

March 2020

# ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

## Readability Tips

Writing for an eighth grader — some things never change

When it comes to reaching your audience, yes, writing at the eighth-grade level is still best practice. Small words, no jargon, sentences that vary in length but are still on the short side. Short paragraphs. Also use the right typestyles and size.

But your “influencers” are often well-educated, so you can still engage them with detailed finance or technical terms, right? Maybe, but do you really think your audience *wants* things to be harder to read?

The rule is to still make it simple for everyone. You can always link (or refer to) to a “deep dive” of technical details for people who love reports, especially in explaining bond proposals or new curriculum.

### The basic mechanics — font and size

- First, use the most readable type style and size. For online reading, the best font and size, in general, is Arial, 12-point minimum (the font size of this tip sheet!)
- For a formal look, use the font “Georgia.”
- For older readers, use at least a 14-point font, regardless of whether you’re writing for a brochure or online.
- On paper, serif fonts (like Garamond and Times New Roman) are easiest to read.
- Use sans serif type for online text.
- Use the extra-fancy fonts (you’ll find dozens in the drop-down menus) sparingly, for graphic effects.
- Never mix your fonts, other than to choose one style for headlines and another for body text. Oh, and headlines should be slightly larger than body text.

We realize this is very traditional, even boring ... but when you think of who most of your readers are (older adults who vote and actually read for longer than a nano-second), use what works for them.

### Advice from a leading coach

Writing coach Ann Wylie has been a leading dispenser of wisdom for school and other PR professionals for several decades, so we tracked down some recent advice from her. We found much of the same solid finger-wagging at writers... but something new: Go even lower! Learn why from her nuggets of wisdom:

### *Start with average*

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(Over)

The average U.S. adult reading level is eighth-grade. Is your audience average? If yes, target a seventh- or eighth-grade reading level. Not so average? Consider going lower.

According to findings in the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, the world's huge global literacy test:

- **Education.** Education is the most reliable predictor of literacy. On average, literacy scores increase by 10 points for each year a person remains in school. The lower your readers' level of education, the easier your copy should be to read.
- **Industry.** People with poor reading proficiency tend to have more health problems, for instance. So if you're writing to an audience that may have health care concerns, consider aiming lower. The best reading level for health information is fifth grade.
- **Types of devices.** Also, reduce the grade level when you're writing for mobile devices. Mobile screens cut understanding in half, according to research by R.I. Singh and colleagues from the University of Alberta.

### *Consider going lower*

In general, the higher the literacy skills, the higher the job ranking. Managers and professionals, for instance, tend to (but don't always) have higher literacy skills than technicians, craft workers or machine operators. People with high literacy skills are less likely to be blue-collar workers than those with lower skills.

But consider this — even if your audience is more educated, chances are they're reading *more* and therefore have *less* time to read ... so it's still a good idea to write more simply, even for them.

### *Okay, go even lower*

Even if you're writing to rocket scientists, keep your grade level average low. That's because:

- **People don't read at their grade level.** On average, high school graduates read at the ninth-grade level, according to William H. Dubay, readability consultant at Plain Language Services. College graduates read at the 12th-grade level.
- **Over time, reading skills decline.** On average, Dubay says, adults read at five grade levels lower than the last grade they completed.
- **People don't want to read at their grade level.** "People prefer to read and get information at a level below their capacity," says Douglas Mueller, president of the Gunning-Mueller Clear Writing Institute. "Even a Harvard University professor prefers to get information without strain."

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*Contributed by Shannon Priem, APR, former communications director for Oregon School Boards Association; health writer for Salem Health.*