

Readability for Clear Health Communication

Health Literacy

Readability Scales

The Basics of Readability Scales

“Readability” refers to how easy or difficult a document is to read. You can use computer software or hand assessment methods to determine readability. When you write for limited-literacy populations, aim for a reading level of 6th grade or less.

What are the benefits of using readability scales?

- They are easy to use and understand.
- They give a concrete benchmark of a document’s reading level.
- They remind writers to use simple words.

What are the limitations of readability scales?

Readability formulas are not perfect. They do not account for:

- The impact of design and layout.
- The complexity of some concepts.
- Cultural sensitivity and relevance.
- A reader’s familiarity with content.
- A reader’s eagerness to learn about the material.

Which readability formulas should I use?

- Flesch Reading Ease: This scale rates readability on a 100-point scale. The higher the score, the easier a document is to read and understand.
- Fry, Gunning Fog, and SMOG: Based on the U.S. education system, these determine a document’s reading grade level. For example, a score of “6” means that a reader would need to have completed the 6th grade to understand the text.

Using Readability Software*

- Use a sample with at least 30 sentences, or 300-500 words.
- Choose a sample from the middle of the text; first and last sentences are not usually representative of a document as a whole.
- Include only complete sentences in your sample.
- Unless your software does it for you, “clean up” your text before you test. This means deleting:
 - Headers and sub-headers.
 - Incomplete sentences.
 - Bullets.
 - Extraneous periods.

* We recommend
Readability Calculations from
Micro Power & Light.
Please call
(214) 553-0105
for more information.

Want more information?

To learn more about readability scales, materials assessments, or on-site health communication trainings for your staff, please contact **Beccah Rothschild** at beccah_rothschild@berkeley.edu or (510) 642-0415.