level.

Microsoft has not acknowledged the grade-level flaw in its Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level program. But, Word Office 2007 now goes above grade-level 12. The same flaw in the Mac version of Word has not been fixed.

There are other computerized versions of the Flesch and Kincaid formulas and other formulas. Quality varies. One expert subjected Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to

a dozen online readability programs. They produced reading grade-level scores from 9.7 to 16.18! (www.smileycat.com/miaow/archives/000875.php) His recommendation? Pick one program and stick with it.

Other Helpful Statistics

Word's readability software offers two other statistics of potential help to writers concerned about readability. They are words per sentence (which is not separately computed in the Reading Ease scale) and the percentage of passive-voice sentences.

Many plain-language advocates—Bryan Garner, Joseph Kimble, Judge Mark Painter, and Wayne Schiess among them—agree with Rudolf Flesch that you should keep average sentence length to 20 words or fewer. So the words-per-sentence calculation is helpful.

"Prefer the active voice" is familiar advice if you have read any guide to good writing. So Word's percentage-of-passive-sentences calculation should be helpful. Unfortunately, it too is flawed.

The problem is this. As a document is being spell-checked, you may choose to ignore the sentences flagged as passive. If so, the readability calculator ignores them too. This can result in an inaccurately low (or even zero) percentage being shown.

Microsoft has acknowledged the problem and offers the following workaround. After you view the Readability Statistics box, immediately press the **F7** key. The Readability Statistics box should now display the correct percentage of passive sentences. (If you wait too long to press **F7**, the box will continue to display the incorrect percentage. Then you will have to completely recheck the document.)

What if you want to check the readability of just a portion of your document—perhaps an executive summary that must be clear to everyone? Here's how. Highlight the section of text and press **F7**. When asked if you want to continue checking the remainder of the document, select **No**. The readability statistics that are displayed will relate only to your selection.

A Test is Just a Tool

Readability testing can be a good check on the clarity of your writing. When testing on actual readers is impractical, readability formulas can give some indication of how understandable your document is. And word-processing programs have greatly simplified the process.

But no mathematical formula can truly measure understanding. For instance, on the Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level tests, James Joyce's *Ulysses* scores somewhat easier to read than Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. And because those formulas are based on word counts rather than word order, scrambling the words in a sentence will not change its readability scores.

In short, just using shorter words and sentences can result in a text that is more difficult, not less. You also have to attend to other factors such as tone, approach, organization, and design that are appropriate to your target audience.

So do not write to the test. One expert compares that to trying to raise the temperature of a room by holding a match under the thermometer. Rather, write to your audience. Then test—revise—and retest. ■

(This article has an average sentence length of 13.1 words and contains 7 percent passive sentences. It scores 39.3 on the reading-ease scale and is written at grade level 11.0.)

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