DRAGONFLY

FIELD GUIDES

Tips and tools
FOR THE WRITING WORLD

7 Steps to Writing for Readability

Today's readers are distracted and impatient. They want the information they need as quickly as possible. That's why whether it's web copy or white papers, readability is important. As a writer, you can help by creating clear copy that's easily scanned and understood. Here's how.

STEP 1: ESTABLISH BASELINE READABILITY

Run readability statistics in Microsoft Word.

Make a note of grade level readability, average words per sentence, and percent of passive voice.

STEP 2: MAKE ORGANIZATION CRYSTAL CLEAR

Does your piece start with a clear, descriptive headline and deck?

Is the content broken into short, digestible sections?

Is each section labeled with an informational subhead? (Ask yourself this: If readers could see only your headline and subheads, would they understand your message?)

Is the most important information presented first in each section, subsection, and paragraph?

STEP 3: CHOOSE SIMPLE WORDS

Scan every sentence. Without changing meaning, is there anywhere you can replace:

- Long words with short ones?

- Complicated words with simple ones?

- Jargon or business-speak with plain talk?

- Multiple words with one word?

STEP 4: STREAMLINE SENTENCES

Can you break long sentences (i.e., those with more than 14 words) into two or three short ones?

Can you turn a long series of points into a bulleted list?

Can you convert data-heavy text into a table or figure?

STEP 5: ASSESS VOICE

Are you writing in the active voice where possible and appropriate?

Are you writing directly to the reader, using *you* and *we*?

Are you using contractions to create a more natural tone?

STEP 6: PARE DOWN PARAGRAPHS

Are paragraphs short — no more than seven lines long?

Do you present one key idea per paragraph?

Do you allow one-sentence paragraphs?

STEP 7: SEE HOW YOU'VE IMPROVED!

Run readability statistics again.

Are you hitting a ninth grade or lower readability level?

Is average sentence length 14 words?

Is there less than 25% passive voice?

If you're hitting these key metrics, you've created readable content.