AIA Best Practices:
In praise of plain English

By Bill Schmalz, FAIA, CSI

Summary

Do you want people to read and understand what you've written? This article talks about how writing in plain English—that is, using simple words and simple sentences wherever possible, even for complex topics—can make your writing more likely to be read, understood, and enjoyed. The author provides guidelines on evaluating the reading difficulty of your writing, and on how to make it more readable.

Why plain English matters

In praise of plain English

Have you ever seen a sign like the one above, perhaps in a hotel lobby or an office building? Of course you haven't. No one would post such a sign. If there were to be a fire, people might panic, so they would need to understand the sign's message in a moment's glance. They couldn't afford to waste an extra second thinking about what the sign is trying to say. The sign you have seen (if you're in North America, that is) says something like, "In case of fire do not use elevators. Use stairs." Ten words, nine of them with one syllable.[1] Nothing makes comprehension easier than short words and simple sentences.

Even if most of our writing doesn't have the same life-or-death urgency as emergency egress signs, it is still often important. Many of us architects spend much of our time writing or editing letters, proposals, contracts, RFI responses, public relations notices, resumes, and white papers, all of which can benefit from consisting mostly of short words. Fortunately for those of us who write in English, the language abounds in short words, with more than 8,000 one-syllable words and goodness knows how many two-syllable words. And most long English words have shorter equivalents that are usually as good as or better than the long ones. Just a few examples: use/utilize, first/initial, try/endeavor, later/subsequent, approach/methodology, limit/parameter, end/terminate, now/currently, and enough/sufficient.

Choosing simple words

But won't long words make us sound smarter? Don't we want to challenge our readers and help them build their vocabularies? In a word, no. Bryan Garner, in his book Modern American Usage, says it best: "Build your vocabulary to make yourself a better reader; choose simple words whenever possible to make yourself a better writer." It's our job as writers to get our messages across to our readers in the simplest manner possible. Let the other writers build their readers' vocabularies. (Just to be clear, I'm not suggesting that we never use long words, but to use a long word only when a shorter one doesn't work as well.)

Writers for literally millennia have known this. In the first century BCE, the Roman politician Cicero said, "When you wish to instruct, be brief; that men's minds take in quickly what you say, learn its lesson, and retain it faithfully. … Plainness of style seems easy to imitate at first thought, but when attempted, nothing is more difficult." Two thousand years later, George Orwell, in his essay "Politics and the English Language," said, "Never use a long word where a short one will do."

As people become more educated, their ability to comprehend complex technical writing increases. But just because folks with PhDs can understand difficult academic papers doesn't mean they enjoy reading them. The vocabulary most people (including those with PhDs) are comfortable using, and therefore reading, is what they knew by the time they left high school. Writers who want their writing to be read should aim for that vocabulary level. But how on earth are we to know what a high school reading level is? Don't panic. Help is on the way.

Estimating reading level

In 1952, the American businessman Robert Gunning developed the Gunning Fog Index (GFI) as a way to estimate the reading level of any piece of writing. He based it on two factors: the average number of words per sentence and the average number of syllables per word.[2] After what I imagine was a fair amount of tinkering, he developed the following formula: GFI = 0.4 ((words/sentences) + 100 (complex words/total

words)). This gave numerical answers that are roughly equivalent to American education levels (for example, a GFI of 12 approximates a high school senior level).

Sometime after this, plain-English advocate Rudolph Flesch developed a system of his own, called the Flesch Reading Ease Test. Flesch also based his formula on words per sentence and syllables per word. His formula was more complicated[3] and, unlike Gunning's, generated numerical scores from 0 to 100 that require a table to show grade-level equivalencies.[4]

In the mid-1970s, the U.S. Navy hired Flesch, teamed with Robert Kincaid, to develop an alternative system, the Flesch-Kincaid (F-K) Readability Test. Its formula[5] is also complex, but like Gunning's, its results correspond to American school grade levels.

Despite the level of precision seemingly built into these formulas, they don't represent exact science. Some three-or-more-syllable words, such as syllable and vocabulary, aren't hard to comprehend (and have no good short equivalents), while some one-syllable words, such as quirt, will send most readers to their dictionaries.[6] However, the formulas can help us roughly gauge our writing's reading level.

