

Rudolf Flesch: How to Write Plain English

At first blush you may think this [readability formula] is a very crude way of dealing with writing. Writing means conveying ideas from one mind to another. To use a mechanical gadget for this doesn't seem like an intelligent approach.

But wait a minute. I spent several years of my life doing the underlying research for this formula and got my Columbia University Ph.D. degree for it. I can assure you that it is based on some very complicated facts of human psychology. It works because it is based on the way the human mind works.

When you read a passage, your eyes and mind focus on successive points on the page. Each time this happens, you form a tentative judgment of what the words mean *up to that point*. Only when you get to a major punctuation mark—a period, a colon, a paragraph break—does your mind stop for a split second, sum up what it has taken in so far, and arrive at a final meaning of the sentence or paragraph. The longer the sentence, the more ideas your mind has to hold in suspense until its final decision on what all the words mean *together*. Longer sentences are more likely to be complex—more subordinate clauses, more prepositional phrases and so on. That means more mental work for the reader. So the longer a sentence, the harder it is to read.

Exactly the same thing is true of words. Some words are short and simple, others are long and complex. The complexity shows up in the prefixes and suffixes. *Take* is a simple, short word that doesn't present much difficulty to a reader. But *unmistakably* has the prefixes *un-* and *mis-* and the suffixes *-able* and *-ly* and gives the mind much more to think about than *take*. (My very first readability formula was based on a count of prefixes and suffixes to measure word complexity. A few years later I tried to make it easier to use and changed to a count of syllables. Statistically, the results are about the same.)

[...]

First, if you want to rewrite a passage to get a higher score, you'll have to cut the average sentence length. This means you'll have to break up long, complex sentences and change them to two, three, or four shorter ones. In other words, sprinkle periods over your piece of writing. When you're turning subordinate clauses into independent sentences, you'll find that a lot of them will start with *And*, *But* or *Or*. Don't let that bother you. It's perfectly good English and has been good usage for many centuries. The Old Testament says, "And God said, Let there be light; and there was light." The New Testament says, "But Jesus gave him no answer." And Mark Twain wrote, "Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to." So never mind that old superstition. And don't—please don't—put unnecessary commas after your *And's*, *But's* and *Or's*.

Second tip: When it comes to replacing complex words with simple ones, take first aim at words with prefixes and suffixes, like *establishment*, *available* or *required*. Often the best Plain English replacement is a two-word combination like *setting up*, *in stock* or *called for*. If you can't think of a good substitute, use any good thesaurus or book of synonyms. You'll find that there's no complex, legalistic word that can't be translated into Plain English.