Scoring your writing

These formulas aren't easy to use, but fortunately we don't have to use them. Websites are available for each system, allowing us to plug in chunks of text to check their readability levels. However, we have an even easier option: The Flesch and F-K formulas are built into most word processing software, including Microsoft Word. To set it up in MS Word, go to File, Option, Proofing and click the box for "Show readability statistics." Then, while in your document, click Review, Spelling & Grammar. After running through the spelling and grammar checks, a box with readability statistics will appear, telling you such things as average number of sentences per paragraph, words per sentence, characters per word, and percentage of passive sentences.[7] At the bottom are the Flesch Reading Ease score and the F-K Readability grade level.

What numbers should we aim for? Good upper limits are 20 words per sentence and 20 % passive sentences. The Flesch Reading Ease score should be no less than 50 (Flesch himself preferred 60 to 70), while the F-K grade should be between 9 and 12.

Bear in mind, aiming at a high school reading level is not the same as "dumbing down" our writing. We have only two goals as writers: to make our readers want to read what we've written, and to make it easy for them to understand us. We may well be writing about highly complex topics, but the writing itself should be engaging and easily understood.[8]

What would Abe do?

To show how this works, let's use a short piece of writing most of us are familiar with: Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. As far as I know, no one accuses Lincoln of talking down to his audience, or dumbing down his message, so let's see what the statistics say:

Words per sentence: 26.8 (a bit on the high side)

Passive sentences: 20% (at the upper limit, but still good)

Flesch Reading Ease: 64 (roughly at high school freshman level)

F-K Grade Level: 10.9 (high school junior level)

Other than using sentences longer than generally recommended, Lincoln was right on target in aiming for a general audience. And look at the vocabulary he used: Among the speech's 268 words,[9] only seven have four or more syllables (dedicated (four times), proposition, altogether, and consecrated), while 196, or 73%, have only one syllable, and 52, or 19%, have two syllables. Lincoln could have written a highfalutin speech filled with fancy words and complex sentences, but he wanted his audience (and later his readers) to easily understand what he came to say. And that may be why the Gettysburg Address has outlived most other American speeches.

Writing in plain English isn't easy. Achieving it requires practice in writing and diligence in editing, but our readers will appreciate our efforts. And in case you're wondering, here are the readability statistics for this article (not counting footnotes):

Words per sentence: 19.7

Passive sentences: 3%

Flesch Reading Ease: 53.1 (high school senior level)

F-K Grade Level: 10.5

Finally, should we check everything we write for its readability statistics? That's not only time-consuming but unnecessary. I suggest occasionally selecting random paragraphs and predicting their readability levels, then checking for their Flesch and F-K scores to see how close you were. After a while, you'll learn to get a good feeling for your writing's reading ease.

Footnotes:

1. If you're in London, then the sign would consist entirely of one-syllable words.

2. Until 1982, the formula used clauses instead of sentences. Useless information; that's why it's in a footnote.

3. 206.835 – 1.015 (total words/total sentences) – 84.6 (total syllables/total words). Clearly, a great deal of tinkering was involved here.

4. Flesch's Reading Ease Table:

   90–100: Very easy to read (5th grade)

   80–90: Easy to read (6th grade)

   70–80: Fairly easy to read (7th grade)

   60–70: Plain English (8th and 9th grades)

   50–60: Fairly difficult to read (11th and 12th grades)

30–50: Difficult to read (college level)

0–30: Very difficult to read (graduate level)

5. 0.39 (total words/total sentences) + 11.8 (total syllables/total words) – 15.59.

6. Let me save you the trouble. A quirt is a riding whip consisting of a short wood or leather handle attached to a rawhide lash. Someday, when you're solving a crossword puzzle, you'll thank me.

7. Sentences come in two flavors: active and passive. In active sentences, someone (or something) is doing something, while in passive sentences, something is being done by someone (or something). In general, it's best to have a lot more active sentences than passive ones in our writing. Active sentences tend to be simpler, shorter, and more direct than passive ones. But sometimes a passive sentence is exactly what we need, when, for instance, the doer of the action isn't important (The structural steel was topped out yesterday.) or we want to wait until the end of the sentence to reveal the identity of the doer (The value engineering idea that saved the project was conceived by the architect.).

8. Or, as Matthew Frederick says in his book 101 Things I Learned in Architecture School, "If you can't explain your topic in terms your grandmother would understand, you don't really know it."

9. I've made one change to the "standard" text to bring it to modern standards: In three places, Lincoln wrote "can not" instead of the modern one-word "cannot." Oddly enough, no one is quite sure exactly what Lincoln said at Gettysburg; contemporary newspaper transcriptions differed, and Lincoln had several slightly different handwritten versions. The standard version is the last one Lincoln wrote (well after the dedication ceremony) and the only one he signed.

About the contributor

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